

4

Conversion to Tibetan Buddhism: Some Reflections

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Abstract

Tibetan Buddhism, it is often said, discourages conversion. The Dalai Lama is one of many Buddhist leaders who have urged spiritual seekers not to convert to Tibetan Buddhism, but to remain with their own religions. And yet, despite such admonitions, conversions somehow occur – Tibetan dharma centers throughout the Americas, Europe, Oceania, and East/Southeast Asia are filled with people raised as Jews, Christians, or followers of the Chinese folk religion. It is appropriate to ask what these new converts have gained, or lost; and what Tibetan Buddhism and other religions might do to better adapt.

*One paradox that emerges is that Western liberals, who recoil before the fundamentalists of their original religions, have embraced similarly authoritarian, literalist values in foreign garb. This is not simply an issue of superficial cultural differences, or of misbehavior by a few individuals, but a systematic clash of ideals. As the experiences of Stephen Batchelor, June Campbell, and Tara Carreon illustrate, it does not seem possible for a viable “Reform” version of Tibetan Buddhism (along the lines of Reform Judaism, or Unitarian Universalism) ever to arise – such an egalitarian, democratic, critical ethos would tend to undermine the institution of Lamaism, without which Tibetan Buddhism would lose its *raison d’être*.*

The contrast with the Chinese folk religion is less obvious, since Tibetan Buddhism appeals to many of the same superstitious compulsions, and there is little direct disagreement. Perhaps the key difference is that Tibetan Buddhism (in common with certain institutionalized forms of Chinese Buddhism) expands through predation upon weaker forms of religious identity and praxis. Implicit within the Tibetan Buddhist appeal is the assumption that traditional Chinese forms of religiosity are, if not defective, at least inadequate. The converts thus exchange a well-established, intergenerational ritual and symbolic community for one in which their primary role is contributing funds.

I. Great inner confusion

[F]or those who are seriously thinking of converting to Buddhism, that is, of changing your religion, it is very important to take every precaution. This must not be done lightly. Indeed, if one converts without having thought about it in a mature way, this often creates difficulties and leads to great inner confusion. I would therefore advise all who would like to convert to Buddhism to think carefully before doing so. [...However,] when an individual is convinced that Buddhist teachings are better adapted to his or her disposition, that they are more effective, it is quite right that this religion be chosen.

– The Fourteenth Dalai Lama¹

Talk of “conversion” assumes the existence of multiple religions (of which Buddhism is one), coupled with the possibility of leaving one and adopting another. In fact the category of “religion” turns out to be rather vague—there exists an abundance of borderline phenomena² which may or may not be classed as religious, depending on the scholar, and a growing suspicion that the concept has been disproportionately influenced by the example of Christianity (which initially defined itself in contrast with the secular or pagan customs of the Roman Empire).³ Although many aspects of religion (e.g. myth, ritual, supernatural belief) seem to be universal (i.e., present in all human societies), they are not necessarily found combined into a unified whole, let alone as an identity group which competes against other, similarly-conceived identity groups. We often hear of societies which lack any notion of “religion” separate from everyday life, or religions which amount to entire “ways of life”; indeed, such integrated or implicit forms of religion may represent the norm from which Christianity has

¹ From *Beyond Dogma* (1996: 129-140). By “more effective,” the Dalai Lama presumably means, at inculcating spiritual virtues such as kindness and compassion—as the Tibetan dharma emperors (who were the manifestations of several bodhisattvas) must have calculated when they embraced the religion in the seventh to ninth centuries.

² For example, my Taiwanese mother-in-law objects to my whistling at night, on the grounds that this attracts malevolent ghosts. It is difficult to decide whether her admonition represents a religious belief which must be respected, a superstition which may be safely mocked, a principle of etiquette, or some sort of primitive science. (For all I know, she may be right.)

³ That is, Christianity involves the implicit belief that religions exist, that Christianity is a religion, and that outsiders can and should join it, abandoning all rival religious affiliations. The Jewish and Islamic identities evolved against this background, while Hinduism and Buddhism came to be understood as “religions” in more recent times, as a result of contact with/conquest by these cultures. This is the view of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Jonathan Z. Smith, *inter alia*.

departed. In other words, the concept of religion may itself be a religious concept!

In East Asia, for example, many people are unsure whether they have a "religion," or if so, what it should be called. Although Buddhism is widely acknowledged to be a religion, there is no such consensus on Confucianism, Shinto, Korean shamanism, or the Chinese folk religion (NB: an etic label), and much uncertainty as to who counts as a Buddhist. Some older literature describes this situation in terms of multiple, simultaneous religious identities, or perhaps syncretism. I favor the explanation that East Asian religions tend not to function as identity groups, but take the form of personal interests (like mahjong!) or communal activities (like holiday and life-cycle celebrations) which are difficult to distinguish from their secular counterparts. The identity groups which do exist tend to be ethno-cultural or political in nature. From a functionalist viewpoint, perhaps "being Chinese" or "being Japanese" should be considered the religions, and Confucianism, etc. only identity markers. (Christianity and some New Religious Movements are the major exceptions, while Buddhism exists in both implicit and explicit forms.)

Religious identities have become blurred in the West as well to some extent. To the categories of "Sheilism" (after Robert N. Bellah),⁴ "Spiritual But Not Religious" (a 1990's phrase of uncertain origin), and "Nightstand Buddhists" (after Thomas A. Tweed)⁵ should perhaps be added, "If I have to have a religion, then maybe I'll be a Buddhist." In this light, Western "conversion" to Buddhism has more in common with participation in other alternative religious milieus such as neo-paganism or the New Age movement, than with conversion to a religion like Islam, with a multigenerational community and well-established customs.

Although Tibetan Buddhist representatives (including the Dalai Lama, cited above) often deny that they are seeking converts, and make statements discouraging conversion, such rhetoric fits uncomfortably with the

⁴ Bellah et al. (1996, ch. 9) quote one "Sheila Madsen" (pseud.) as professing an extremely individualistic set of beliefs which she dubs "Sheilism." See also Bellah's lecture "Habits of the heart: Implications for religion" (21 Feb. 1986), http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm

⁵ In Prebish and Baumann (2002, ch. 1). Tweed's expression refers to sympathizers who do not embrace the religion fully or exclusively, and who may not attend or belong to any formal group.

preponderance of converts in the “Tibetan”⁶ dharma centers of many countries – not only the West, but also among various Chinese populations of East Asia (noting that Chinese “conversion” to Tibetan Buddhism may also be framed as reaffiliation, like the Methodist who becomes a Baptist). For both Westerners and ethnic Chinese, the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism has come as part of larger trends towards secularism, globalization, and religious pluralism. Where before, such identities would have been assigned or assumed by virtue of membership in a particular (and largely endogamous) community – coexisting with it, like language, in a sort of symbiosis – competitive pressures have made them negotiable. Without succumbing to a misplaced nostalgia, it makes sense to ask whether Tibetan Buddhism represents an improvement over the traditions which it displaces.

If the truth be told, I fall into the same category of spiritual seeker that the Dalai Lama probably had in mind when he made the above statement, so these are not just academic issues for me. In fact, I have spent much of my life looking not only for “the truth,” but also for a plausible religious identity.

I should perhaps mention that despite the Chinese-looking name on the byline, I am actually a white guy from Texas, and that my “real” name is David Bell. (Since there are too many David Bells in the world – some of whom publish in fields that I’m also interested in – I have taken to using the Chinese version of my name in order to avoid confusion.) From this, the alert reader will have surmised that I was not born into a Buddhist family. In fact my parents are members of the Episcopal Church (part of the worldwide Anglican Communion), which for the sake of my non-Western readers, I describe as a mainline denomination of Protestant Christianity.

Like numerous others, I stopped going to church in my early teens – partly because I had come to regard its central articles of faith as unscientific and illogical (I was a *Star Trek* fan), and partly out of discomfort with the whole “church experience” which included dressing up, sitting in wooden pews, and singing dreary hymns to choir and organ accompaniment. (The Dalai Lama would doubtlessly be irritated with me for criticizing my former religion, so let

⁶ Otherwise known as Indo-Tibetan, Tibeto-Himalayan, Tibeto-Mongolian, or Inner Asian Buddhism, a category which imperfectly overlaps with Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism. “Lamaism” may either refer to Tibetan Buddhism or, within it, to the institution of the lama.

me add that today I am better able to appreciate many aspects of it.) Instead, despite my early rationalism, I gravitated towards certain post-Theosophical and New Age lore (e.g. the paintings of Nicholas Roerich), from which I somehow acquired the image of Tibet—conflated, perhaps, with Shambhala—as a magical land which would fulfill my deepest yearnings, if I could only reach it.

The prospect of actually traveling to Tibet, however, took somewhat longer to materialize. In 1988, at the tender age of 21, I moved to Taiwan—not only to find that elusive first job after university, but also to approach nearer to the mystical Asia of my fantasies. Of course I realized that Taiwan was no Shambhala, but at least it would put me that much *closer* (or so I reasoned). I lived there for two years, working as an English polisher and copy-editor. Gradually I made plans to backpack across Asia, with Tibet and the Himalayas as my particular goals. A passage in *Lonely Planet* mentioned a Tibetan monastery in Nepal called Kopan,⁷ which was full of “intense-looking Westerners.” The author of that edition (Prakash A. Raj, if this was not an addition of Tony Wheeler) judged that “a day spent with the monks and nuns here can change your life.” He also noted that the monastery offers an annual month-long meditation retreat every November-December. If a day could change your life, I reasoned, what would a month do? So I went.

At the end of the course, all those who wished to take refuge vows were invited to do so, in a ceremony led by visiting lama Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche. (Did Kopan’s organizers perhaps fail to receive the Dalai Lama’s memo on the subject of religious conversion? One wonders.) While I did not convert to Buddhism that day, a few months later I tracked down Lama Kirti at his home monastery in Dharamsala, and asked to take refuge. He graciously agreed.

Did Kopan change my life? Yes, I think so. Until recently I thought of it as my spiritual home, which I always hoped to revisit. Every year, around November-December, I reflect on how well I’ve been using my time, and spare a thought for the latest cohort sitting on their cushions. And yet, my Buddhist identity has

⁷ Kopan Monastery was founded by Thubten Yeshe, an exile monk from Sera Je; and Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, a Sherpa and minor *tulku* from Solu Khumbu. During the 1970’s, they began attracting the interest of Western backpackers on the Asian “Hippie Trail,” a subculture which slowly evolved into what some have called the “Banana Pancake Trail.” Lama Yeshe has since died (and apparently been reincarnated as a Spaniard, Osel Hita Torres), leaving his junior colleague Lama Zopa in charge of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), an international network of Gelugpa dharma centers.

faltered. After returning to the U.S. for graduate school, I tried to focus on the study of Tibetan Buddhism, but instead found myself pulled (is this too passive an expression?) in other directions, both secular and religious. Among the latter, I would particularly name Orthodox Christianity, and the family of “extremist” (*ghulat*) Muslim sects that includes the Alevi and Baha’i traditions. At the same time, my academic work has reinforced my basic skeptical orientation. If you now find yourself suffering from “great inner confusion,” then—you understand!

My warm feelings for Tibetan Buddhism soured when I discovered Jessica Falcone’s 2008 articles criticizing the FPMT’s Maitreya Project.⁸ Beyond the tastelessness of the project itself (a giant Buddha statue planned for Bodhgaya or Kushinagar)—beyond even the ham-fisted, exploitative scheme to force Indian farmers to sell their land—lie more fundamental issues of authority and governance which have alienated me from the religion as a whole. Like most Tibetan Buddhist organizations, the FPMT (which I hasten to add is far from the worst-behaved) is governed by a self-perpetuating board of trustees whose purpose is to carry out the wishes, and pet projects, of its lamas. The lack of accountability to rank-and-file participants reflects a more general top-down spiritual ethos which I term “authoritarian” for its tendency to defer to the authority of traditional texts or leaders. I will say more about this later.

During the decade of the 2000’s I moved back to Taiwan, where I live today, and married Yang Chu-Yu (whose name, unlike mine, does not mislead as to ethnicity). While we were dating, Chu-Yu claimed not to have a religion. When I discovered her bowing before her family altar, she explained that she did not belong to an *organized* religion. Further inquiry revealed that she venerates her ancestors, fears ghosts, and prays to Heaven (Lao Tien Ye), conceived as a sort of plenum from which the various gods and goddesses of Chinese tradition emanate. Scholars refer to this belief system as the Chinese folk religion. Its adherents call it by a variety of names, including Buddhism and Daoism, when they admit it to be a religion at all. (In Indonesia it is called *Khonghucu*, or Confucianism.) In fact this turns out to be the predominant religion of Taiwan, as

⁸ Jessica Falcone, “A Year in India: Questioning the Maitreya Project: What would the Buddha do?” and “A Year in India: What would the Buddha do? The debate continues...” (both Feb. 2008, *Wild River Review*), readable through the Wayback Machine (<http://archive.org>) at the following, now defunct addresses:

http://www.wildriverreview.com/airmail_india-maitreya.php and
http://www.wildriverreview.com/airmail_india.php

well as the wider Chinese cultural sphere. Within it, “Buddhism” and “Daoism” could easily be regarded as the narrow traditions of professional religious specialists serving a broader, largely undifferentiated clientele which cares little either for the Three Jewels (except as represented by the bodhisattva Guanyin, easily Taiwan’s most popular deity) or the Three Pure Ones.

Once I asked each of my in-laws what they would put down as the name of their religion, for example, if they had to fill out a form. Although I received a bewildering variety of answers, after some discussion the family decided that they were Buddhists. God (wink wink) knows what the Dalai Lama would advise them, or me. In any case, I suppose that I am joined with Chu-Yu not only in our profession of irreligion, but also in our secret worship.

II. No monks, no magic, no mumbo jumbo? (The West)

In the West, attraction to alternative religions (including Tibetan Buddhism) is at least partly a reaction against the perceived shortcomings of Judaism and Christianity. For example, rhetoric to the effect that Buddhism is atheistic, rationalistic, or pacifistic is calculated to contrast with these religions. Reincarnation and meditation are embraced as alternatives to Western traditions regarding the afterlife and prayer, respectively. Buddhist statuary calls to mind Western prohibitions of idolatry, with Tibetan iconography being particularly suggestive of demonolatry and/or transgressive sexuality. Whether from frustrated idealism or a penchant for head-banging, disillusionment often ensues as converts come to realize that Buddhism is, at bottom, just another religion. In its wake, they may choose to adhere selectively, call for reforms, search for a more congenial group, swallow their reservations and submit, drift into inactivity, disaffiliate, and/or revert to their original religion whose influence, after all, cannot have entirely disappeared from their lives. Multiple identification is routine among Jews, and not unknown among gentiles. In this spirit, Stephen Batchelor asks whether the Dalai Lama’s admonition against conversion reflects a hidebound view of religious authority at odds with the individualistic, less dogmatic approach of many Western Buddhists.⁹

⁹ “What’s wrong with conversion, Your Holiness?” (29 May 1999, *The Independent*), <http://www.stephenbatchelor.org/index.php/en/whats-wrong-with-conversion-your-holiness>

Religious identity, it seems, is more than a matter of undergoing a particular ceremony, or of having a certain worldview or set of beliefs, but involves the whole of our social and cultural influences. One cannot simply turn these off, any more than one can forget one's native language. (On the other hand, the same difficulty would apply to reversion.) It is easy to sustain a religious identity when it comes as a virtual birthright, and is reinforced by family, holidays, etc. An alternative religious identity, on the other hand, cannot be nominal, but demands deliberate and sustained cultivation. (It is not enough simply to be a Buddhist—one must do meditation retreats, take robes, and/or become a Tibetologist.) These pressures to demonstrate commitment favor a certain traditionalism, which sits uncomfortably with the critical urge impelling converts seek out a new religion in the first place.

In *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, David L. McMahan observes that

Most non-Asian Americans tend to see Buddhism as a religion whose most important elements are meditation, rigorous philosophical analysis, and an empirical psychological science that encourages reliance on individual experience. It discourages blindly following authority and dogma, has little place for superstition, magic, image worship, and gods, and is largely compatible with the findings of modern science and liberal democratic values. [McMahan, 2008: 5]

While acknowledging that scholars and practitioners may “roll their eyes” at such generalizations, McMahan sees modernist rhetoric as “the lingua franca of Buddhism as it is presented in transnational, cosmopolitan contexts” (p. 259, cf. p. 256). McMahan also identifies an even more iconoclastic Buddhist *post*-modernism—for example, the Open Mind Zen center in Florida promises “no monks, no magic, no mumbo jumbo” (p. 245).¹⁰ However, writes McMahan, “some strains of Tibetan Buddhism have not been as quick to embrace the world-affirming, egalitarian, and democratic reinterpretations of the path,” but have instead moved in the direction of “retraditionalization” (read: fundamentalism), as illustrated by a particularly retrograde-sounding quote from Penor Rinpoche (pp. 246-247).

¹⁰ The center's website is <http://www.openmindzen.com>. I note that this skepticism does not extend to the practice of seated meditation, or to the role of the resident “Zen master.”

This is not the place to survey the situation of Tibetan Buddhist dharma centers in various Western countries,¹¹ or the history of orientaling fantasy visions of Tibet;¹² nor can I do much more than allude to the vast literature of interfaith dialogue¹³ between Buddhism and the major Western religions (including reactionary apologia for Judaism¹⁴ or Christianity¹⁵). I would however like to bring up the accounts of a few dissidents and defectors. During the 1990's, one wit quipped that the popular Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*—which had recently featured June Campbell,¹⁶ Jeffrey Hopkins,¹⁷ and Stephen Batchelor¹⁸ in its pages—was promoting the Three Poisons of anger, desire, and ignorance. How

¹¹ General descriptions of the convert—and immigrant—Buddhisms of various Western countries include Fields (1981/1992) and Williams & Queen (1999) for the USA; Matthews (2006) for Canada; Croucher (1989) and Rocha & Barker (2011) for Australia; Bluck (2006) for the UK; and Baumann (1995) for Germany. I forbear from listing every Western country. The subculture of Western backpackers in South Asia should not be overlooked; see Moran (2004). Baumann (1997) contains a lengthy bibliography on Western Buddhism.

¹² For this see Dodin & Rather (1996); Bishop (1989/1990 and 1993), and Brauen (2004).

¹³ For personal experiences of Buddhism in relation to Judaism and Christianity, see Kasimow, Keenan, & Keenan (2003). For high-level scholarly discussion of the possible compatibility of Buddhism and theism, see Schmidt-Leukel (2006). For ongoing dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, there is the journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, several issues of which have been published as books: Gross & Muck (2000 and 2003). See also Robert A. Jonas, "Buddhist-Christian Bibliography" (2006), <http://www.emptybell.org/articles/bibliography.html>. The best exploration of Buddhism and Judaism is still Kamenetz (1994). For a fuller bibliography see Jacquetta Gomes, "Buddhism and Judaism,"

http://www.thubtenchodron.org/InterreligiousDialogue/buddhism_and_judaism.pdf

¹⁴ For a Jewish anti-conversion plea, see Tatz & Gottlieb (2005) in which Tatz, an Orthodox rabbi, persuades Gottlieb, a former Zen practitioner, to revert. According to Dr. Tatz, "if Buddhism consists only of 'cultivating mindfulness, watching my breath, realizing the interconnectedness of all things and beings, and striving to recognize and uproot the causes of suffering', we should not find it necessary to argue" (p. 78). Gottlieb's decision was reportedly aided by his wife Galit, who told him "David, [...] your practicing Buddhism is a knife in my heart." Sara See Yoheved Rigler, "Conflicts of a Buddhist Jew" (n.d. but 2011), <http://www.aish.com/sp/so/48905982.html>

¹⁵ For the account of a Gelugpa scholar-practitioner turned Dominican tertiary, see Williams (2002). Strand (2008) is the memoir of a former Zen monk and *Tricycle* editor who found himself praying to Jesus during an episode of airline turbulence. As I understand him, he is not so much a revert as a syncretist; see his blog at <http://wholeearthgod.typepad.com>. For a Nyingmapa convert to Orthodox Christianity, see Nilus Stryker, "Through the Eastern Gate: From Tibetan Buddhism to Eastern Orthodoxy" (2 May 2007), http://www.ppravmir.com/article_216.html

¹⁶ Helen Tworhkov, "The emperor's tantric robes: An interview with June Campbell on codes of secrecy and silence" (*Tricycle*, col. 6, no. 2, Winter 1996), http://www.anandainfo.com/tantric_robes.html

¹⁷ "Jeffrey Hopkins on sex, emptiness, and gay tantra" (*Tricycle*, Summer 1996, vol. 5, no. 4, issue 20). The following issue (Fall 1996, vol. 6 no. 1, issue 22) contained many letters to the editor critical of Hopkins and/or homosexuality.

¹⁸ See "Rebirth: A case for Buddhist agnosticism" (*Tricycle*, Fall 1992, vol. 2 no. 1), <http://www.tricycle.com/feature/rebirth-case-buddhist-agnosticism> and (with Robert Thurman) "Reincarnation: A debate" (*Tricycle*, Summer 1997, vol. 6 no. 4), <http://www.tricycle.com/feature/reincarnation-debate>

so? In an academic study of women's roles in Tibetan Buddhism, Campbell, a former Kagyu nun, had raised eyebrows with a few lines describing her experience as the tantric consort of Kalu Rinpoche (likewise a supposed celibate), in an asymmetrical relationship she later came to see as exploitive (Campbell, 1997, ch. 6). She thus represents anger (at the gurus), although the late Kalu Rinpoche is hardly the only guru to stand accused of scandal. Jeffrey Hopkins, a former Gelugpa monk who wrote a book on gay tantra, represents desire. Finally, Stephen Batchelor, another former Gelugpa monk, represents ignorance (of cause and effect), since his attempt at a "non-contentious" (Batchelor, 2010: 175; the book was Batchelor, 1997/1998) introduction to Buddhism famously brackets the traditional Buddhist teachings of reincarnation and karma.

Jokes aside, it is interesting to consider why Tibetan Buddhists have reacted so defensively to these positions. Batchelor's doubts not only call into question the basic Buddhist goal of liberation from samsara, at least as traditionally understood, but also undermine the legitimacy of the *tulku* system (which depends on the conceit that lamas are capable both of reincarnating, and of identifying one another's reincarnations). The resulting backlash recalls the controversy surrounding John Shelby Spong¹⁹ among Protestants. Compare with the positive reception accorded to Batchelor's old nemesis,²⁰ B. Alan Wallace (yet another former Gelugpa monk), whose relatively limited skepticism elevates the practice of meditation (conceived scientifically)²¹ above various "religious, or quasi-religious, practices of Asian Buddhists, such as fortune-telling, palm-reading, funerary rites, and propitiation of mundane gods and spirits," which "cannot be deemed truly *Buddhist* in any canonical sense of the term" (in Prebish and Baumann, 2002: 35). Campbell extends her critique even wider, to the point of abandoning Buddhism itself:

¹⁹ Spong, a retired U.S. Episcopal bishop, is the author of a number of books expressing doubt towards various articles of the Christian faith, including the Virgin Birth and the efficacy of prayer.

²⁰ See their exchange in: B. Alan Wallace, "Distorted visions of Buddhism: Agnostic and atheist" (*Mandala: The Official Publication of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition*, Oct. 2010), <http://www.mandalamagazine.org/archives/mandala-issues-for-2010/october/distorted-visions-of-buddhism-agnostic-and-atheist> and Stephen Batchelor, "An open letter to B. Alan Wallace" (*Mandala* magazine, Jan. 2011), <http://www.mandalamagazine.org/archives/mandala-issues-for-2011/january/an-open-letter-to-b-alan-wallace>. See also Ted Meissner, "A reply to B. Alan Wallace's article, 'Distorted visions of Buddhism: Agnostic and atheist'" (*The Secular Buddhist* [blog], n.d. but 2011), http://www.thesectionalbuddhist.com/articles_response.php

²¹ For a history and critique of claims to the effect that Buddhism is uniquely compatible with science, confirmed by science, or a science in its own right, see McMahan (2009: 89-116—i.e. the whole of chapter four—as well as pp. 204-211).

"Once I started unravelling my experiences, I began to question everything," she said. That meant not just the actions of a particular guru, but the very idea of the guru. She began to wonder whether the Tantra was just a fantasy, and whether there is really any difference between Tantric sex and ordinary sex. She questioned the very concept of enlightenment itself and the practice of meditation.²²

As for the gay issue, controversy has erupted on other occasions. In one incident, the Dalai Lama—under fire for his remarks in *Beyond Dogma* to the effect that homosexual behavior violates Buddhist refuge vows—told gay representatives in San Francisco that he could not change the commentaries of Ashvagoshā and other Buddhist worthies, which he assumed to be correct.²³

Batchelor characterizes Tibetan Buddhism as authoritarian, dogmatic, and incompatible with what he sees as the critical impetus of Buddhist practice:

Despite a veneer of open, critical inquiry, Geshe Rabten did not seriously expect his students to adopt a view of Buddhism that differed in any significant respect from that of Geluk orthodoxy. [...] Moreover, to arrive at conclusions that contradicted orthodoxy was, for Geshe, not only anathema, but immoral. [Batchelor, 2010: 45]

[U]nlike some of my contemporaries, whom I envied, I would never achieve unwavering faith in the traditional Buddhist view of the world. Nor would I ever succeed in replacing my own judgment with the uncritical acceptance of a "root" lama, which was indispensable for the practice of the highest tantras, the only way, so it was claimed, to reach complete enlightenment in this lifetime. [Batchelor, 2010: 7]

"Having been presented with an image of Buddhism as open-minded, rational, scientific and tolerant," he writes, Western Buddhists "often find themselves confronted with a Church-like institution that requires unconditional allegiance to a teacher and acceptance of a non-negotiable set of doctrinal beliefs."²⁴ (Cf.

²² Paul Vallely, "I was a tantric sex slave" (10 Feb. 1999, *The Independent*), <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/i-was-a-tantric-sex-slave-1069859.html>

²³ See Steve Peskind, "According to Buddhist tradition" (*Shambhala Sun*, March 1998), http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1977

²⁴ "An open letter to B. Alan Wallace" (*op. cit.*)

Clark Strand's observation that Buddhism tends to be embraced "not as an alternative religion, but as an alternative to religion."²⁵ McMahan (2008: 245) describes Batchelor as a modernist for his conviction that religious principles can be argued rationally, and since he defends his theology by attributing it to the historical Buddha himself. However, a modernist would be more likely to amass scientific evidence or philosophical arguments for reincarnation, not reject it entirely; Batchelor's explanation of the doctrine as an Indic cultural artifact is more consistent with postmodernism.

In an online diatribe²⁶ hosted at Americanbuddha.com,²⁷ Tara Carreon (formerly a member of a Nyingma center in Ashland, Oregon) describes the subculture of U.S. dharma centers in withering terms:

In Tibetan Buddhist dharma centers all over America, lamas give orders to a tight hierarchy of appointed followers, who are often chosen for their willingness to donate time, money, real estate and property. [...]n your average Dharma center, the lama's word (or his wife's word) is law. Questioning is disobedience, and disagreement is heresy. If you think I'm exaggerating, I'll give you a list of centers to visit.

The complaint that we shop for Dharma is rather disingenuous. The lamas themselves turned the Dharma into a traveling show, selling tickets to empowerments with vague promises of spiritual benefit [...]

²⁵ "Buddhist Boomers: A meditation" (9 Nov. 2007, *Wall Street Journal*), available online http://online.wsj.com/article/SB119456987882087319.html?mod=taste_primary_hs
See also responses by Philip Ryan, "Graying Buddhism?" (14 Nov 2007), on the *Tricycle* blog (<http://tricycleblog.wordpress.com/2007/11/14/graying-buddhism/>); and Christ Suellentrop, "Autumn of the American Buddhist" (12 Nov. 2007, *New York Times*), <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/12/autumn-of-the-american-buddhist/?ex=1352696400&en=ac7beb323c03c9f8&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

²⁶ "Another view on whether Tibetan Buddhism is working in the West" (n.d. but 2001), <http://www.american-buddha.com/tib.bud.working.htm> See also the response by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, "East-West, West-East" (in the blog Ranjung Yeshe Gomde, 12 June 2009), <http://gomde-dk-sangha.blogspot.com/2009/06/east-west-west-east-by-dzongsar.html>

²⁷ Americanbuddha.com is the website of Victor and Victoria Trimondi (a.k.a. Herbert and Mariana Röttgen), authors of *Der Schatten des Dalai Lama. Sexualität, Magie und Politik im tibetischen Buddhismus* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1999) and *Hitler-Buddha-Krishna - Eine unheilige Allianz vom Dritten Reich bis heute* (Vienna: Überreuter Verlag, 2002). While no one would call the site balanced (for example, it draws rather sweeping conclusions from some bellicose verses in the *Kalachakratantra*), it hosts a wealth of material calculated to expose the dark side of Tibetan Buddhism and embarrass its apologists.

Possibly we should blame Americans for this venality. Probably not. The teachers chose the teachings, the place and the time. The students came, paid money, and listened.

Carreon's letter deserves to be read in full—not only on its own merits, but as a list of fairly typical complaints. They include repetitious, unedifying “arcane rituals”²⁸ performed in Tibetan, and reinforced with appeals to fear and psychological compulsion; reliance on “a lot of medieval assumptions about reality, cause and effect, and the need to propitiate the protector deities”; a culture of silence and secrecy which insulates lamas from criticism (but encourages gossip); and a distrust of democracy. “At the Tibetan temple where I invested 22 years,” she writes, “there were no ‘members.’” Carreon bristles at the arrogance of the lamas, and their ungracious contempt for Westerners: “The fact is that due to the financial support they have received from Westerners (and the Taiwanese), they can afford to remain ensconced in relative splendor in Kathmandu and Bhutan.”

All this is in the context of a response to B. Alan Wallace, whose essay (on the problems of Tibetan Buddhism in the West)²⁹ Carreon feels to be insufficiently critical. After all, she commiserates, “no one wants to be an accused heretic, like Stephen Batchelor.” Although she is “no longer a Tibetan Buddhist” and has learned “to think for myself,” Carreon constantly invokes the rhetoric of Buddhist modernism, citing the scientific method, freedom and democracy, humanitarianism and social activism, biofeedback studies of Zen meditation, and “the Buddha, who called everything into doubt.”

The above criticisms should be seen in the context of a liberal Western tradition with roots in the Enlightenment. Under pressure from the physical sciences, biblical scholarship, and activist social movements such as feminism, Jewish and Christian denominations have famously arranged themselves along a liberal-conservative spectrum, depending on their willingness to entertain proposed revisions. At one extreme lie Reform and Progressive Judaism, Unitarian Universalism, and some Quaker congregations, *inter alia*; the other is occupied by various fundamentalist groups. Western Buddhists thus tend to be drawn from

²⁸ Batchelor (2010: 22-23) also reports discomfort with Tibetan ritualism.

²⁹ “Tibetan Buddhism in the West: Is it working here?” (*Tricycle*, Summer 2001, vol. 10 no. 4), <http://www.alanwallace.org/Tricycle%20Interview.pdf>

among those dissatisfied with even the most sweeping reforms. In recent decades, however, Tibetan Buddhism (in common with other religions) has undergone a conservative retrenchment. As popular responses to the above-mentioned controversies demonstrate, not all Western converts are liberals. It would be interesting to explore how and why this shift has occurred (and I note in passing that similar trends can be observed among adherents of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness as well as the Baha'i religion), and document whether the liberal adherents of earlier years were transformed into, or replaced by, conservatives.

For all the Dalai Lama's vaunted progressiveness, Tibetan Buddhism has much in common with the fundamentalisms of other religions—from the pious insistence of its lamas that the historical Buddha really did teach the Mahayana sutras as well as the tantras; to the claim that Chandrakirti's interpretation of Nagarjuna represents the highest/truest/best possible tenet system; to the embrace of various cosmological and esoteric-anatomical concepts from ancient India. Above all, the system depends upon deference being accorded to various identified saints and teachers, whose authority rests primarily on the very fact of their elevation by tradition. To convert to Tibetan Buddhism is thus to abandon what liberals are likely to regard as theological gains. Even fundamentalist Protestants often affirm democracy and egalitarianism, values which Tibetan Buddhism does not seem capable of embracing. Where would Tibetan Buddhism be without tantra? And where would tantra be without the guru-disciple relationship, the assumption that vows and teachings must be passed down in an initiatory chain, or the conviction that some practices are higher or more effective than others due to unverifiable and essentially magical considerations?

Are there, then, no liberal Tibetan Buddhist groups? I am aware of one possible example, although I only know about it from the internet: Aro gTer, an upstart Nyingma organization whose leaders and members seem to be entirely non-Tibetan. While not even Aro can bring itself to dispense with the trappings of hierarchy and lineage, its leaders take full advantage of the *terma* tradition of mystically-revealed "treasure" texts to manufacture spiritual charisma for themselves, and effect whatever reforms are felt necessary. Critics complain that Aro leaders have misrepresented details of their lineage and endorsements.

III. They eat the people's rice (East Asia)

Besides the West, Tibetan Buddhism has been making significant inroads into the Chinese ethno-cultural world. By this I do not mean so much China proper (though there is a long history of such exchanges,³⁰ which in the future will surely grow in importance) as the relatively prosperous Chinese populations of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia. Abraham Zablocki observes that

This transnational expansion [of Tibetan Buddhism] was due both to the need of the exiles to find patrons to sponsor their reconstruction efforts in South Asia and to their recognition that there was a global demand for their religion that, in accordance with Buddhist doctrine, they ought to satisfy. Taiwanese Buddhists, enriched by the economic boom that had begun in Taiwan during the 1970s, proved to be particularly generous sponsors, and this helped make the island a frequent destination for many Tibetan Buddhist monastics and teachers. From this vantage, Taiwan was simply one site, albeit a very important one, in the emerging transnational networks of Tibetan Buddhism.³¹

His observation is echoed by Peter Moran, who recalls that in 1993 and 1994, "Taiwan figured prominently in many of the conversations I had with Tibetans [in Kathmandu] about Bodhanath lamas and monastery building" (Moran, 2004: 81-83). A letter to the editor of the *Taipei Times* from a Bhutanese disciple of Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche confirms this impression:

Countless monasteries and temples in Bhutan, Nepal and in many parts of India have continued to thrive today because of the sheer generosity of their Taiwanese friends. Hundreds of thousands of monks, nuns and lay practitioners depend on Taiwanese generosity for their livelihood. Because of the roles, Taiwanese disciples are commonly referred to as "jindags," which beautifully translates to "the giver of livelihood" or patrons. The Taiwanese jindags should actually feel proud of this. [However...] There are many cases were

³⁰ See Tuttle (2005), Kapstein (2009), and Yu (2011).

³¹ Abraham M. Zablocki, "The Taiwanese connection: Politics, piety and patronage in transnational Tibetan Buddhism" (ch. 11 of Kapstein, 2009), p. 388. See also his doctoral dissertation, *The Global Mandala: The Transnational Transformation of Tibetan Buddhism* (Cornell University, 2005).

the recipients seem to have become spoilt and intoxicated by the offerings of the Taiwanese, that they have come to think that they are entitled to the offerings.³²

Lest we suppose that the Taiwanese, etc. are content merely to earn merit by contributing funds, Zablocki traces the appeal of Tibetan Buddhism to “its perceived power to ensure long life, financial success, marital and family harmony, and other this-worldly benefits,” and to its claim of superiority over Chinese Buddhism. In contrast to the situation in Western dharma centers, he finds that in Taiwan, “there is comparatively less interest in Tibetan meditation or philosophy, and more in the efficacy of Tibetan rituals” (in Kapstein, 2009: 385).

Besides the Chinese folk religion (whose adherents, the reader will recall, sometimes call it Buddhism), a minority of Chinese people (in Taiwan, I suppose the figure would be something on the order of five or ten percent) identify with Buddhism *in stricta sensu*—i.e. the form associated with monks or nuns, and marked by such practices as vegetarianism, prayer-beads, and the greeting *Amitofo* (Amitabha). Looming over the numerous small-scale temples are several relatively large Buddhist organizations founded by charismatic sangha. In Taiwan, the most important would be Ciji (Compassion Relief Society), Foguangshan (Buddha Light Mountain), Fagushan (Dharma Drum Mountain), and Zhongtaishan (whose name is not usually translated).³³ Tibetan Buddhist centers in Taiwan (of which there seem to be several hundreds)³⁴ fall into the same general category as this institutionalized Chinese Buddhism, though none of them approach the size of the larger Chinese groups. The Tibetan groups (of which the largest is Penor Rinpoche’s Palyul Ling organization) are perceived as exotic, though some were founded by ethnic Chinese lamas, or are led by ethnic Chinese *tulkus*. Controversy has arisen over the issues of money (recall the parade of fund-raising tours by lamas, held in conjunction with mass teachings

³² Pawo Choyning (sic—should probably read Chonying) Dorji, “Buddhist thanks Taiwan patrons for generosity,” letter to the editor of the *Taipei Times*, (20 March 2012), <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/commentary/eye-on-taiwan/2012/03/20/335173/Buddhist-thanks.htm>

³³ See Huang (2009), Chandler (2004), Laliberte (2004), Madsen (2007), Jones (1999); and DeVido (2010). For an overview, see Bingenheimer, (2003).

³⁴ See <http://www.lama.com.tw> for announcements of current and upcoming Tibetan Buddhist activities in Taiwan.

or initiations) and sex (with tantra complicating what would otherwise be a set of scandals comparable to those of Chinese Buddhism, or for that matter, any other religion). On that note, a particularly hostile Chinese Buddhist reaction against Tibetan Buddhism has appeared in the form of the True Enlightenment (Zhengjue) Education Foundation. In much the same spirit as Americanbuddha.com, Zhengjue disseminates exposes on various Tibetan Buddhist scandals (especially those of a sexual nature), almost to the exclusion of other interests, and apparently labors under the impression that tantric sex, including rapes and orgies, is a regular activity of Tibetan dharma centers.

Among the lamas who travel to Taiwan, some give irregular teachings and initiations (for which set donations are usually specified), or lead sadhanas (crowds of several hundred are routinely encountered). Like the propaganda of charismatic Chinese Buddhist sangha, their posters and fliers can be seen at stores specializing in Buddhist paraphernalia, among other public places. Some foreign lamas maintain permanent local centers which they visit periodically, offering a more long-term, systematic curriculum. A few have settled here permanently. I am aware of others, both temporary visitors and long-term residents, whose activities are relatively low-key or limited to a select group. For example, Lupon Nikula of Bhutan visits his small circle of Taiwanese disciples (numbering twenty or so) on an annual or semi-annual basis in order to lead them through ever more advanced practices; the group began practicing together about ten years ago, and is essentially closed to newcomers. Turning to the ethnic Chinese/Taiwanese who have assumed the role of lama, several have essentially founded their own "Tibetan" sect on the basis of their own personal revelations (e.g., the True Buddha School), while others boast recognition from some established lineage. As for the followers, one discerns a range of motivations and emphases. Unlike the relative individualism of the West, East Asian participants are often recruited on the basis of family ties. To what extent they cultivate a religious identity distinct from Chinese Buddhism, or the Chinese folk religion, is difficult to say. I note that many Tibetan dharma centers observe the Chinese Ghost Month, and that vegetarianism is widely assumed to represent the Buddhist teaching.

Many Chinese Buddhist groups in Taiwan affirm the ideology of *renjian fojiao* (translated as "Humanistic Buddhism" or "Buddhism for the Human Realm") as taught by Yin Shun (1906-2005), which holds that Buddhism ought not to be

relegated to a purely funerary role. (For example, Ciji runs the island's largest charity.) To my knowledge, none of the Tibetan groups here have involved themselves in such practical activities, apart from donations to their home monasteries. In Malaysia, however, Kechara House (a Gelugpa group led by Mongolian-American lama Tsem Rinpoche, and affiliated with the exile Ganden Shartse in Mundgod, Karnataka)³⁵ organizes a soup kitchen which distributes vegetarian meals to the homeless, in addition to running a chain of shops and restaurants. Although sent to Malaysia for the purpose of fund-raising, Tsem Rinpoche has settled there, and encourages his students (practically all of whom are Malaysian Chinese) to live and work together under the auspices of Kechara's various wings.

All types of institutional Buddhism agree on the insufficiency of Chinese folk practices (while also adapting to them to some extent), and grow by predation upon weaker religious identities. Granting the incapability of the folk religion to transmit very complex theological teachings, it deserves to be asked whether the preservation of such minutia is worth the expense of supporting professional religious specialists, or the loss of spiritual independence that would be the result of a shift away from home-based practices. My father-in-law's reaction to TV images of a Tibetan monastery was, "They eat the people's rice," i.e., they live an essentially parasitical social existence. In their different ways, institutional Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism destroy the balance of an earlier Chinese cultural ecology in which Buddhism was relegated to clearly-defined niche roles. Of course, change is inevitable, perhaps even an improvement; while the historical upheavals of the last century or so make it difficult to speak of "balance."

All forms of traditional Chinese religiosity carry significant social costs. Superstition is rife—by which I mean such practices as divination, belief in lucky or unlucky days, hyper-ritualism, petitionary prayer to the exclusion of other practices, and a whole body of apparently unimpeachable beliefs which seem, in cold reality, to be false (such as the curious notion that sacrificing a chicken is proof of a politician's honesty). While such things exist in Western religions as well (perhaps the chicken sacrifice could be compared to swearing on the Bible in court), their role in Chinese religion is far greater. Whether Tibetan Buddhism is less superstitious is a difficult question, and the answer probably varies from

³⁵ See <http://www.kechara.com>, <http://blog.tsemtulku.com>

group to group. At least Tibetan groups lack the cozy ties with politicians and/or organized crime that many formal religious institutions enjoy, though this may simply be the result of their small size and relative newness. The fact that Tibetan dharma centers tend to be led by ethnically alien religious figures arguably introduces a kind of spiritual colonialism that is not present in traditional Chinese religious forms.

Conclusion: Yak's head, sheep's body

Whether or not it continues into the future, globalization will surely be remembered as one of the great defining trends of our era. Its religious dimension takes not only the familiar form of missionaries and diasporas, but the increasing impossibility of taking our own religious identities for granted. Whatever we may ultimately believe, practice, or join, religion has become a matter of choice rather than an implicit identity which adherents may assume to be true. It is difficult to wall off outside influences, to the extent that this is even possible. As the world integrates further, we can hardly avoid becoming like that yak-headed sheep spoken of by the Dalai Lama as a cautionary symbol for religious syncretism.³⁶

Confronted by these globalizing forces, many established religions (including Buddhism, in countries where it dominates) promote romantic nationalistic dreams of an ethnically and religiously homogenous society—often in alliance with right-wing political forces, mafia groups, and other dubious representatives of tradition. Indeed, Buddhist sangha have often allowed themselves to be used as legitimizing symbols of their ethnic group's political domination, or remained silent in the face of ethnic cleansing (when they were not actively fomenting it, as during the Sri Lankan civil war). Such departures from the ideal would make it difficult to support any religion. In any case, in light of impermanence, together with the difficulty of identifying "essential" cultural traits which demand preservation, it is hardly an original Buddhist insight to suggest that such resistance to other cultures is misguided.

³⁶ In several places the Dalai Lama applies to religious conversion the Tibetan proverb, "Don't try to put a yak's head on a sheep's body." See for example *The Good Heart* (1998, p. 105).

As for recommendations,³⁷ I doubt that very many Tibetan Buddhist leaders will particularly care what changes I think ought to be made to their religion. A religion is not a reciprocal relationship like a marriage, in which both parties are obliged to listen and adapt to one another. At the same time, changes will surely come, even if they are not necessarily ones favored by liberal dissidents and defectors such as myself. Possibly the qualities which allow religions the best chances of survival, are ones which also encourage a certain ruthlessness in facing threats or opportunities. Religions, like languages, often take on a life of their own, existing in a kind of symbiosis with their host populations. In this light, the wisest strategy would be to choose the least demanding religion available, albeit one which is nevertheless strong enough to withstand competition. While it is possible to be an atheist, this is difficult to sustain multigenerationally, as any offspring would be vulnerable to predation by relatively gung-ho religious identities (on the assumption that religionlike behavior is universal across all human populations). Against the pressures of group identity and inter-group competition, idealism (as opposed to idealistic rhetoric) tends not to fare very well.

³⁷ The original call for papers for this conference (penned, I am told, by Dasho Karma Ura) hoped that participants might address (among a rather dizzying ten-page list of proposed topics) “the theme of Buddhist multiculturalism” and “Buddhism by choice,” in the West and elsewhere. Papers would “counter negative opinions and misconceptions on Buddhism,” and contribute to “a checklist of 108 reasons” for accepting the religion.

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