Introduction

In 1254, after a long and anxious wait at the Mongol Empire's capital of Qaraqorum, the Flemish friar and missionary William of Rubruck (ca. 1220–ca. 1293), finally got his wish to preach in person to the Mongol Qa'an Möngke (r. 1251–59). Before meeting the emperor, however, there was one final obstacle to overcome: outperforming his Muslim and Buddhist contenders in an interreligious debate. This multilateral court disputation was the first documented debate of its kind that included Christians (both Catholics and Nestorians), Muslims, and Buddhists.[1] For William and for the Catholic Church more broadly, the encounter with Buddhism was entirely new. For the Muslim debaters, it was by no means the first interaction with Buddhists: Islam and Buddhism had a prolonged history of religious, intellectual, and commercial encounters and exchanges, but one that was fraught with friction and rivalry as well.[2]

From our historical hindsight, however, this 1254 exchange in Mongolia can be seen as marking a new page in Muslim-Buddhist relations, not in the eastern territories of the Mongol Empire (China and Mongolia), but rather further west, at the other end of Mongol-dominated Eurasia, in Iran, which would shortly become the seat of the independent Mongol state of the Ilkhanate (1260–1335). Established by Chinggis Khan's (r. 1206–27) grandson, Hülegü (r. 1260–65) in Iran, Iraq, and Azerbaijan—areas with a predominantly Muslim population—the Ilkhanate would become a destination for Buddhist monks from across Eurasia. These Buddhist experts would travel great distances to spread the Dharma and take advantage of the opportunities of patronage that the new Mongol rulers of Iran, the Ilkhans, offered.

In the late 1280s, some thirty years after William's visit to Qaraqorum, the Ilkhanid court in Iran experienced the height of interfaith exchanges. Learned

monks gathered at the court of Buddhist enthusiast Ilkhan Arghun (r. 1284–91), and debated with Muslims and possibly others. It is against this backdrop that this book's protagonist, Rashid al-Din (d. 1318), then still a court physician and an up-and-coming bureaucrat, found himself embroiled in a disputation with one of the Mongol king's cherished monks.

Rashid al-Din describes his exchange in a treatise written nearly two decades after the event, and under very different circumstances. He was at the height of his tenure as vizier, the most powerful civil servant in the Ilkhanid state, and Islam had already prevailed over Buddhism to become the official religion of the Ilkhanid rulers. Rashid al-Din does not name his contender and refers to him only as a bakhshī, Buddhist priest.[3] The Buddhist asked Rashid al-Din the following question in Arghun's presence: "What came first, the bird or the egg?"[4] Rashid al-Din notes that this was a "famous fable" among the Buddhists. The monk indeed evoked a well-known Buddhist enigma that appeared in the "Questions of Mellinda," a Pali dialogue between a Buddhist sage and the Greek king Menander of Bactria, probably composed between 150 BC and 100 AD.[5] Rashid al-Din writes that while the monk believed that he would fail to solve the riddle, he was confounded by it for only a moment before God divulged to him the answer. He does not tell us what answer he ended up providing nor whether the Buddhist offered a rebuttal. Instead, Rashid al-Din downplays his Buddhist rival, dismissing the monk as ignorant of the true meaning of his own riddle. Yet he does not disregard the question itself as a catalyst of a theological inquiry. Rashid al-Din is "inspired" by it, and in the remainder of this treatise, he proceeds to contemplate Islamic philosophical points regarding issues such as the createdness of Adam and the divine source of primordial human knowledge.

Rashid al-Din's account of this debate certainly differs from the Flemish friar William's report to the Pope about his multilateral debate at Möngke's court in Mongolia. For one, William provides more detail about how the debate with the Chinese Buddhist representative evolved and about the type of arguments that each party employed. We know they debated the existence and unity of God and the cause of evil. The differences between the Persian Muslim's and the Flemish Christian's accounts notwithstanding, there are also striking parallels between the two. Both downplay the intellectual fortitude of their Buddhist opponents. And both emphasize their recourse to their own scholastic traditions of rational argumentation to overcome the challenges mounted by their Buddhist contenders, rather than relying on Muslim or Christian scriptures (see further chapter 1).[6] Whereas both might have underscored cultural and linguistic disparities, whether explicitly or implicitly, their accounts ultimately give the impression of a common vocabulary—that of rational argumentation.

Scholastic disputation indeed emerges from their reports as a shared currency enabling a certain exchange of ideas. Yet how far did such exchanges go? William's

account suggests that the debates went beyond the exchange of riddles and parables and could include hefty theological arguments. It also gives the impression, however, that the two parties remained ingrained in their own scholastic traditions. Rashid al-Din's account, on the other hand, leaves more to the imagination. He gives the impression that few meaningful intellectual exchanges between Muslims and Buddhists took place under Mongol rule in Iran. And this impression is amplified by the general dearth of Muslim Ilkhanid descriptions of such exchanges, as well as the complete absence of any Buddhist textual documentation from the Ilkhanate.

Yet it is hard to reconcile this impression with what we know of the prevalence of Buddhism and the flourishing of the Buddhists during the Ilkhanate's first four decades (see further below). As this book shows, a thorough examination of the Ilkhanid vizier Rashid al-Din's extensive theological works demonstrates that Buddhist, Muslim, and Mongol exchanges have left deeper and more consequential impressions than the silence of contemporaneous Muslim authors implies. Muslims at the court were exposed to and made a considerable effort to respond to Buddhist concepts. These might not have been the finer points of the Dharma, but rather, as we will see, Buddhist methods of engaging with political authorities and conversion strategies.

An Afterlife for the Khan explores the Ilkhanid court of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century as an arena of interreligious exchange and rivalry, where the conceptual differences and equivalences between various Eurasian structures of power and sacrality—Islamic, Buddhist, and Mongol—were debated and deployed. It unearths the various subtle ways in which cultural and religious agents employed their religious and political resources to accommodate, translate, manipulate, and subvert the symbols and structures of the religious Other.

Focusing on the theological-philosophical works of a Persian Muslim vizier active in the intellectual scene of the Ilkhanid court at the turn of the fourteenth century, *An Afterlife for the Khan* shows how the Persian-Muslim experience of Buddhism and its system of karmic-righteous kingship, on the one hand, and the accommodation of and resistance to the Mongol model of divinized kingship, on the other, generated and informed processes of creative experimentation in new modes of Islamic sacral kingship. Buddhists marketed concepts and models of karmic kingship as means of translating, reaffirming, and converting their Chinggisid patrons' claims to deified kingship. The Islamic challenge entailed, therefore, not only winning their Ilkhanid patrons to the Muslim faith or cementing their commitment to Islam in the case of the Mongols who had already converted, but also uprooting their previous Buddhist education.

Jewish convert, Persian vizier, historian, and Muslim theologian Rashid al-Din stood at the center of the Muslim conversion efforts. In his theological and historical writings, invigorated by the lively atmosphere of an intellectually rigorous and religiously competitive royal court, Rashid al-Din not only engaged in the

translation and assimilation of Buddhist narratives and concepts, or painstakingly attempted to dispute and disprove the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation. He was also inspired and informed by his Buddhist competitors and their strategies of conversion and domestication of the Chinggisid rulers. To this end, he experimented with a model of Mongol-Muslim kingship that paralleled Buddhism's structure of karmic-righteous rulership.

This book argues that Rashid al-Din's Buddhist- and Mongol-informed experimentation in Islamic theological discourses formed a crucial, intermediate stage between the two more dominant frameworks for legitimizing Islamic, sultanic authority—the pre-Mongol phase of a restrictive, legalistic, and genealogical-based caliphal structure, and the post-Mongol independent model of universal and sacral Islamic rulership buttressed by saintly and messianic discourses. The Mongol occupation of Baghdad and the consequent elimination of the ʿAbbasid caliphate in 1258 represented a dramatic event that shattered the religiopolitical foundation of the Sunni majority's world .[7] This cataclysm inaugurated an era of unprecedented constitutional crisis that exacerbated after the collapse of the Ilkhanid state in 1335.[8] In subsequent centuries, new strategies for legitimizing sultanic authority were formulated to resolve this crisis. To that end, Muslim intellectuals increasingly made use of and elaborated on an innovative, comprehensive, and compelling vocabulary of sovereignty that effectively shifted the discourse of sultanic legitimacy away from the pre-Mongol restrictive genealogical and juridical parameters of Sunni authority. In its place, there emerged a new discursive realm of universal Islamic kingship that referenced and interlinked a variety of intellectual fields—from philosophy and theology to astrology, mysticism, and the occult.[9] Rashid al-Din's works marked the end of caliphal authority and the beginning of this new age of Islamic authority. In the remainder of this introduction, we first explore the central theoretical foundation of this research into sacred kingship and the strategies of religious agents with the Mongol rulers. Subsequently, we provide two short historical overviews—on Rashid al-Din and on the Buddhist "moment" of Ilkhanid Iran. We end the introduction with a brief outline of the book's chapters.

MONGOL SACRED KINGSHIP

By the end of Chinggis Khan's life (d. 1227), or under his son Ögödei (r. 1229–41), a coherent, albeit succinctly articulated, message about the legitimacy of the Mongol emperors as universal rulers was forged and propagated, grounded in Chinggis Khan's exceptional affinity with Tenggeri (Eternal Heaven), the supreme sky deity of Inner Asian traditions.[10] The Chinggisid affinity with Heaven was commonly expressed in the following Mongolian formula, found with relatively little variation in the Mongols' ultimatums: "By the might of Eternal Heaven; by the good fortune of the Qa'an [Great Khan]."[11] This formula revolved around two main legit-

imizing assertions that also had deep roots in the imperial legacies of the Eurasian steppe.[12] First, the claim that Eternal Heaven selected Chinggis Khan and conferred on him its blessing and protection—hence his exclusive mandate to universal conquest and domination. Second, Chinggis Khan was in possession of a special good fortune (*suu* in Mongolian, *qut* in Turkish), which further confirmed his identity as Heaven's chosen ruler and predestined his success as the fortunate universal emperor. Furthermore, the Chinggisids advocated for a heavenly lineage through the miraculous impregnation of Chinggis Khan's mythical ancestress Alan Qo'a (see chapter 5 below).[13]

Potential Chinggisid successors and reigning khans were expected to demonstrate their personal, merit-based qualification for the position,[14] as well as empirical validation that they were in possession of Tenggeri's favor.[15] They were also required to cultivate their relationship with the imperial founder, so that Heaven's blessing would continue flowing to the Chinggisids and, by extension, to the polities they ruled.[16] Chinggisid princes and khans had several ways to maintain and solidify their relationship with Chinggis Khan, including claiming privileged descent within the Chinggisid lineage,[17] cultivating the ritualized reverence of Chinggis Khan and the family's ancestral cult,[18] and imitating the divine-like traits attributed to the imperial founder. These were malleable and subject to reinterpretation, yet they seem to have generally entailed Chinggis Khan's supramundane intelligence, and "sense of right" and premonition, or intuitive, divine knowledge, attained through his personal communion with Heaven.[19]

From the perspective of the sociology of religion, the Mongols endorsed a deified or immanentist model of sacral kingship. "Religion" as a whole can be seen as consisting of two contrasting tendencies toward transcendentalism and immanentism. These two terms can be assigned to specific characteristics within most (transcendentalist) religions or to religions in their entirety. What best defines transcendentalist religions such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and philosophical Hinduism is their orientation around individual salvation and universal ethics. These religions are institutionalized via scriptural canons and formal doctrines. They entail hierarchical clerical ranks, whose members claim higher moral authority thanks to their ability to decipher the textual cannon and thus the tradition's soteriological promise.

Unlike their transcendentalist counterparts, immanentist religions—variously referred to as tribal, traditional, temple, cosmotheistic, or archaic—are primarily concerned with harnessing supernatural or other forces in the here and the now: healing the sick or securing fertility, abundance, and victory over the community's enemies. While transcendentalist religions are committed to "particular all-important truth claims which are held to be superior to rival" religions, immanentist traditions are interested in the proven, empirically observable efficacy of rites, gods, and clerisies.[20]

Notably, transcendentalism and immanentism are ideal types, rather than historical realities. Religions, societies, devotional movements, and ritual forms have exhibited varied syntheses of the two.[21] Despite the obvious risk involved in applying such broad categories, they enable us to tease out certain processes that are otherwise left unearthed. As this book shows, employing this theoretical framework helps us to better comprehend the changes that Mongol Islamization entailed and to identify the chief obstacles that bearers of Islam experienced in their efforts.

Alan Strathern demonstrates that this conceptual division is further aligned with two opposing modes of sacralizing kingship: the divinized and the righteous. Immanentist societies deify kings through their affinity with the gods. Conversely, in transcendentalist religions, kings are endorsed by a religious hierarchy as righteous "guardians of a system of truth-ethics-salvation." In this scheme, kings must negotiate for a sacralized status with a clergy that draws its authority from the same moral sphere.[22] *An Afterlife for the Khan* explores how Buddhists and Muslims sought to resolve the tensions between these two distinct modes of sacralizing kingship by deploying their religious-cultural resources and ingenuity to assimilate and subvert their Chinggisid patrons' sacred symbols of divinized, immanentist rulership. The book proposes that the Mongols' interfaith court debates, where religious interlocutors attempted to persuade or outshine their religious contenders, were also where Muslims and Buddhists made concentrated efforts to domesticate and transform their Chinggisid patrons' patterns of sacral authority.

INTERFAITH COURT DEBATES AND THE LOGIC OF EMPIRICAL RELIGIOSITY

The Mongols' immanentist religiosity was central to their conception of empire, divinized rule, their attitude toward the religions of the conquered populations, and the significance of interfaith court debates and contests. Like followers of other immanentist traditions, the Mongols, too, were partial to observable demonstrations of power and spiritual force. Their pattern of "empirical religiosity"[23] infused all levels of Mongol society's ritual activity—from domestic cultic practices (including ancestral veneration, offerings to the spirits inhabiting the universe, and the observation of taboos) to the functions of the ritual expert, the shaman, in maintaining and promoting communal well-being.[24]

The Mongols also viewed other religious traditions through this same prism of cultic efficacy: they evaluated other religions' power holders—humans or metapersons—according to their empirically proven spiritual potency. They were, therefore, keen on arranging and attending martial, sportive, intellectual, and supernatural contests. These events ranged from intellectual "duels" and religious debates to wrestling matches and other spectacles. These court contests had several functions. They facilitated knowledge and intelligence acquisition and were a

forum for educating and entertaining the ruler and his milieu.[25] Moreover, they offered a venue for the public display of the prestigious talent and human spoils assembled by and for the sake of the emperor.[26] Finally, they enabled the ruling Mongol elite to empirically compare and assess the skills of individuals or in the case of scriptural experts and holy men, to determine their efficacious supernatural powers that could involve healing, divination, magic, or more "intellectual" performances. Success in these "tests" moreover indicated the heavenly support of the ritual specialists and the religions and metapersons they represented.[27]

While these court contests were mostly arranged at the behest of the khans, participation in them was also desirable for religious agents. Successful performances could determine the ability to negotiate access to the ruling elite, and through them gain sought-after political and material support. Furthermore, Mongol inclinations might have prompted the religious interlocutors to explicitly address and highlight in their performances the political implications and the potential empirical pertinency of their religions for Chinggisid causes. However, the participants also brought with them a different perspective on their participation in these interfaith competitions. They considered their religious contenders to represent competing truth claims that had to be disputed, dismantled, and eradicated. Indeed, in contrast to the Mongol rulers' expectations or wishes, interlocutors often came to the debates better prepared to tackle their competitors on an intellectual basis rather than based on their performance of superior supernatural force. Still, these interlocutors seem to have also viewed the interfaith debate as a valuable opportunity for introducing their Mongol patrons to their scholastic traditions, and for inducting them into a discourse of truth claims, rational argumentation, and scripture—all of which informed a transcendentalist-salvific mindset. In other words, not only did the ruling Mongol elite and the participants have very different expectations of the interfaith debate, but religious contenders attempted to go beyond proving their skills or divine support by introducing their own religious logic.

This transcendentalist mindset furthermore undermined the empirical rationale that drove the khans' interest in hosting intellectual duels and interfaith debates. This was especially significant since, as this book demonstrates, court debates and intellectual audiences with the ruler had an additional role from a Mongol perspective. They also functioned as a forum for the religiously and ideologically charged performance of the Chinggisid rulers' divinized kingship and their intuitive, divine-like knowledge. The interfaith debates and similar settings, therefore, were also used by the religious parties to attempt to convert and domesticate the Chinggisids' immanentist pattern of kingship.

Historians have examined the interreligious debate at the Mongol courts in the context of the expectations and efforts of their religious participants to convert the khans, or the way such conversions, real or fictitious, were narrated and remembered.[28] This book shows that religious interlocutors indeed attempted to transform