Evangelicals in Central Tibet: Background Notes

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Since China opened up Tibet to tourists there has been increasing activity by western Christians eager to spread their religion in Tibet through official or unofficial means.

Tibet has always held a great attraction to Christian missionaries, who were frustrated for 200 years by its refusal to admit missionaries. 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 tourists or teachers.

Evangelical Activists in 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 as 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 US-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. ... Through intercession we can prepare the way for Christian evangelism into Tibet".

The group invited Christians to join their teams of evangelical tourists in Tibet, but they were also interested in attracting professionals who would enter as foreign guest

workers. They gave a list of industries which they say are being developed in Tibet, a move which they hope "would give Christian professionals the opportunity to make an impact for the One True God in a nation historically heaped with false ones".

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. In the first day they walked their three month old baby Maria to the park. Attracted to Maria, the Tibetans invited them for yak tea. That day they gave away 50% of the 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, the use of "rancid smelling yak butter for just about everything" and the use of 108 beads instead of 100 on a rosary as examples of how "Satan has enslaved the people".

The group expresses sympathy for the deaths of thousands of Tibetans at the hands of the Chinese, and the resulting exodus of many Tibetans in 1959. It comments on this, "In the midst of all this terror one wonders if the Tibetans question the ability of the Dalai Lama to save them." It also criticises the Dalai Lama for his ecumenical approach to religion and for saying "belief in God does not matter so much".

The group appealed in 1990 for funds for their next project, which was to take Christian literature into Tibet. They hoped to reach illiterate nomads who will not have access to electricity by distributing wind-up, dynamo-powered tape-recorders together with evangelical tapes in Tibetan.

"Prayer-warriors" are asked to support the group by praying "that the demonic spiritual bondage of Bon and Buddhism may be prevented from keeping its stronghold on the people", that "Tibetans will see the emptiness of present religious systems", and "that political leaders will kept the doors open to travellers and [will] open the doors to foreign workers".

Supporters are also asked to "pray against the spreading of Tibetan Buddhism into other countries". The group is concerned about the presence of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the West and notes that certain major Universities in the United States have opened Tibetan departments where, "in some classes, parts of Tibetan scripture are required reading".

Groups on the Indo-Tibetan border

The group's leaflets do not acknowledge the work of other groups in the same field.

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, who established a permanent station in Ladakh in 1885. The Moravians had settled in Lahul from as early as 1856; they later had other bases in Rajpur (Uttar Pradesh) and Kinnaur, 200 miles north of Simla (1865–1924).

The Moravians still run a school in Leh, Ladakh, and from the 1920s to the 1960s Tharchin Babu, a Tibetan converted by Moravians in Kinnaur and later ordained a Minister of the Church of Scotland Mission in Kalimpong, West Bengal, produced a well-reputed Tibetan language newspaper called "The Mirror". Tibetan Christian groups in Leh, Rajpur, Kathmandu and Kalimpong are still active.

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 US-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 for the journal Tibetan Review in March 1990.

David Woodward writing in the Tibet Journal in WInter 1991, estimates that there are abut 2,000 Tibetan Christians. The Central Asian Fellowship, which on 1st 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 60 in all," says the leaflet, adding that 12 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 inside 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 neither 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 takeover of China, on the Chinese-Tibetan border.

History: Central Tibet

Missionary activity inside central and western Tibet began with the arrival in 1624 of the two Portuguese Jesuits, De Andrade and Marques. Entering western Tibet from Ladakh, they were allowed to found two churches near Tsaparang in Western Tibet. The mission lasted for some 15 years before local unrest and popular opposition to their work led to their flight. Only a dozen Tibetans are said to have been converted in that period, according to the modern Chinese historians Wang and Suo.

In 1707 a Capuchin missionary was allowed to set up a mission in Lhasa, and in 1716 the Jesuit scholar Desideri was allowed, and encouraged, to study Buddhism at the Monastery of Sera. He wrote, in Tibetan, a refutation of Buddhism which is said to have been eagerly studied and appreciated at the time, although it led to no conversions. Sectarian conflict with the Capuchins forced him to flee to India in 1721, but growing local opposition to the Capuchins led to their expulsion from Lhasa in 1745.

47 years later the Lhasa Government announced a formal ban on all Westerners entering Tibet. Some writers maintain that Tibetans had enjoyed and tolerated the Catholic missions as a valuable contribution to debate and learning, but had changed their attitude when it became clear that the missionaries were intent upon persuading Tibetans to renounce their own religion.

The Christian presence in central Tibet had lasted, in all, little over a century. Apart from a visit in 1846 by two travelling Lazarist fathers, Abbe Huc and Gabet, who did not attempt missionary activity, there was no further recorded Christian activity in political Tibet after that date.

The only exception is believed to have been an Englishwoman by the name of Annie Taylor. She was tolerated as an eccentric and was allowed to stay for over a decade in Yadong at the beginning of this century. She was unsuccessful in her attempts at conversion.

But the missionaries were not without significance even after they were banned from entry into Tibet. From the middle of the 19th century missionaries began to settle on the then Indian and Chinese borders of Tibet, and the historian Hugh Richardson attributes to their aggressive activity much of the determination which led the Tibetan Government to keep its borders closed to Westerners in the 19th and 20th centuries (*Tibet and Its History,* Shambala, 1884, p. 71). Annie Taylor herself was not without impact despite her lowly status: constantly writing to the British Viceroy in India about the largely imaginary influx of Russians in Lhasa, she was amongst those whose pressure encouraged the British to stage the brutal 1904 invasion of Tibet.

Eastern Tibet

In Eastern Tibet, then as now beyond the administrative control of Lhasa, French Catholics had been active since the late 18th century, and Protestant organisations from Britain, Scandinavia, and later the United States, worked hard to build up churches amongst Tibetans and Chinese in those areas.

Before the Communists came to power in 1949 small Protestant communities, numbering perhaps 30 people, had been established in Batang in Kham (now in Sichuan province) and in Labrang in Amdo (now in Gansu). The organisation responsible for the community in Labrang was the Christian and Missionary Alliance, whose most famous missionary was the scholar Robert Ekvall, author of Cultural Relations on the Kansu-Tibetan Border (1939). These areas were within the ambit of the Chinese nationalists, most of whose leaders had themselves been educated in missionary schools.

The Chinese, who, in the last days of the Qing dynasty, had defeated the local Tibetan rulers of the western Tibetan area of Kham in 1905, had renamed the captured parts of eastern Tibet as the province of Sikang, They ruled it loosely until 1949, despite some powerful military expeditions by the Lhasa Government as well as by local Khampa leaders to reclaim the area for Tibetans.

The Catholics had been in the capital of Sikang Province, Kangding – now known as Tachienlu or Dartsedo – since the 1890s and had even built a Cathedral in Luting, also in the west of what is now called Sichuan Province.

Meanwhile, the desire of Western missionaries to convert China had continued to grow throughout the early 20th Century, despite the advances of Communism. Hundreds of Westerners converged on Shanghai to spread the faith as soon as the Second World War had put a final end to Japan's attempts to invade China. China's civil war was still in progress, but the advance of the Communists did not deter them, and indeed meant that the Republican Government was too weak to interfere in their work; in any case Chiang Kaishek and many of his advisers had been educated in mission schools and were sympathetic to western influence.

Some of these had their eyes set upon converting the Tibetans, and believed that access was far more likely from China than from Tibet's Indian border. The established Protestant missions had attempted to assuage competition by carving China up amongst themselves, with each area going to a different group. Thus the souls of Sikang had been consigned by the 'Comity of Missions', as it was called, to the pastoral care of the British-based China Inland Mission, with some help from the World Prayer Mission League and a few smaller groups.

The most significant of the final wave of pre-Liberation missionaries in Western Tibet was the Scots evangelical George Patterson. When he took the boat from London to Shanghai in 1948, with the Communists already virtually assured of success in the North, there were, he wrote later, over 100 other missionaries on board his boat alone, set on converting the Chinese. When he reached Kangding he found that there were already 13 other Protestant missionaries in the town, one of whom had been there for

30 years. Four others arrived in the spring of 1949, as well as two Chinese evangelicals from the growing indigenous House Church movement.

Patterson and Missionary Politics

There were scores of other missionaries scattered along the then Tibetan border. And besides the Protestant groupings, there were Catholics – in Kangding the French had already established a hospital and a convent. The lack of co-operation between the Roman and Protestant Churches in China was legendary, with each side barely acknowledging the existence of the other. The writer Peter Fleming described an encounter with two polite elderly Bavarian Protestant missionaries in 1933 in a remote Chinese town in Jiangxi. The ladies had never met the only other Westerners in the town, the Fathers at the Dutch Catholic Mission a few minutes away.

"Here were two gallant ladies in exile relentlessly ignoring the only other white people they had a chance of seeing from one year's end to the next ... What, I wonder, may have been the effect on the observant Chinese, to whom the West is for ever extolling the virtues of unity and co-operation?" wrote Fleming (*One's Company*, Penguin 1934, p 234).

The agreements worked out amongst the Protestants by the Comity of Missions were ignored by those missionaries who came from anti-denominationalist sects. Patterson was a member of the sect known as the Plymouth Brethren and thus was fiercely opposed to any sort of establishment Church or priesthood. Then in his early twenties, he spent much of his first months attacking the methods of other Protestant missionaries, who practiced what he called the "paternalistic-compound' system and thus attracted only 'rice Christians' – converts whose income depended on their acceptance of Christianity.

As the Communists approached from the North in 1948, slaughtering any Chinese converts they found, the missionaries worked with ever greater intensity to convert the Chinese. Meanwhile, the rivalry amongst Protestant missionaries grew so intense that Patterson described the Communists as sent by God as a punishment for the mistaken methods of the other missionaries:

"The writing was on the wall as far as any system ... such as compound-missionary work was concerned . ... I could well understand how Communism might be used as a whip in the hands of God to scourge His disobedient servants, as a judgement of them for well-meaning malversation of the Scriptures to the detriment of the glory of His name, as a purge to cleanse out the self-deceived". (*God's Fool*, Faber, London, 1986, p. 87)

"One good thing from the rise of Communism in China would be the cleaning out of all missionaries," (op. cit. p 100) he wrote, apparently referring to missionaries other than himself. He also suggested that the fall of the Chinese empire to the Communists was a punishment by God for their earlier support of the Tibetans' decision to close their borders to Christian missionaries.

More importantly, Patterson's fundamentalist views represented a new attitude to Communism, to which he was honest enough to admit he had himself once been attracted. He recognised that in practical terms it had much to offer and that the Nationalist regime was too corrupt to withstand it. He had already broken with the established missionary tradition by planning to enter Tibet illegally, as other 'independents', like the Morse Family, had tried to do before him. Subsequently he was to go a stage further and to break with all missionary traditions in the region by taking an explicit political position, allying himself with the Tibetan independence movement (although only in its secular perspective). He rapidly became one of their most important western spokesmen, and devoted much of his evangelical energies to more political goals.

Patterson's outspoken political involvement brings into high relief the political affiliations of the other missionary movements. They maintained a traditional position in China of avoiding any kind of political position, as liable to interfere with their spiritual work. But with the rise of Communism, which was clearly opposed to them, they became by default clear supporters of the Kuomintang, at the time hopelessly corrupt and incompetent.

Resurgence of Chinese Christianity

In late 1949 the remaining Western missionaries in China were finally forced to flee. But in a way Patterson's apocalyptic prophecy was right: 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 1 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, allowed to function so long as they sever traditional links with foreign Churches and respect the authority of the Party, have gathered around them since 1979 some 4 million Protestants and 5 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 House Church movement had been active in the 1930s and 1940s, through such leaders as the Chinese scholar known as "Watchman Nee". Nee's church, an informal network of secret cells connected only by travelling unofficial preachers, is known as the Little Flock; reports indicate that it and similar groups are still growing rapidly throughout China, despite the frequent campaigns of mass arrest by the Chinese authorities.

The current missionary movement among Westerners mirrors this division, and is roughly divided along lines which Patterson more or less described before he allied himself to the secular Tibetan nationalists. 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, with the exception of Patterson: 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, central Tibet has been rendered by an atheist Government 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 evangelising is already being done by the Chinese themselves, western activists are left to seek out a more subtle, and secondary, role.

A British explorer, Squadron Leader Michael Coles, who in 1990 led what was described as a medical mission by hovercraft up the Yangtse, told TIN that in fact a main purpose of his mission had been to assess or spread Christianity in China. Coles and his team may have anticipated a role for themselves as converters but in fact they did little of this: it was unnecessary. They encountered in north-west China a form of Christianity that was entirely self-sufficient: “I don’t myself believe there is any need now for Westerners to go to China as traditional missionaries”, Coles said. “Our role now is not to evangelise there in the old sense, but to support them,” he adds. Coles suggests that there is still a role for Westerners in supplying bibles to the illegal house churches.

Conventional Western organisation see even these activities as inappropriate: “Bibles are in short supply but as a matter of principle we ought to meet the need ourselves. We do not want to see China return to the status of a mission field of overseas churches”, says a Chinese pastor quoted by the Church Missionary Society in a booklet calling for a moderate approach to evangelism in China (‘Like The Willow TRee’. p.18).

One Christian activist, who asked not to be named, told TIN that he had made eleven trips to China in the last 6 years carrying in bibles. “The requests for bibles and literature far exceed anything that can be produced by the official publishers,” according to the missionary, who insists (on anecdotal evidence) that up to 10–15.000 Chinese a day are becoming Christians.

The western bible-runners, although contemptuous of the official Church, say they work in response to Chinese requests and provide support, not preaching. Coles is generous in his appreciation of the Chinese Christianity he encountered: “It can not only do all its own evangelising – it could show us in Britain how to do it”. But he is

careful not to rule out the need for more aggressive evangelism amongst non-Chinese people. "There are still a few parts with [non-Chinese] nationalities living in them who may still need traditional missionaries," he says.

Although Michael Coles regards the Tibetans' primary task at the moment as having to deal with their political situation, other western evangelicals include the Tibetans amongst those non-Chinese nationalities which require "traditional" conversion by foreign intermediaries. The methods used these missionaries are contentious amongst their colleagues – many of them operate by "tracting", proselytising by handing out literature in the streets. Such methods are considered "naive" by the both 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 evangelising. 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 TIN 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: Western 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 of life-long service in one area, and amongst them were several who had worked, lived, or even been born in Batang before 1949.

The group negotiated with the Chinese authorities to allow them to travel back to Batang in May 1986, on the grounds that it was, for them or their relatives, their former birthplace or workplace. They found five (Protestant) Christians still alive in Batang, with an average age of 80, and began preparations to establish a Protestant Church there under the direction of Philip Ho.

These missionaries worked with the Chinese authorities, and were supportive of Chinese achievements in Batang, particularly praising 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, according to an article by former Batang missionary Marguerite Fairbrother, who was one of the six on the trip. The article, printed in the US 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 co-operate 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 evangelising 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 Batang missionaries took part in "personal evangelism with people in whose homes we visited".

Like the Sowers Ministry in Hong Kong, these missionaries are also calling for Christians to work in China under cover as teachers. According to Marguerite Fairbrother, "It is not possible to go into China as a missionary, but China is calling for 50,000 teachers of English ... What an opportunity for Christian "tent-makers"! Many non-Christians are applying to fill these positions. Pray that the Lord of the Harvest will send Christian people to make an indirect witness", says the article.

Ms. Fairbrother also noted that "Muslims and Buddhists are capitalizing on the situation. Can we hold back and let them take all the advantage?"

The Protestant Church in Batang is believed to have been re-established, with official approval, four years after the western missionaries made their first return trip to the town.

Two years ago the Chinese Catholic Official Patriotic Association reported that a Catholic Church had been re-opened in Markham, in Chamdo district. It was reconsecrated on Christmas Eve 1988 (some reports say 1989), with 33 new members received, according to the British journal The Tablet, quoting the official journal of the association. That report gave no indication as to whether the members of the church were Tibetan or Chinese. Markham is inside what is now called the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Unofficial Missionary Activity: Lhasa since 1985

In the last 5 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 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 US-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 growing activities of modern western evangelicals are not reported to have had any concrete results among Tibetans, but a number of Chinese living in Tibet are believed to have become Christians. However, their conversion is due not to western evangelists but mainly to activity in Lhasa by secret evangelists working for one of the proscribed Chinese Christian House Church movements.

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.

The undercover evangelists differed amongst themselves over what tactics to pursue in Tibet, and one, who had a long family history of involvement in the region, preferred to act through personal contact with individuals, mainly students, with whom he worked. He was opposed to what the evangelicals call 'tracting', arguing that it would lead to all of them being thrown out.

However, the others did not follow his advice; in any case they did not have the language skills or dedication necessary for extensive work through personal contacts, and so they continued to distribute tracts. They appear to have avoided public proselytising in the city and preferred to distribute their material as quickly as possible by making one-off lightning visits to villages and remoter areas.

The local police appear to have been aware of their activities, and indicated strong disapproval of them. The missionaries claim that microphones were installed in their rooms, a fact which they say only encouraged them to sing more hymns in their bedrooms, in the hope of converting the policemen who were listening. Police activity seems to have been designed to discourage local people from spending time with the teachers, rather than to punish the Westerners. The authorities did not take any further action to stop the Westerners from evangelising.

The 'tracting' teachers were joined on some occasions by visiting western evangelicals who arrived from time to time, disguised as tourists, with extra stocks of literature. One pair of covert evangelicals, working for the US-based evangelical organisation "Youth With A Mission" (YWAM), arrived in Lhasa in 1987. They spoke no Tibetan or Chinese, but travelled with a tape-recorder and a tape of evangelical sermons in Tibetan which they played in villages they visited.

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. Earlier appointments

had been made from individual travellers making ad hoc arrangements with local Lhasa officials.

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 in the demonstrations, and their expulsions were justified by the claim that they had acted illegally by working in Lhasa without contracts. One was later told that, amongst other misdemeanours, he had collected geological specimens and allowed other Westerners to stay overnight in his room. 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 positions in Tibet, all of them American citizens with strong connections to evangelical organisations or traditions. Four of them were members of the English Language Institute, which supplies Christians to work at low cost (or, according to some accounts, at no cost) as teachers in China.

There is no information as to whether these teachers are involved in evangelical activity in Tibet. However, 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. In a sense his remark could be seen as justification of the faith of the Chinese authorities in the political reliability of the western Christians.

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 Tibetan language prior to embarking on missionary activities made feasible again by the open door policy. Before 1949 missionaries were expected to study Tibetan with other missionaries and local Tibetans in Kangding or Batang; 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 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 Buddhism 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'. The title is applied to great saints or teachers, in some cases seen or represented in ways indistinguishable from Buddhas.
As a result evangelists in the past often reported that it was easy to persuade Tibetans to accept Jesus as a spiritual master, but difficult to get them to renounce all the other Bodhisattvas, including Buddhist ones. 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."

According to a detailed study by the historian John Bray in the forthcoming Proceedings of the 5th International Seminar on Tibetan Studies, Moravian missionaries working in Northern India experienced similar difficulties. The leading Moravian Tibetanist Jaeschke wrote home in 1865, "The story of Christ made no impression on ... Buddhists in general, mainly because their own stories tell of the self-sacrifice of holy beings who had to undergo innumerable terrible agonies in order to accomplish the salvation of other beings, so they regard the evangelists' stories of Jesus as something long known".

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 form the old communities in Batang, 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 Tibetan. 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.

The evangelical movement as a whole remains committed to the central idea of converting the Chinese, usually seen as much more susceptible to Christianity then the Tibetans, since they currently have no prevalent religion of their own. One evangelical activist from the United States told TIN that China was "the great Christian field to be exploited". "There is a relative lowness of converts in China," he said, explaining why a major missionary effort was called for, "11 million strikes me as a bit on the low side." The evangelical movement in China is growing in leaps and bounds, with some missionaries putting the number of Christian converts closer to 50 million.

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 sub-section of the problem of converting the Chinese. "Since Tiananmen Square people in China have decided that

Christianity is the way forward. I am convinced of that", said one Christian activist, speaking of the Tibetans.

But in China the spread of Christianity appears to be worrying the authorities, who regularly imprison and persecute the wandering preachers of the unofficial Churches – but only the Chinese ones. In the summer of 1990 arrests increased and the Communist Party, holding its first conference on religion since 1949, announced that it would "strengthen its leadership" over religion.

Foreign missionaries posing as teachers were criticised in strong terms in an official statement two months later. But 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.

END