(d. 1358/1359).[17] Some of the sources precede Riccoldo's *Libellus* by almost half a century, some were written almost half a century later. The political contexts of the friars' missions varied—while some were envoys who were travelling through Asia for diplomatic purposes,[18] others focused on the establishment of permanent missions.[19] The missions were greatly influenced by both the friars' objectives and the environment in which they operated, including both the vast steppe inhabited by nomadic populations as well as multireligious cities. These aspects certainly influenced the authors' missionary strategies as well as the success of their endeavours. Situating Riccoldo's statements into the broader context of missionary experience reveals the discrepancy between the Mendicant narrative modes, recurring across the Mendicant sources, and the regional specifics reflecting his own experience.

WAS THERE A MISSION TO NON-CHRISTIANS AT ALL?

Robin Vose, in his publication on medieval Dominican missions among non-Christians in the Crown of Aragon, pointed out that the Dominicans in this region, in spite of the close presence of Jews and Muslims, focused primarily on Christian communities and that their engagement with non-Christians was quite limited.[20] Following Vose's research, some scholars believe that the level of Mendicant engagement with non-Christians was low, not only in Iberia, but also in other regions of the medieval world.[21] However, in my opinion, such generalizations might conceal essential differences which testify to the friars' engagement with non-Christians. Besides the political and diplomatic contexts of the missions to the Mongols, which have already been described by Ryan,[22] there are numerous cases providing us with examples of Mendicant missionary activities among the non-Christian population. A letter sent by Franciscans operating in the region of the Golden Horde in 1320 mentions Tartar Christian converts who, after being converted, were Islamized because of a lack of

17 For the Latin text, see *Kronika Marignolova*, ed. Josef Emler 1882. For the English translation of selected parts, see Yule 1866, vol. 2, pp. 335–394. For a modern edition see Malfatto 2013 and Mocella & Malfatto 2022.

18 This is the case of John of Marignolli; to some degree, also of Pascal of Vittoria.

19 John of Montecorvino, Andrew of Perugia and Peregrine of Castello were working on the development of a strong Christian Church.

20 Vose 2009.

21 Roest 2015, pp. 333–334.

22 Cf. Ryan 1998, pp. 350–373.

Christian friars.[23] Another letter, sent in 1323 from the same region, mentions a German Franciscan who destroyed 93 idols belonging to nomads by throwing them into a fire, thus demonstrating his grave concern with the nomads' religious practices.[24] More examples may be listed;[25] at the same time, there were serious obstacles and limitations to these missionary attempts. One of the most serious was the language barrier, as mentioned by many friars.[26]

However, there were also non-verbal means of mission, which were applied with great attention—the self-representation of the friars, the singing of *Credo* and other hymns,[27] and the sharing of food with locals, etc. All these actions were aimed to impress the local inhabitants and perform Christian ideas with the aim of converting them. That the efforts of the friars had little effect among non-Christians should not be universally ascribed to reluctance on the part of the friars, but sometimes to very specific cultural and social factors which played a role in the process of conversion.[28]

Riccoldo is quite explicit about his missionary aims when he states in one of his *Letters*: "For you, O Lord, I left the world and entered the Order. For you I left the Order, so to speak, and came to proclaim you to the Saracens and Tartars ..."[29] He was aware of the rising power of Islam among the Mongols and perceived his mission as a challenge to it: "I ... have been sent to preach the faith of Christ to the Saracens and Tartars, at a time when not only the Tartars and other nations are becoming Saracens, but also the Christians."[30] On the one hand, his mission is aimed at preventing the process of Islamization; on the other hand, he does not limit himself to Christian communities, as his profound knowledge of, and polemics with Islam testifies.

23 Moule 1924, p. 66. More on the Franciscan mission in the Golden Horde in Hautala 2013; 2016.

24 Moule 1923, p. 107.

25 Cf. Jordan of Catalan's promising prospects of Christian mission in India. Gadrat 2005, pp. 265–266.

26 Rubruck often complained about this problem, cf. Jackson 1990, pp. 179–180, 228 and *passim*. Peregrine of Castello stated that if the friars knew languages, "God would show forth His wonders" (Dawson 1955, p. 233, Latin text in van den Wyngaert 1929, pp. 365–368). Cf. Valtrová 2017.

27 Jackson 1990, pp. 117, 132, 166, 177 and *passim*. Latin text in Chiesa 2014, pp. 76, 154, 176, 178 and *passim*.

28 As one such factor, a taboo spread among Christians in the Mongolian Empire concerning the drinking of qumys may be mentioned. Cf. Jackson 1990, p. 102; Chiesa 2014, p. 56.

29 George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 145.

30 George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 152.

MEDIEVAL MINDS AND MODERN CONCEPTS

Before proceeding to the examination of Riccoldo's statements about conversion, a few general remarks concerning modern and medieval conceptualizations of religion, religious typology and conversion are necessary. In the following pages, I intend to avoid an anachronistic imposition of the modern concept of "religion", its classification pattern and the underlying notion of "conversion" upon medieval thought. Instead of "religions", Riccoldo writes about "sects" (*sectae*) when referring to groups of practitioners or "nations" (*nationes*), which in the medieval sense mingled the modern meanings of ethnic origin and religious affiliation.[31] These discrepancies between modern and medieval conceptualizations of religions create a specific terminological problem which is beyond the scope of the present study, but should not be ignored.[32] Here, it is sufficient to point out that Riccoldo's classification of particular "sects" or "nations" was, along with all other friars of his time, Christian-centric. This implied not only the idea of Roman Christianity as the only true "religion", but also posed a problem in relation to Asian religious inclusivism.

In the introduction to his *Libellus*, Riccoldo evaluates each religion according to the similarity or "closeness" of its doctrine to that of the Western Church. Thus, he names Nestorians and Jacobites as those who are "the closest" to Western Christians, followed by Jews, then Saracens, and finally Tartars and pagans, who are the most distant from the Christian faith because they have "neither understanding nor law, except the law of nature, neither a temple nor a fast, nor any support that unites them spiritually."[33] As noted by Rita George-Tvrtković, the same order of "sects" was very often used by medieval authors to structure and organize writings on these topics.[34] Looking closely at Riccoldo's typology of non-Christians reveals, however, that this typology is not used by him consistently: specifically, the category of the Tartars and pagans seems somewhat problematic. While in the introductory part of *Libellus* Riccoldo mentions "Tartars and pagans", in the following development of his work he distinguishes two other groups: the Tartars and other "idolaters", namely Indian monks called *bacscite* or *baxitas*, that is, *bhakshīs* or Buddhist monks, whose position on his

31 Cf. Carpini and William of Rubruck in Dawson 1955, pp. 17, 42, 132 and *passim*.

32 More on this cf. Bossy 1982; Biller 1985; Valtrová 2016. On the history of the concept of religion see Nongbri 2013.

33 "... tartari et pagani, qui nec intellectum habent nec legem, nisi legem nature, nec templum nec ieiunium, nec aliquod adminiculum, quod eos uite spiritualis coniungat." Electronic edition Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/1.prohemium.pdf. Article 10.

34 George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 18.

scale is not explicitly determined.[35] Riccoldo notes, however, that they enjoy great respect among the Mongols and provides special instructions on how to handle them.[36]

In general, Western travellers noticed that there were "many different sects of idolaters"[37] in the East, which varied according to their objects of worship and other customs, and often also in burial rites. While in theory, "pagans" were treated as one category, in practice, a great variety of beliefs and practices were documented and some types of the "pagans" required special treatment, as we shall see in the example of Riccoldo's account of the *bhakshīs*.

Discrepancies between the theoretical religious typology and religious practice are obvious, however the adaptation of the concept of "religious conversion"[38] is even more complicated. It may encompass a wide range of actions and processes—from simple participation in a ritual, which might not even be properly understood by the alleged "convert",[39] to a complete change of life including its social and practical consequences. Riccoldo does not provide us with his explicit definition of a proper "conversion", but a close examination of his statement reveals a broad range of meanings. Reports of other missionaries also document a whole variety of cases, ranging from a formal act of receiving baptism, sometimes en masse, to the very elaborate programme of a catechism. The first type of "conversion" is reported by John of Montecorvino, a Franciscan friar in Khanbaliq, as concerning the Önggüd ruler Körgüz (in Latin sources called "King George"). His "conversion" with the whole tribe is testified by their participation in a Catholic mass.[40] The latter case is attested by Montecorvino in 1305:

> I have purchased by degrees forty boys of the sons of the pagans, between seven and eleven years old, who as yet knew no religion [*legem*]. Here I baptized them and taught them Latin and our rite, and I wrote for them about thirty psalters and hymnaries and two breviaries by which eleven boys now

35 The Turkic word *bakshī* refers to a Buddhist monk. About their status besides other holy men in Persian Ilkhanates see Jackson 2017, pp. 298–300.

36 Electronic edition by Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/4.Detartaris.pdf. Article 4.

37 Cf. Rubruck's report in Jackson 1990, p. 149. Latin text in Chiesa 2014, p. 116. Similarly, also Marignolli in Malfatto 2013, p. 3.

38 For more on conversion in the Middle Ages, see Muldoon 1997 and Szpiech 2013. For conversion in the Mongol Empire, see Ryan 1997.

39 As testified, e.g., by Rubruck, see Jackson 1990, pp. 166–167. Latin text in Chiesa 2014, pp.136–138.

40 Dawson 1955, p. 227. Latin text in van den Wyngaert 1929, p. 348.

> know the office. And they keep choir and say office as in a convent whether I am there or not.[41]

Montecorvino's understanding of a proper conversion as more than mere baptism is also reflected in his letter from 1306.[42] The fact that baptism is perceived as only a part of the process is also indicated by Andrew of Perugia in his letter from 1326: "Of the idolators exceedingly many are baptized: but when they are baptized they do not adhere strictly to Christian ways."[43]

Medieval Mendicant sources on Asian missions reveal a relatively vague and broad concept of "conversion" when it concerned the category of "pagans".

THE "MOST EASILY CONVERTED" TARTARS

What kind of experience could support Riccoldo's statement, and what do the accounts of other missionaries tell us about the difficulty and effectiveness of converting "the Tartars"? Analysing Riccoldo's words about his personal experience with evangelization among the Mongols provides little evidence. This is not unusual among missionary reports about Asia. In general, cases of conversion that are described in detail are rather few.[44] Reporting about the results of mission seems to be associated especially with those missionaries who worked on a long-term basis and wished to invite more friars to participate—in this context numbers of converts appear in letters of John of Montecorvino and his fellow friars,[45] and in Jordan of Catalan's *Mirabilia descripta*.[46]

When considering Riccoldo's engagement in the evangelization of the Mongols, there are several statements proclaiming his intention;[47] however, none of his works abound with specific examples of such conversions. In his *Libellus*, we can read that:

> ... not many Tartars were converted to our faith, except some rulers and excellent men and women. The great emperor of the Tartars kindly keeps friars

41 Dawson 1955, p. 225. Latin text in van den Wyngaert 1929, p. 347.
42 Dawson 1955, p. 230. Latin text in van den Wyngaert 1929, pp. 354–355.
43 Dawson 1955, p. 237. Latin text in van den Wyngaert 1929, p. 376.
44 Among the notable conversions described in detail is the case of an Indian Brahmin who was baptized after a three-month-long catechism by John of Marignolli (cf. Malfatto 2013, p. 20–21).
45 van den Wyngaert 1929, pp. 345, 347, 354–355, 366 and *passim*.
46 Gadrat 2005, p. 251.
47 *Letter Three* in George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 152.

> at his court with honour, but this is for his bigger fame, rather than with any hope for conversion.[48]

Unlike some friars who nourished the idea of the future conversion of the Mongolian khans to Christianity, Riccoldo did not foster any such hopes, although he recommended to address the mission primarily to the educated people and people of higher social rank than to the common people.[49] However, in relation to the "Tartars", instead of a promising future for Christian mission among the Mongols, he witnessed the Mongols' strong confidence in Buddhist monks[50] and their easy conversion to Islam.[51] There seems to be a slight shift in his works relating to his treatment of the role of the Buddhist monks among the Mongols. He dedicated more space to their description within his earlier *Liber peregrinationis*[52] than later in *Libellus*.[53] This may reflect their changing status within the Ilkhanate during the reigns of Arghun (1284–1291), who held the Buddhist monks in great esteem, and his son Ghazan (1295–1304), who adopted Islam and started their persecution.[54] Nevertheless, the fame of Buddhist monks as trustees of the Ilkhans is reflected in *Libellus*, where Riccoldo recommended first refuting the doctrines of the Buddhists in order to successfully evangelize among the Mongols.[55] How difficult a task this would be, he does not say.

Neither Riccoldo's *Libellus* nor his *Letters* document any large-scale conversion of the Mongols to Christianity. He even claims that the Mongols ask what they will gain if they become Christians.[56] How should we understand his statement that the Tartars are those who are "most easily converted"? Certainly, it does not refer specifically

48 Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/4.Detartaris.pdf.

49 Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/5.Regule-Generale.pdf, Article 11.

50 Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/4.Detartaris.pdf, Article 4.

51 Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/4.Detartaris.pdf, Article 2.

52 George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 192. The Buddhist monks are labelled *baxitas* here.

53 Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/4.Detartaris.pdf, Article 4.

54 Cf. Jackson 2011 [1988].

55 Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/4.Detartaris.pdf, Article 4. About Buddhist immigration to the Ilkhanate, see Jackson 2017, p. 300. About *bhakshīs* also in *Liber peregrinationis*, cf. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 192.

56 Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/4.Detartaris.pdf, Article 5.

to conversion to Christianity, but to conversion to any "sect" in general, most likely to that which brings the most benefit. According to Riccoldo, the Mongols became Muslims because Islamic "law" was "exceedingly lax and contained nothing difficult either in belief or works";[57] in addition to that their conversion was supported by "the greatest gifts".[58] In fact, this lament about the Mongols' attachment to valuables such as silk, gold and other items is not unique and stems from a non-deliberate difference in distribution of supplies, tributes and gifts in Mongol society. Half a century earlier, William of Rubruck had experienced the difficulty of navigating between these social institutions, while trying to stick to the ideal of poverty.[59]

The seeming absence of a religious "law" among the Mongols, combined with their alleged attachment to valuables, in Riccoldo's understanding creates the foundation of their spiritual instability. Successive religious conversions of some of the Mongol Ilkhans in the preceding decades also certainly contributed to the development of this opinion concerning the Mongols and conversion. Several Ilkhans, including Hülagü and Arghun, were reported to have successively "converted" from one tradition to another during their lifetimes. The most striking example is undoubtedly Öljeitu (Ilkhan between 1304–1316), who is reported to have been a Nestorian, a Buddhist, a Sunnī Muslim of two different schools, then a Shīʿa Muslim, and finally a Sunnī Muslim again.[60] The case of baptism of the Ilkhans's envoys at the Second Council of Lyon in 1274 also supports this view of the Mongols as being easy to convert.

In this context, Riccoldo's statement about the conversion of the Tartars has to be understood in terms of the Mongols' general willingness to accept new religious beliefs and practices, be they Christian, Buddhist or Muslim, which is something they had done quite flexibly over the preceding decades.

The works of other missionaries provide us with comparative material. For example, William of Rubruck had already recorded an episode that reveals how problematic it is to use the concept of "conversion" in the Asian context. On a dangerous journey through the Tarbagatai mountains, Rubruck was asked by his guides to pray for their safe passage, which he did by singing the *Credo*. When the caravan had passed safely, the local guides, impressed by the prayer's power, asked Rubruck to teach it to them. Due to the translators' incompetence it was not possible to explain to them the content of the *Credo*; therefore, Rubruck decided to write it down and gave it to his guides with a commentary:

57 *Liber peregrinationis* in George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 197.
58 *Liber peregrinationis* in George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 197.
59 Cf. Valtrová 2020.
60 Jackson 2005, pp. 176–177.

> What is written here is the belief a man should have concerning God, and a prayer in which God is asked for whatever a man needs. So believe firmly what is written here, even if you cannot understand it, and … my hope is that it will save you.[61]

This episode shows the interest of local people in a variety of religious beliefs and practices, which were easily adapted, accommodated, and used to fulfil their everyday needs. However, the acceptance of a Christian prayer certainly cannot be considered as a "conversion".

If we consider sources concerning Mongol China, here the mission was also presented as quite promising. John of Montecorvino claims to have baptized 6,000 people within ten years.[62] In a letter from 1318 written by Peregrine of Castello, a fellow friar of Montecorvino, we read:

> But among the infidel we can preach freely and in the mosque [*moscheta*] of the Saracens we have preached often that they might be converted, and to the idolaters likewise in their great cities by means of two interpreters. Many come together and wonder greatly and enquire diligently about these things. And now it has begun, we have good hopes, seeing the crowds eager to hear and running to where we preach.[63]

Some of those reports which recount the promising evangelization of idolaters certainly have to be perceived with their implicit intentions in mind—they were written to inspire more friars to come and to justify the Asian mission. Nevertheless, the Asian inclusivism of faiths and practices, as recorded by many friars, supports Riccoldo's judgement that, indeed, the Tartars are "the most easily converted", although in this case it means neither that he was particularly successful among them, nor that they became exclusively Christian and abandoned their previous faiths and practices.

CONVERTING MUSLIMS AND JEWS

Riccoldo's work is strongly marked with an awareness of the rising power of Islam in the Eastern Mediterranean and its popularity among the Mongols. His knowledge of Islam was extraordinary compared to that of his contemporaries, and he explicitly

61 Jackson 1990, p. 167. Latin text in Chiesa 2014, p.138
62 Dawson 1955, p. 225. Latin text in van den Wyngaert 1929, p. 347.
63 Dawson 1955, p. 233. Latin text in van den Wyngaert 1929, p. 366.

mentions Muslims as targets of his mission.[64] Conversions of Muslims to Christianity are documented as happening quite often in those parts of the Holy Land that were under the Christian rule. As Benjamin Kedar has shown, it was common for a large proportion of the inhabitants of a conquered region to adopt the religion of their conquerors.[65] However, Riccoldo was in a different situation, especially after the fall of Acre in 1291. The Mamluks conquered the city as one of the last strongholds of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Christians, therefore, could hardly expect the local Muslims to convert to Christianity anymore. For Riccoldo, who was settled in Baghdad then, this event became a catalyst for serious contemplation about God's intentions regarding Muslims and their rise to power, which he expressed in his five *Epistolae ad Ecclesiam Triumphantem*.[66] Prospects for Christian missions also worsened as the Mongols gradually became Islamized. As Riccoldo ruefully pointed out: "Where Christ was once publicly preached, Mahomet is now proclaimed with loud cries day and night."[67]

Although particular conversion stories regarding the Muslims are sporadic in missionary accounts, there are specific indications and sources showing that such attempts were made by friars. One of the earliest is an episode recorded by Rubruck, who unsuccessfully attempted to baptize one Muslim in a region north of Crimea.[68] Further testimony, showing little success among the Jews and the Muslims, comes from a 1326 letter written by Andrew of Perugia: "... of the Jews and the Saracens none is converted."[69] These accounts at least show that attempts to convert the Muslims were made, although we do not know much about their actual procedure.

A letter from 1338 written by the Franciscan friar Pascal of Vittoria provides a more detailed account. Pascal travelled with a caravan of Muslim merchants from Urgenj to Almalyk, where a Franciscan convent was situated. In his letter, he describes in detail his efforts to convert his fellow Muslims: he had been preaching ceaselessly for many days near a mosque during Ramadan. To stop him preaching, the Muslims offered him various precious presents including silver and gold, horses, camels and even virgins; later he was also attacked.[70] The following year Pascal and all the Franciscans in this convent were martyred.[71] Disappointingly, Pascal did not record anything about

64 George-Tvrtković 2012, pp. 145, 152.
65 Kedar 1997.
66 English translation in George-Tvrtković 2012, pp. 137–173. On the *Letters* cf. also Shagrir 2012.
67 George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 143.
68 Jackson 1990, p. 104. Latin text in Chiesa 2014, p. 58.
69 Dawson 1955, p. 237. Latin text in van den Wyngaert, p. 376.
70 van den Wyngaert, pp. 501–506. English translation in Yule 1914, pp. 81–88.
71 One of the accounts of this martyrdom is edited in van den Wyngaert, pp. 509–511.

the results of his missionary efforts, a fact that is not that surprising given his focus on martyrdom, which became an aspect of the Franciscan missions after 1300.[72]

In contrast to these reports an earlier source provides the reader with a much more optimistic account of the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. The author of a Latin treatise *De statu Saracenorum* (1273), traditionally ascribed to the Dominican friar William of Tripolis, claims that he had baptized "a good thousand" Muslims in the Holy Land.[73] This is not a unique claim. Several decades later, when such a situation was no longer possible in the Holy Land, another Dominican friar, Jordan of Catalan, who evangelized in Southern India in the 1320s, mentions that he baptized "around 300 people, out of whom many were pagans and Saracens."[74] How many of these "many" converts were Muslim is impossible to tell. Certainly, we should not assume that the friars' chances were the same throughout the vast Asian regions and under the different political circumstances.

Riccoldo's statement placing Muslims in second place on his convertibility scale must also be viewed with respect to the other groups that he considered as even more difficult to convert: Jews and "heretical" Christians. As the difficulty is presented simply as relative it is thus practically impossible to quantify.

When exploring missionary contacts with Jews in Asia,[75] little is reported by friars. Most of these rare mentions are limited to noting the presence of Jews at various places in the Caucasus, in Persian cities and also in Southern India. From the little evidence we have, it seems that friars operating in Asia did not consider Jews as primary target groups and their presence was sometimes even ignored. The fact that Jews were encountered in Asia and that friars had to deal with them at some point is also testified by Riccoldo, who pointed out that Jews were very well versed in the Old Testament, and therefore those friars who wanted to evangelize among them should be well prepared.[76] In general, his approach towards Jews was based upon Augustinian theology, according to which the Jews deserve to be tolerated as those who received and preserved the message of the Old Testament. Furthermore, the Augustinian approach stressed the role of Jews as witnesses of the true message of the New Testament. During the 13th and 14th centuries Christian attitudes shifted from the Augustinian view of Jews as witnesses towards the rejection of Talmudic Judaism. Riccoldo's opinion,

72 MacEvitt 2020.

73 *De statu Sarracenorum*, § 55, 370. On William of Tripolis and his work, see Tolan 2002, pp. 203–209.

74 Gadrat 2005, p. 251.

75 Cf. Cuffel & Gamliel 2018.

76 Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/5.Regule-Generale.pdf.

however, did not follow this development, as is also reflected in his belief in the future conversion of the Jews.[77]

Riccoldo's participation in a disputation between Dominicans and Jews in Mosul's synagogue mentioned in *Liber peregrinationis*[78] was probably not an exceptional experience among friars, because we learn from John of Marignolli's account that he had "many great disputes" with Jews and other sectarians in Khanbaliq in the 1340s. According to Marignolli, a "great harvest of souls was gained in this region."[79] If and how many of the alleged converts were Jews is unclear. No results concerning Jews in China are documented in Andrew of Perugia's letter mentioned above.

NESTORIANS AND JACOBITES

The last group on Riccoldo's scale—the Nestorians[80] and Jacobites—is a complicated case, where ambiguous attitudes can be perceived. The first problem concerns the definition of their "conversion" and its symbolic representation. From the canonical point of view, rebaptism was out of the question, because the rebaptism of heretical Christians had already been forbidden in the Catholic Church from the 4th century AD.[81] Therefore, we may assume that the friars would not baptize these "converts" again if they had been previously baptized by their priests.

In the case of the Jacobites, we have quite a detailed account of their "conversion" in *Liber peregrinationis*. Riccoldo's description of preaching to, and the direct conversion of, some of the monks in the Monastery of St Matthew presents what appears to have been a straightforward task. Although some monks opposed Riccoldo, the others, including the most learned bishops, accepted him "as an angel" and promised "to preserve until death the faith which they had received firm and complete from [him]."[82] Taking into account Riccoldo's advice listed in his *Libellus*, that the missionaries should focus on a unity of faith, not a unity of rite,[83] this might suggest that a "conversion" of these Christians may have not required any kind of outer representation.

77 Walker 2011, p. 4.

78 George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 200.

79 "... multus animarum fructus in illo imperio factus." Malfatto 2013, p. 3, article 8.

80 By the term "Nestorian" I refer to a historical concept by which the Western travellers designated the members of the Church of the East. Cf. Brock 1996, 23–35.

81 For a detailed list of synods dealing with conversion of heretics cf. Freidenreich 2014.

82 George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 203.

83 Jensen 1997 & 2014, https://www2.historia.su.se/personal/villads-jensen/Riccoldo/5.Regule-Generale.pdf, Article 8.

Less detailed but similarly optimistic is the account of Jordan of Catalan. According to him, Dominican and Franciscan friars converted some 4,000 people or more in Armenia, including an archbishop named Zakarias.[84] Furthermore, Jordan was successful in Tabriz with 1,000 converted "schismatics" and as many in Ur, plus 500 or 600 in Sultaniya.[85]

Riccoldo's judgement of Nestorians and Jacobites being the most difficult to convert stands in contrast to these numbers, reported by himself and Jordan. Supposedly, in this case, we need to regard the difficulty of their "conversion" not as an individual change of religious affiliation, but as the unification of churches by means of the acceptance of the pope as the ultimate head of all Christians. While friars could have been warmly received in certain places, Riccoldo was well aware of the fact that the union of churches was a goal far beyond his personal remit.

The situation in the eastern part of the Mongolian Empire was different. In missionary accounts from Rubruck, to Montecorvino and to Odoric of Pordenone, the Nestorians were presented as "the worst heretics" and rivals of the Latin Christian mission in Asia.[86] The image of the Nestorians in Latin reports seems to shift from a critique of their ignorance in the second half of the 13th century, towards a criticism of their conspiratorial and hostile behaviour as described by the Franciscans after 1300. This development might reflect a growing rivalry between the two institutional networks which competed for the favour of the khan. While in the second half of the 13th century William of Rubruck had to co-operate with the Nestorians in order to successfully accomplish his mission, the Franciscans some 50 years later were much more independent of them and relied on other sources of support—Europeans living in China, Armenians,[87] or Alans, not to forget the funding from the khans. The difference between the Nestorians and other Christians is reported as being maintained by the Nestorians. William of Rubruck mentioned that the Hungarians, Alans, Armenians, Georgians and Ruthenians living in Karakorum were not allowed to accept the sacrament in Nestorian churches unless they had been rebaptized by the Nestorians.[88] At the same time, however, he reports that he was allowed to use their church and liturgical equipment for celebrating the Easter mass.[89] Such cases of sharing reported by Rubruck were no longer present in the letters of the Franciscans in China. According

84 Gadrat 2005, p. 244.

85 Gadrat 2005, pp. 245–246.

86 Cf. Valtrová 2011.

87 One Armenian lady provided funds for a new church in Zaitun. Dawson 1955, p. 233. Latin text in van den Wyngaert 1929, pp. 374–375.

88 Jackson 1990, p. 213. Latin text in Chiesa 2014, p. 218.

89 Jackson 1990, p. 216. Latin text in Chiesa 2014, pp. 222–224.

to Montecorvino, the Nestorians did not allow anyone to build even a small church, and they attempted to get rid of him by making false accusations against him.[90] Probably, the rivalry between Nestorians and Franciscans in Mongol China had grown as the Franciscan mission settled.

However, there was also a certain ambiguity in Montecorvino's relationship with the Nestorians: on the one hand, he was strongly critical of them; on the other, the success of his mission was based upon the "conversion" of exactly these "heretical Nestorians", namely the tribe of "King George".

It seems that apart from the case of the "King George" tribe, the Franciscans in China achieved most success among Christians—specifically, Armenians, Alans, Greeks and various other Europeans—who were not affiliated to, or not allowed to join the Nestorian church. To what degree the Franciscans could step into the network of the Nestorian church, which had its communities in many cities on and around the Silk Road, is also questioned.[91] According to William of Rubruck, Nestorian bishops came to the regions in the realm of the great khan rarely—only once in 50 years: "On that occasion they have all the male children, even those in cradle, ordained as priests."[92] This of course did not mean that all the males were sufficiently prepared to provide the spiritual services required for celebrating a mass. It should also be noted that Syriac as the liturgical language of the Nestorians was no more understandable to the locals than Latin. Therefore, the arrival of a priest, no matter of what affiliation, could have been welcomed, especially in those places where the network of the Nestorian church was weak and educated priests were rare.

CONCLUSION

Riccoldo's statement regarding the effectiveness and facility of the conversion of particular religious "sects" has to be viewed as a combination of the traditional treatment of the topic and the friar's personal experience. This statement might also be a reflection of the fact that those who were closest to Catholic Christians were at the same time those who were most difficult to convert, and those who were furthest, the easiest. Contextualizing this claim within Riccoldo's own work leads us to the conclusion that in this statement he did not indicate those groups from which most converts were likely to be recruited to Christianity, but rather the difficulty of missionizing among them.

90 van den Wyngaert 1929, p. 346.

91 Cf. Tang & Winkler 2013; 2022.

92 Jackson 1990, p. 163. Latin text in Chiesa 2014, p. 134.

The typology and order of "sects" follows the traditional view, which did not distinguish among the different types of "pagans", although Riccoldo was well aware of their variety. From Riccoldo's accounts of his travels we know that he considered the different demands of refuting the beliefs of such pagans, although he does not provide the readers with detailed instructions on how to proceed with particular groups of "idolaters". He seems to be aware of the intellectual demands of converting Buddhist monks, compared to the demands of the Mongols, who sought instant benefits.

Contextualizing Riccoldo's statement within the broader, though not complete, set of missionary sources allows us to draw some general observations. Experienced friars were well aware of the difficulty of proper catechesis and the conversion of the followers of non-exclusivist religions. The speedy success of missions among them was often undermined by their maintenance of idolatrous practices.

The approaches to Muslims and their conversion seem to exhibit the greatest variety with respect to their degree of success across the selected sources and regions. When thinking about converts from Islam the overall situation regarding the spread of Islam must be taken into account, as well as the growing importance of the ideal of martyrdom within the Franciscan order. The Franciscan mission among the Mongols is described by some sources as a race with Islam. Given the Mongol willingness to "convert", it is quite possible to imagine recent native Mongol converts to Islam as being temporarily "converted" to Christianity by the friars (only to be reconverted to Islam again).

In the case of Jews, occasional inter-religious debates taking place in Asia are mentioned in several sources, similarly to the situation in medieval Europe. Whether and how the different position of Christianity as "one of the many sects" in the Mongolian Empire influenced such debates is a question to which the sources discussed here do not provide any answer.

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JEAN-MARIE MÉRIGOUX OP (†)

Friar Riccoldo da Monte di Croce's *Letters to the Church in Heaven*

"The Lament of a Camel Driver of Christ"

Friar Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (*c.* 1243–1320), from the Order of the Preachers, is a famous medieval clergyman. The life and writings of this passionate Florentine, philosopher, theologian and orientalist are moving and fascinating, for he experienced in present-day Iraq the difficult problem of the encounter of the Christian world with the Muslim world, a confrontation that would soon be continued with the persecution of the Christians under the Mongols. The fall of Acre, the last Frankish bastion in Syria, captured by the Mamluks on 18 May 1291, had consequences as far as in Mesopotamia, where Riccoldo was living at the time. These dramatic events traumatized him and plunged him into a bitter inner turmoil that may partly explain his severity with regard to the *lex Sarracenorum*.

I will first give some information about our author, and then present some excerpts from the translation that I made in Mosul[1] of the *Letters* that Riccoldo wrote to the Church triumphant after the dramatic fall of Acre, *per modum orationis amaritati animi*, "like a prayer of a soul in bitterness".

1 I was helped for this translation, in Mosul, by Father André Dubarle OP, who lectured at the St John seminary, and in the Dominican monastery of Paray le Monial by Sister Hélène de Jésus, who corrected it and revised it thoroughly. My grateful thanks go to these two senior figures in Dominican life. Cf. Mérigoux 2000, pp. 87–122.