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On the Protection of Minorities in Chotscho (10th c. A.D.)

On the fourth of February 2018 I presented two lectures at the Department of Conflict, Peace and Development Studies of the Tribhuvan University in Kirtipur, Nepal, one in afternoon and one in the early evening.

As subjects of those lectures I chose two historical examples of conflict and crisis prevention taken from the pre-modern cultures of Turfan and Ladakh.

Today, two days after the massacre of people of foreign descent in Hanau, Germany, by an extreme right-wing German fanatic it is time to return to those lectures for the lessons they teach us about living together peacefully in a multi-religious society.

The first lecture concerned the Buddhist *pranidhi* wall paintings of Bezeklik in which foreigners are unmistakably depicted as worthy followers of the Buddha. In these paintings the portrait art of the Uighur painters left behind a message that can hardly be over emphasized in its importance for our times: A true Buddha warm heartedly welcomes the stranger and gives him a place of dignity in the inner circle of his friends and followers. The uncanny brushwork of the Uighur painter conveys both the kindness in the Buddha's facial expression and the identifying ethnic characteristics of the faces and clothing of the foreigners kneeling on one knee next to the feet of the Compassionate One in readiness to be of service.

The intensity of this edifying message of the fellowship of man becomes even clearer if we briefly contextualize the historical situation of the those noble souls who commissioned the painting: As is well known, the Uighurs of Turfan descend from the nomadic Yaglagar Turks of Inner Asia, who had driven out their predecessors as lords of the steppes, the Koec or Eastern Turks, in the early eighth century only to be driven out themselves by the Kirghiz in the early ninth century.

When the refugee Yaglagar Turks came to the oasis of Turfan they were greeted by none other than influential descendants of the Koec Turks whose great grandfathers had been killed or driven out of their lands by their own great grandfathers.

It would be both insensitive and foolish to believe that the irony of their historical situation did not become clear to at least some of the new masters of the oasis of Turfan who were, after all, themselves lay followers of the Compassionate One.

At Turfan the nomadic Yaglagar became the sedentary Uighur Turks, but with an important difference in their worldview: "I, too, am a stranger in a strange land."

In the ninth century A.D. survivors of the relentless persecution of the followers of the Iranian mystic teacher Mani (216-276 A.D.) --- as mercilessly by Christians as by Muslims --- arrived in Chotscho via China and succeeded in time in converting the ruling Uighur princes to their religion, Manichaeism.



(Electi of the Manichaens of Chotscho; illustrated Manuscript, 8.-9. c. A.D.)



(Uighur princes as Buddhist votaries; Chotscho, 8.-9. Jh.)

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An important vestige of this ennobling insight into the humanity and (implicitly) the inhumanity of man is the portrait art of the Uighurs: In contrast to Chinese portrait art of foreigners of the same period, the Uighur portrait is never condescending. Distortion of facial features and expressions as well as of clothing and the exaggeration of the size of the barbarians' weapons and the danger they represent for the 'civilized' Chinese are refreshingly absent in the Uighur portraits. What we see instead is the stumbling but endearing attempt to paint an affectionate portrait of the family of man.

But the tolerant policies of the Uighur rulers of Chotscho extended far beyond portrait painting.

When the Saminid ruler of Khurasan Abu'l Hasan Nasr (913-942 A.D.) decreed that all Manichaens in his domains should be killed wherever they be found the Uighur ruler of Chotscho replied robustly:

"Three times more Muslims live in my land than Manichaens live in your land. I swear that if you kill even one of the Manichaens I will kill whole villages of Muslims, destroy their mosques and send out spies to kill Muslims wherever they be found in all countries of the world."

After considering the threat of war with the powerful Uighurs, the ruler of Khurasan wisely relented and accepted the payment of the *jizya* (head tax) from the Manichaens in his domains.

We shall never know if the threat of the Uighur rulers was only a diplomatic gambit that never would have been carried out. But we do know that as far as the power or the influence of the Buddhist-Manichaen Uighurs of Chotscho extended religious tolerance and the protection of minorities was the rule of law.

In this spirit I pray that prudence, wisdom, and protection of our fellow man wherever he may be and whatever he may believe always guide our internal and external policies and inform our personal relationships.

With best wishes and my most humble *salaam*,

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