

Saving Tibet from Satan's Grip

Present-day Missionary Activity in Tibet

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Tibet has always held a great attraction for Christian missionaries, who were frustrated for 200 years by its refusal to admit them. The open door policy of the last ten years allowed the missionaries who worked on the Sino-Tibetan borders 50 years ago to resume their activities in Eastern Tibet, usually with official consent. At the same time, Chinese authorities appear to have turned a blind eye towards the small number of less orthodox evangelicals who have attempted to spread their religion in Tibet, sometimes operating under the cover of being tourists or teachers.

evangelical activists from hong kong

In 1990 a group of fundamentalist Christians issued a call for evangelical activists to go to Tibet in disguise in order to convert Tibetans to Christianity. The missionaries, who planned to enter Tibet as tourists or guest workers, intended to distribute bibles and tracts throughout Tibet in order to convert Tibetans from Buddhism, which the organisation describes as "demonic spiritual bondage".

The call was made by a U.S.-based organisation called "The Sowers Ministry" which operates from Kowloon in Hong Kong. The group sent "undercover" missionary teams to Tibet in 1989 and 1990, and in 1990 issued leaflets calling for volunteers to join an "intercession team" which it planned to send into Tibet in 1991. According to the leaflets, the visit by this team would mean that "the roots of evil can be identified and dealt with, and Satan's forces can be thrown down and destroyed". One of the teams, sent by the group in July 1990, consisted of a Western couple who used their daughter to attract Tibetan interest. According to the group's leaflet, "The Lord opened the doors for Neil and Kathy to give away bible tracts and gospels of John.

On the first day they walked their three-month-old baby Maria to the park. Attracted to Maria, the Tibetans invited them for yak-butter tea. That day they gave away fifty per cent of their Christian literature."

The group describes Tibet as "a nation long steeped in demonism and Tibetan Buddhism, called Lamaism, a nation in desperate need of sharing the Truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ...". In its literature it describes sky burials and the use of "rancid smelling yak butter" as examples of how "Satan has enslaved the people". (See "Extracts from the Sowers Ministry Website" on page 42 for more such descriptions of Tibetan customs and beliefs.)

groups on the indo-tibetan border

Christian organisations have been attempting to convert Tibetans since the mid-eighteenth century. Some of these groups are still active amongst Tibetans in Northern India and Nepal. Some of the present-day evangelical groups focus on long-term scholarly work and charitable activity. In this they are largely following the initiative of the Moravian church, which established a permanent station in Ladakh in 1885.

Other groups have a more aggressive approach to evangelism. A group in Kathmandu produces apocalyptic tracts in Tibetan and two organisations operate radio stations broadcasting evangelical material in Tibetan to Northern India and Tibet. One of these, apparently operated by a U.S.-based organisation with additional funding from the Norwegian Tibetan Mission, broadcasts from the Seychelles, and the other, which is based in Sri Lanka, is run by Indian evangelical organisations in association with the Kathmandu group.

The groups in India are loosely connected through membership of the Tibetan Christian Fellowship, which

produces a newsletter from an address in California. The movement to convert Tibetans, working in India for some 250 years, is reported to have at present about 200 Tibetan converts to the Christian faith, according to Reverend Stephen Hishi, a former Moravian pastor of Tibetan parentage who was interviewed by *Tibetan Review* in March 1990.

The Central Asian Fellowship, which on 1 November 1990 launched a Tibetan language evangelical radio station called Gaweylon, gives slightly different figures in one of its leaflets. "The number of Tibetan-speaking Christians in India and Nepal is not more than sixty in all," says the leaflet, adding that twelve of these are in Nepal. But the organisation adds that the number of Christians using the Tibetan Bible is around 250, mostly concentrated in Ladakh.

All these groups are evangelical, unlike some of the other Christian organisations involved in charitable and educational work with Tibetan exiles. Although they are not all trying to operate clandestinely within Tibet itself, the Tibetan Christian Fellowship shares with the Hong Kong evangelists a long-term interest in work in Tibet. The Moravians in Kinnaur had tried to cross the border into Tibet in the late 1860s, and sent one of their Tibetan converts as a preacher into Tibet forty years later, but none were allowed to proceed very far by the Tibetan authorities.

The Tibetan Christian Fellowship has also expressed some concern about the spread of Tibetan religious ideas in the West. It noted in one newsletter in 1987 that thousands of Western Buddhists had been allowed to attend a recent Buddhist ceremony in the United States. "Surely we should be free to share the knowledge of Jesus Christ", the newsletter added.

Since 1986, however, some of these groups have begun to work with the Chinese authorities in an effort to re-initiate missionary activities in Tibet. This has led them to operate not just on the Indian border with Tibet but to station themselves, as they did before the Communist take-over of China, on the Chinese-Tibetan border.

resurgence of chinese christianity

In late 1949 the remaining Western missionaries in China were finally forced to flee. But in a way the eviction of missionaries from China cleared the way for what became in the 1980s a resurgence of indigenous Christianity in China. Under what some evangelical Christians in the West today refer to as the "refining

fire" of the Cultural Revolution, Christianity in China, reportedly only about one million strong in 1949, became what one Westerner has called "every missionary's dream" — a Church which is self-sustaining and self-propagating.

The official Church organisations are allowed to function so long as they have no traditional links with foreign Churches and respect the authority of the Communist Party. These Church organisations have, since 1979, gathered around them some four million Protestants and five million Catholic converts (though a grey area surrounds the Catholics since many privately support the officially condemned Vatican loyalists). These official organisations continue to flourish, but are rejected by many Christians because of their rigid links with the Chinese Government. As a result, the "Three-Self Patriotic Church" and the other official organisations are now dwarfed by the growth of the House Church Movement, as the major clandestine Protestant movement is called in China.

The current missionary movement among Westerners mirrors this division. One sector works through the existing Chinese state, accepting its laws in return for its patronage, while another sector operates clandestinely, and opposes Communism almost as much as Tibetan Buddhism. Many of the denominational groups and the Catholics tend to take the first option, whilst the fundamentalist evangelical movements prefer the second.

Both sectors, however, take essentially the same view of political activity as did the missionaries in China prior to the 1949 Liberation; they avoid any political involvement. The present-day fundamentalists, despite an ideological opposition to Communism, do not actively oppose the Chinese state or support Tibetan nationalism. In any case, by opening up China since 1979, the Communist administration in Beijing has dramatically increased missionary access to the country. Paradoxically, it is an atheist government that has rendered Central Tibet more accessible to Christian missionaries than at any time in recent Tibetan history.

Amongst the undercover missionaries the vitality of the House Church Movement in China poses something of a dilemma, since the work of evangelizing is already being done by the Chinese themselves. Yet most Western evangelicals include the Tibetans amongst those non-Chinese nationalities which require "traditional" conversion by foreign intermediaries. The methods used by these missionaries are contentious amongst their colleagues — many of them operate by "tracting", proselytizing by handing out literature in the streets. Such methods are considered "naive" by both the

official missionaries who work with the state organisations and by the unofficial ones who support the House Church Movement and consider themselves culturally sensitive.

The “reborn” fundamentalists do not accept such criticisms. To an extent, this reflects a theological divide as well as a dispute amongst Christians over the role of “sensitivity” in evangelizing. The fundamentalists maintain that those who are not baptised are damned; more tolerant Christians, including both the established Protestant and Catholic Churches, avoid this question and recognise the ethical and moral values of other religions. “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions”, as the Pope put it in the edict *Nostra Aetate*. There are also doctrinal variations amongst the fundamentalists: one of the evangelicals working in Tibet told the Tibet Information Network in London that the Tibetans who are not Christians are damned only if they have heard the word of God but then not accepted it.

official protestant activity: eastern tibet

In 1985 a group of former Protestant missionaries to Tibet met in Anaheim, California. They were mostly connected to the Christian Missionary Alliance or to independent missionaries like George Patterson or the Morse family. These evangelists were from the tradition

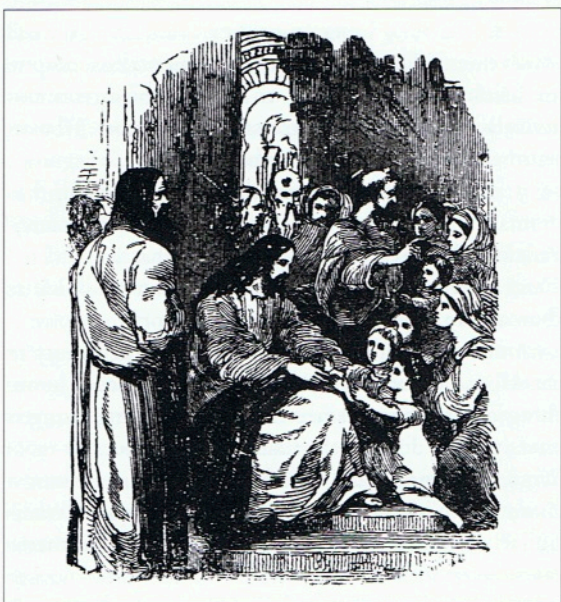


Illustration from *Tibetan Catechism* by Edward Amundsen, Christian Tract and Book Society, Calcutta 1906, p.29.

of lifelong service in one area, and amongst them were several who had worked, lived, or even been born in Bathang in Eastern Tibet before 1949. The group negotiated with the Chinese authorities and was allowed to travel to Bathang in May 1986, on the grounds that it was, for them or their relatives, their former birthplace or workplace. They found five (Protestant) Christians, all in or around their eighties, still alive in Bathang. Under the direction of Philip Ho, they began preparations to establish a Protestant Church there.

These missionaries worked with the Chinese authorities, and were supportive of Chinese achievements in Bathang. An article by former Bathang missionary Marguerite Fairbrother (who was one of the six on the trip) praised advances in prosperity, population control, literacy and the provision of “electric lights, radios, cassette players, televisions, small Chinese-made washing machines” and, occasionally, flush toilets for the Tibetans in the town. The article (printed in the U.S. magazine *Horizons* in November 1986) condemned the earlier pre-Communist Tibetan society and “its mountain of superstition and enslaving tradition”, but lamented the “spiritual void” that remained.

The group undertook in a public statement to cooperate with the official “Three-Self” Church organisation in China, an arm of the State created to protect Chinese Christianity from foreign control. Chinese law allows freedom of belief but does not allow evangelizing except within the premises of official religious institutions. Nevertheless, this law does not seem to be strictly applied where foreign evangelists are involved, and the returning Bathang missionaries took part in “personal evangelism with people in whose homes we visited”.

unofficial missionary activity: Lhasa since 1985

In the last five years missionary activity, all of it covert, has resumed in Lhasa, where there had been no missionary work since the expulsion of the Capuchins 250 years earlier. Western missionary activity in Lhasa has been conducted mostly by evangelicals operating as English teachers.

Encouraging undercover evangelicals to work as teachers does not seem to be construed by the missionaries or by the Chinese as a political challenge to the Chinese state. There are indications that the authorities in China actually prefer such teachers and in some cases the authorities have tacitly encouraged the use of evangelical Christians as foreign teachers in China. This

may be because even covert Christian missionaries, unlike Buddhists in Tibet, for example, are traditionally likely to preach support of the state as well as energetic support of the post-Communist society. Organisations such as the Hong Kong-based Jian Hu Foundation and the U.S.-based English Language Institute, apparently dedicated to appointing Western evangelical Christians as teachers in China, are not known to encounter any opposition from Beijing.

The opening up of Lhasa to tourists in the early 1980s appears to have been seen as a God-given opportunity by all Western evangelical groups interested in Tibet. Even more opportunity presented itself with the decision of the Lhasa authorities to accept Westerners as English teachers. During the autumn of 1985 the first four Western teachers were appointed, and already two of them were Christians with a long-standing commitment to evangelism. By the autumn of 1986 eight other teachers had been appointed, and at least two of these were evangelists.

In late 1986 the authorities in Lhasa, perhaps in deference to the anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign then under way in Beijing, are reported to have shown the first signs of nervousness about the appointment of Western teachers. That autumn, contracts for two teachers were not renewed. The teachers appointed after this in late 1986 and in 1987 were mainly from well-known organisations contracted through Beijing, namely the British Council and Voluntary Service Overseas.

The political sensitivity of the presence of teachers in Tibet became clear in October 1987, a few days after the outbreak of pro-independence demonstrations in Lhasa: all the Lhasa-appointed Western teachers were expelled from Tibet. There was no evidence of involvement by the teachers. The expulsions seem, therefore, to have been partly symbolic, perhaps designed to indicate official disapproval towards Western travellers who were regarded as sympathetic to the demonstrators.

Only the Beijing-appointed teachers were allowed to remain, but even they were encouraged to leave over the next year by less obvious forms of pressure. From that time until the end of 1991 only six Western teachers are known to have been allowed to take up posi-

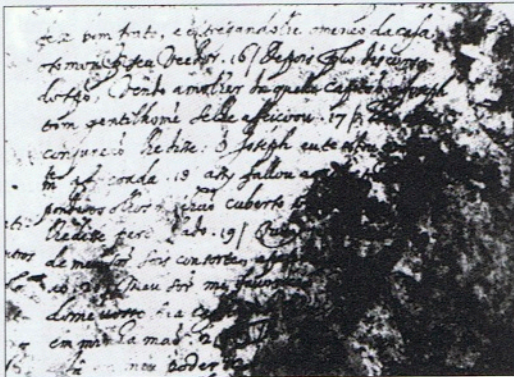


Illustration from *Tibetan Catechism* by Edward Amundsen, Christian Tract and Book Society, Calcutta 1906, p.1.

tions in Tibet, all of them American citizens with strong connections to evangelical organisations or traditions. In March 1989, when martial law was imposed on Lhasa, one of the teachers was quoted — not necessarily accurately — by the official Chinese press as approving of the decision to impose military rule.

Even fundamentalist evangelical groups do not rely purely on bible-running and “tracting” to convert non-believers. Some undertake intensive language learning in order to be able to preach in the local language. The most extreme fundamentalists, such as the notorious Summer School of Linguistics — already active amongst Tibetan-speaking peoples in Nepal — are motivated by the belief that the Messiah cannot appear until the Bible has been translated into all the world’s languages.

As a result, a number of the new generation of evangelists, those with a slightly more long-term vision than the tourists who were handing out tracts, are studying the Tibetan language prior to embarking on missionary activities made feasible again by the open door policy. Before 1949 missionaries were expected to study



Remnants of Portuguese Bible Found inside Tibetan Mask

In the mid-1980s, Chinese archaeologists excavating the ruins of Tsaparang, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Guge, discovered a tantric skeleton mask. *China's Tibet* (No.1 1996) provides the rather astonishing dimension of 34 cm (height) by 23 metres (width) for the mask. It is more than probable the latter figure is also in centimetres.

Like Tibetan tantric dance (*cham*) masks in general, this one was made from layers of pasted cloth. This particular mask had its centre layers of cloth while both sides were covered with three layers of pasted paper, with a thin finishing layer of clay. When the clay layer was peeled off the paper exposed was found to be covered with Portuguese words, mostly hand-written and partly printed. The pages were from a Portuguese Bible.

In 1624, the Jesuit missionary Antonio de Andrade and his companions ventured from Agra to Tsaparang where being favourably received by the Tibetan king, they were allowed to set up a mission and build a church. After the overthrow of the King of Guge in 1633, the Jesuits were forced to leave Tsaparang. Constant raids from Muslim forces and neighbouring states, and a drop in the water table brought about the destruction of Tsaparang and the end of the ancient kingdom of Guge. [EDITORS] ■

Tibetan with other missionaries and local Tibetans in Dartsedo (*Chin.* Kangding) or Bathang; nowadays it has become fashionable to attend Tibetan language courses organised by the Chinese Government, such as the course for foreigners at the National Institute of Minorities in Chengdu. In the academic year 1990–1991 fourteen out of fifteen of the Westerners studying Chinese or Tibetan at the Institute were active Christians, of whom several belonged to evangelical organisations and intended to go on to work as missionaries.

tibetan response

One of the evangelicals active in Lhasa in the last five years, who had worked for several years amongst Tibetans in exile, claimed later that Tibetans in Tibet are more responsive to Christian activity than are Tibetans in India. “We chatted all day with the people, and we got rid of the whole lot (religious tracts) at one time...they were so pleased and said “Can I have some for my parents, my family?” and so on... They wanted to take as much as they could”, he said of his first experience distributing tracts in a Tibetan village.

He attributed the resistance of Tibetans in India to strongly-held nationalist pride amongst the exiles. He did not think the welcome he received in Tibetan villages inside Tibet was due to the fact that the Tibetans he approached there were unaware of the intentions of Christian evangelism.

There is little published information about the attitude of Tibetans in exile to Christian Tibetans, although in his March 1990 interview with the *Tibetan Review* the pastor Stephen Hishi referred to hostility amongst Tibetans towards Christian converts, and spoke of a general feeling that Tibetan Christians “had sold out for a certain amount of money”. In 1988 there were reports of incidents involving local Buddhist opposition to Tibetan Christians in Ladakh, in which the Dalai Lama is said to have intervened to reduce tensions.

Historically, Christian attempts at conversion of Tibetans have been bedevilled, initially, not so much by intolerance but by the traditional openness of Buddhist towards other religions, which are regarded as equally acceptable to their own. Buddhism allows for an infinite number of people to discover perfection in a wide variety of ways, not necessarily through religions, and so easily regards Jesus as what is termed in Sanskrit a “Bodhisattva”.

As a result, evangelists in the past often reported that it was easy to persuade Tibetans to accept Jesus as a



Illustration from *Tibetan Catechism* by Edward Amundsen, Christian Tract and Book Society, Calcutta 1906, p.2.

spiritual master, but difficult to get them to renounce all the other Bodhisattvas. Even The Sowers Ministry appears to have anticipated this problem, and their leaflet notes with concern that to Tibetan Buddhists, “Jesus is seen as an incarnate principle of enlightenment rather than [as] the unique Son of God.”

missionary hopes

Some contemporary Western evangelicals who have worked in Tibet speak of the place in semi-mystical terms as a place where the Holy Spirit is working, and tell detailed stories of miraculous events which have happened to undercover missionaries there. Many of these concern the ability to give out tracts without being arrested. “At the Jokhang monastery Kathy gave the literature to a monk and his young trainee. In a room normally full of worshippers no-one was there to report her action to the Chinese. In such ways the Lord provided opportunities,” says a leaflet from The Sowers Ministry.

Other evangelicals are more sophisticated in explaining their belief that God is working through them in their effort to convert Tibet. “A lot of things happened in Tibet which would be difficult to explain to you if you’re not a Christian”, said one, apparently referring to miraculous events. In general, the missionaries are full of confidence about their future. Another Sowers Ministry fundamentalist said of evangelical work in

Tibet, “I am confident that slowly but surely the Lord is raising up hosts of armies in that forbidden land”.

There are few claims so far of any converts made in Tibet, apart from the old communities in Bathang, although Woodward reports that there are Tibetan Christians living in Lhasa. There has also been a traditional reluctance amongst missionaries in Tibetan areas to reveal whether their converts are Chinese or Tibetans. However, one evangelical who worked in Lhasa in 1987 said recently, “As far as I know there were no Tibetans who were Christian”.

The general reluctance to distinguish between Tibetan and Chinese converts is a reflection of the fact that missionaries based in Western China before the war moved into Tibetan areas at the same time as Chinese colonisers and settlers, and were to some extent part of the extension of Chinese influence over Tibetans. That pattern still underlies the increasing involvement of missionaries in Central Tibet today, which coincides with an increase in the number of Chinese settling in Tibet. Some of the Tibet evangelicals talk of Tibetans as though they are likely to follow the Chinese towards Christianity, and regard the issue as a subsection of the problem of converting the Chinese.

Unless the Chinese close the door again — a move which would encourage indigenous, unofficial Christianity — it is unlikely that the Western missionaries can be kept away any more than can the flow of Western ideas. The potential market of a billion souls is too great a temptation for Western evangelicals to resist. Western missionary activity seems likely to continue in Tibet, whether directed at Chinese or Tibetans, and the indications so far are that it is unlikely to face sustained opposition from the authorities. ■

This article is based on a report in Tibet Information Network *Background Papers on Tibet*, September 1992, Part 2)