Friendly Feudalism: The Tibet Myth (2007)

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For Lords and Lamas

Along with the blood drenched landscape of religious conflict there is the experience of inner peace and solace that every religion promises, none more so than Buddhism. Standing in marked contrast to the intolerant savagery of other religions, Buddhism is neither fanatical nor dogmatic — so say its adherents. For many of them Buddhism is less a theology and more a meditative and investigative discipline intended to promote an inner harmony and enlightenment while directing us to a path of right living. Generally, the spiritual focus is not only on oneself but on the welfare of others. One tries to put aside egoistic pursuits and gain a deeper understanding of one's connection to all people and things. "Socially engaged Buddhism" tries to blend individual liberation with responsible social action in order to build an enlightened society.

A glance at history, however, reveals that not all the many and widely varying forms of Buddhism have been free of doctrinal fanaticism, nor free of the violent and exploitative pursuits so characteristic of other religions. In Sri Lanka there is a legendary and almost sacred recorded history about the triumphant battles waged by Buddhist kings of yore. During the twentieth century, Buddhists clashed violently with each other and with non-Buddhists in Thailand, Burma,

Korea, Japan, India, and elsewhere. In Sri Lanka, armed battles between Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils have taken many lives on both sides. In 1998 the U.S. State Department listed thirty of the world's most violent and dangerous extremist groups. Over half of them were religious, specifically Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist.[1]

In South Korea, in 1998, thousands of monks of the Chogye Buddhist order fought each other with fists, rocks, fire-bombs, and clubs, in pitched battles that went on for weeks. They were vying for control of the order, the largest in South Korea, with its annual budget of $9.2 million, its millions of dollars worth of property, and the privilege of appointing 1,700 monks to various offices. The brawls damaged the main Buddhist sanctuaries and left dozens of monks injured, some seriously. The Korean public appeared to disdain both factions, feeling that no matter what side took control, "it would use worshippers' donations for luxurious houses and expensive cars."[2]

As with any religion, squabbles between or within Buddhist sects are often fueled by the material corruption and personal deficiencies of the leadership. For example, in Nagano, Japan, at Zenkoji, the prestigious complex of temples that has hosted Buddhist sects for more than 1,400 years, "a nasty battle" arose between Komatsu the chief priest and the Tacchu, a group of temples nominally under the chief priest's sway. The Tacchu monks accused Komatsu of selling writings and drawings under the temple's name for his own gain. They also were appalled by the frequency with which he was seen in the company of women. Komatsu in turn sought to isolate and punish monks who were critical of his leadership. The conflict lasted some five years and made it into the courts.[3]

But what of *Tibetan* Buddhism? Is it not an exception to this sort of strife? And what of the society it helped to create? Many Buddhists maintain that, before the Chinese crackdown in 1959, old Tibet was a spiritually oriented kingdom free from the egotistical lifestyles, empty materialism, and corrupting vices that beset modern industrialized society. Western news media, travel books, novels, and Hollywood films have portrayed the Tibetan theocracy as a veritable Shangri-La. The Dalai Lama himself stated that "the pervasive influence of Buddhism" in Tibet, "amid the wide open spaces of an unspoiled environment resulted in a society dedicated to peace and harmony. We enjoyed freedom and contentment."[4]

A reading of Tibet's history suggests a somewhat different picture. "Religious conflict was commonplace in old Tibet," writes one western Buddhist practitioner. "History belies the Shangri-La image of Tibetan lamas and their followers living together in mutual tolerance and nonviolent goodwill. Indeed, the situation was quite different. Old Tibet was much more like Europe during the religious wars

[1] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, (University of California Press, 2000).

[2] Kyong-Hwa Seok, "Korean Monk Gangs Battle for Temple Turf," *San Francisco Examiner*, 3 December 1998.

[3] *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2006.

[4] Lopez, p. 205.

of the Counterreformation."[5] In the thirteenth century, Emperor Kublai Khan created the first Grand Lama, who was to preside over all the other lamas as might a pope over his bishops. Several centuries later, the Emperor of China sent an army into Tibet to support the Grand Lama, an ambitious 25-year-old man, who then gave himself the title of Dalai (Ocean) Lama, ruler of all Tibet.

His two previous lama "incarnations" were then retroactively recognized as his predecessors, thereby transforming the 1st Dalai Lama into the 3rd Dalai Lama. This 1st (or 3rd) Dalai Lama seized monasteries that did not belong to his sect, and is believed to have destroyed Buddhist writings that conflicted with his claim to divinity. The Dalai Lama who succeeded him pursued a sybaritic life, enjoying many mistresses, partying with friends, and acting in other ways deemed unfitting for an incarnate deity. For these transgressions he was murdered by his priests. Within 170 years, despite their recognized divine status, five Dalai Lamas were killed by their high priests or other courtiers.[6]

For hundreds of years competing Tibetan Buddhist sects engaged in bitterly violent clashes and summary executions. In 1660, the 5th Dalai Lama was faced with a rebellion in Tsang province, the stronghold of the rival Kagyu sect with its high lama known as the Karmapa. The 5th Dalai Lama called for harsh retribution against the rebels, directing the Mongol army to obliterate the male and female lines, and the offspring too "like eggs smashed against rocks... In short, annihilate any traces of them, even their names." (Curren, p. 50)

In 1792, many Kagyu monasteries were confiscated and their monks were forcibly converted to the Gelug sect (the Dalai Lama's denomination). The Gelug school, known also as the "Yellow Hats," showed little tolerance or willingness to mix their teachings with other Buddhist sects. In the words of one of their traditional prayers:

> Praise to you, violent god of the Yellow Hat teachings
> who reduces to particles of dust
> great beings, high officials and ordinary people
> who pollute and corrupt the Gelug doctrine.[7]

An eighteenth-century memoir of a Tibetan general depicts sectarian strife among Buddhists that is as brutal and bloody as any religious conflict might be.[8] This grim history remains largely unvisited by present-day followers of Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

Religions have had a close relationship not only with violence but with economic

[5] Curren, p. 41.

[6] Gelders, p. 119, 123; Goldstein 1995, pp. 6-16.

[7] Stephen Bachelor, "Letting Daylight into Magic: The Life and Times of Dorje Shugden," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, 7, Spring 1998. Bachelor discusses the sectarian fanaticism and doctrinal clashes that ill fit the Western portrait of Buddhism as a non-dogmatic and tolerant tradition.

[8] Tenzin Paljor Dhoring, *A True History of the Dhoring Gazhi Family*, cited in Curren, p. 8.

exploitation. Indeed, it is often the economic exploitation that necessitates the violence. Such was the case with the Tibetan theocracy. Until 1959, when the Dalai Lama last presided over Tibet, most of the arable land was still organized into manorial estates worked by serfs. These estates were owned by two social groups: the rich secular landlords and the rich theocratic lamas. Even a writer sympathetic to the old order allows that "a great deal of real estate belonged to the monasteries, and most of them amassed great riches." Much of the wealth was accumulated "through active participation in trade, commerce, and money lending." (Karan, p. 64)

Drepung monastery was one of the biggest landowners in the world, with its 185 manors, 25,000 serfs, 300 great pastures, and 16,000 herdsmen. The wealth of the monasteries rested in the hands of small numbers of high-ranking lamas. Most ordinary monks lived modestly and had no direct access to great wealth. The Dalai Lama himself "lived richly in the 1000-room, 14-story Potala Palace."[9]

Secular leaders also did well. A notable example was the commander-in-chief of the Tibetan army, a member of the Dalai Lama's lay Cabinet, who owned 4,000 square kilometers of land and 3,500 serfs. (Gelders, p. 62, p. 174) Old Tibet has been misrepresented by some Western admirers as "a nation that required no police force because its people voluntarily observed the laws of karma." (Reported skeptically in Lopez, p. 9) In fact it had a professional army, albeit a small one, that served mainly as a gendarmerie for the landlords to keep order, protect their property, and hunt down runaway serfs.

Young Tibetan boys were regularly taken from their peasant families and brought into the monasteries to be trained as monks. Once there, they were bonded for life. Tashì-Tsering, a monk, reports that it was common for peasant children to be sexually mistreated in the monasteries. He himself was a victim of repeated rape, beginning at age nine.[10] The monastic estates also conscripted children for lifelong servitude as domestics, dance performers, and soldiers.

In old Tibet there were small numbers of farmers who subsisted as a kind of free peasantry, and perhaps an additional 10,000 people who composed the "middle-class" families of merchants, shopkeepers, and small traders. Thousands of others were beggars. There also were slaves, usually domestic servants, who owned nothing. Their offspring were born into slavery. (Gelders, p. 110) The majority of the rural population were serfs. Treated little better than slaves, the serfs went without schooling or medical care. They were under a lifetime bond to work the lord's land — or the monastery's land — without pay, to repair the lord's houses, transport his crops, and collect his firewood. They were also expected to provide carrying animals and transportation on demand. (Goldstein 1989, p. 5) Their masters told them what crops to grow and what animals to raise. They could not get married without the consent of their lord or lama.

[9] See Gary Wilson's report in *Worker's World*, 6 February 1997.

[10] Melvyn C. Goldstein, William Siebenschuh, and Tashì-Tsering, *The Struggle for Modern Tibet: The Autobiography of Tashì-Tsering* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

And they might easily be separated from their families should their owners lease them out to work in a distant location. (Strong, p. 15, pp. 19-21, p. 24)

As in a free labor system and unlike slavery, the overlords had no responsibility for the serf's maintenance and no direct interest in his or her survival as an expensive piece of property. The serfs had to support themselves. Yet as in a slave system, they were bound to their masters, guaranteeing a fixed and permanent workforce that could neither organize nor strike nor freely depart as might laborers in a market context. The overlords had the best of both worlds.

One 22-year old woman, herself a runaway serf, reports: "Pretty serf girls were usually taken by the owner as house servants and used as he wished"; they "were just slaves without rights." (Strong, p. 25) Serfs needed permission to go anywhere. Landowners had legal authority to capture those who tried to flee. One 24-year old runaway welcomed the Chinese intervention as a "liberation." He testified that under serfdom he was subjected to incessant toil, hunger, and cold. After his third failed escape, he was merciless beaten by the landlord's men until blood poured from his nose and mouth. They then poured alcohol and caustic soda on his wounds to increase the pain, he claimed. (Strong, p. 31)

The serfs were taxed upon getting married, taxed for the birth of each child and for every death in the family. They were taxed for planting a tree in their yard and for keeping animals. They were taxed for religious festivals and for public dancing and drumming, for being sent to prison and upon being released. Those who could not find work were taxed for being unemployed, and if they traveled to another village in search of work, they paid a passage tax. When people could not pay, the monasteries lent them money at 20 to 50 percent interest. Some debts were handed down from father to son to grandson. Debtors who could not meet their obligations risked being cast into slavery. (Gelders, pp. 175-176; Strong, pp. 25-26)

The theocracy's religious teachings buttressed its class order. The poor and afflicted were taught that they had brought their troubles upon themselves because of their wicked ways in previous lives. Hence they had to accept the misery of their present existence as a karmic atonement and in anticipation that their lot would improve in their next lifetime. The rich and powerful treated their good fortune as a reward for, and tangible evidence of, virtue in past and present lives.

The Tibetan serfs were something more than superstitious victims, blind to their own oppression. As we have seen, some ran away; others openly resisted, sometimes suffering dire consequences. In feudal Tibet, torture and mutilation — including eye gouging, the pulling out of tongues, hamstringing, and amputation — were favored punishments inflicted upon thieves, and runaway or resistant serfs. Journeying through Tibet in the 1960s, Stuart and Roma Gelder interviewed a former serf, Tsereh Wang Tuei, who had stolen two sheep belonging to a monastery. For this he had both his eyes gouged out and his hand mutilated

beyond use. He explains that he no longer is a Buddhist: "When a holy lama told them to blind me I thought there was no good in religion." (Gelders, p. 113) Since it was against Buddhist teachings to take human life, some offenders were severely lashed and then "left to God" in the freezing night to die. "The parallels between Tibet and medieval Europe are striking," concludes Tom Grunfeld in his book on Tibet. (Grunfeld, p. 9, pp. 7-33; Greene, pp. 241-249; Goldstein 1989, pp. 3-5; Lopez, N/A)

In 1959, Anna Louise Strong visited an exhibition of torture equipment that had been used by the Tibetan overlords. There were handcuffs of all sizes, including small ones for children, and instruments for cutting off noses and ears, gouging out eyes, breaking off hands, and hamstringing legs. There were hot brands, whips, and special implements for disemboweling. The exhibition presented photographs and testimonies of victims who had been blinded or crippled or suffered amputations for thievery. There was the shepherd whose master owed him a reimbursement in yuan and wheat but refused to pay. So he took one of the master's cows; for this he had his hands severed. Another herdsman, who opposed having his wife taken from him by his lord, had his hands broken off. There were pictures of Communist activists with noses and upper lips cut off, and a woman who was raped and then had her nose sliced away. (Strong, pp. 91-96)

Earlier visitors to Tibet commented on the theocratic despotism. In 1895, an Englishman, Dr. A. L. Waddell, wrote that the populace was under the "intolerable tyranny of monks" and the devil superstitions they had fashioned to terrorize the people. In 1904 Perceval Landon described the Dalai Lama's rule as "an engine of oppression." At about that time, another English traveler, Captain W. F. T. O'Connor, observed that "the great landowners and the priests... exercise each in their own dominion a despotic power from which there is no appeal," while the people are "oppressed by the most monstrous growth of monasticism and priest-craft." Tibetan rulers "invented degrading legends and stimulated a spirit of superstition" among the common people. In 1937, another visitor, Spencer Chapman, wrote, "The Lamaist monk does not spend his time in ministering to the people or educating them. [...] The beggar beside the road is nothing to the monk. Knowledge is the jealously guarded prerogative of the monasteries and is used to increase their influence and wealth." (Gelders, pp. 123-125) As much as we might wish otherwise, feudal theocratic Tibet was a far cry from the romanticized Shangri-La so enthusiastically nurtured by Buddhism's western proselytes.

Secularization vs. Spirituality

What happened to Tibet after the Chinese Communists moved into the country in 1951? The treaty of that year provided for ostensible self-governance under the Dalai Lama's rule but gave China military control and exclusive right to conduct foreign relations. The Chinese were also granted a direct role in internal administration "to promote social reforms." Among the earliest changes they

wrought was to reduce usurious interest rates, and build a few hospitals and roads. At first, they moved slowly, relying mostly on persuasion in an attempt to effect reconstruction. No aristocratic or monastic property was confiscated, and feudal lords continued to reign over their hereditarily bound peasants. "Contrary to popular belief in the West," claims one observer, the Chinese "took care to show respect for Tibetan culture and religion." (Goldstein 1995, p. 52)

Over the centuries the Tibetan lords and lamas had seen Chinese come and go, and had enjoyed good relations with Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek and his reactionary Kuomintang rule in China. (Harrer, p. 29) The approval of the Kuomintang government was needed to validate the choice of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama. When the current 14th Dalai Lama was first installed in Lhasa, it was with an armed escort of Chinese troops and an attending Chinese minister, in accordance with centuries-old tradition. What upset the Tibetan lords and lamas in the early 1950s was that these latest Chinese were *Communists*. It would be only a matter of time, they feared, before the Communists started imposing their collectivist egalitarian schemes upon Tibet.

The issue was joined in 1956-57, when armed Tibetan bands ambushed convoys of the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army. The uprising received extensive assistance from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), including military training, support camps in Nepal, and numerous airlifts.[11] [12] Meanwhile in the United States, the American Society for a Free Asia, a CIA-financed front, energetically publicized the cause of Tibetan resistance, with the Dalai Lama's eldest brother, Thubtan Norbu, playing an active role in that organization. The Dalai Lama's second-eldest brother, Gyalo Thondup, established an intelligence operation with the CIA as early as 1951. He later upgraded it into a CIA-trained guerrilla unit whose recruits parachuted back into Tibet.[13]

Many Tibetan commandos and agents whom the CIA dropped into the country were chiefs of aristocratic clans or the sons of chiefs. Ninety percent of them were never heard from again, according to a report from the CIA itself, meaning they were most likely captured and killed.[14] "Many lamas and lay members of the elite and much of the Tibetan army joined the uprising, but in the main the populace did not, assuring its failure," writes Hugh Deane.[15] In their book on Tibet, Ginsburg and Mathos reach a similar conclusion: "As far as can be ascertained, the great bulk of the common people of Lhasa and of the adjoining countryside failed to join in the fighting against the Chinese both when it first began and as it progressed."[16] Eventually the resistance crumbled.

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[11] Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2002)

[12] William Leary, "Secret Mission to Tibet," *Air & Space*, December 1997/January 1998.

[13] Loren Coleman, *Tom Slick and the Search for the Yeti* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

[14] William Leary, "Secret Mission to Tibet," *Air & Space*, December 1997/January 1998.

[15] Hugh Deane, "The Cold War in Tibet," *CovertAction Quarterly* (Winter 1987).

[16] George Ginsburg and Michael Mathos *Communist China and Tibet* (1964), quoted in Deane. Deane notes that author Bina Roy reached a similar conclusion.

Whatever wrongs and new oppressions introduced by the Chinese after 1959, they did abolish slavery and the Tibetan serfdom system of unpaid labor. They eliminated the many crushing taxes, started work projects, and greatly reduced unemployment and beggary. They established secular schools, thereby breaking the educational monopoly of the monasteries. And they constructed running water and electrical systems in Lhasa. (Greene, p. 248; Grunfeld, N/A)

Heinrich Harrer (later revealed to have been a sergeant in Hitler's SS) wrote a bestseller about his experiences in Tibet that was made into a popular Hollywood movie. He reported that the Tibetans who resisted the Chinese "were predominantly nobles, semi-nobles and lamas; they were punished by being made to perform the lowliest tasks, such as laboring on roads and bridges. They were further humiliated by being made to clean up the city before the tourists arrived." They also had to live in a camp originally reserved for beggars and vagrants — all of which Harrer treats as sure evidence of the dreadful nature of the Chinese occupation. (Harrer, p. 54)

By 1961, Chinese occupation authorities expropriated the landed estates owned by lords and lamas. They distributed many thousands of acres to tenant farmers and landless peasants, reorganizing them into hundreds of communes. Herds once owned by nobility were turned over to collectives of poor shepherds. Improvements were made in the breeding of livestock, and new varieties of vegetables and new strains of wheat and barley were introduced, along with irrigation improvements, all of which reportedly led to an increase in agrarian production. (Karan, pp. 36-38, p. 41, pp. 57-58)[17]

Many peasants remained as religious as ever, giving alms to the clergy. But monks who had been conscripted as children into the religious orders were now free to renounce the monastic life, and thousands did, especially the younger ones. The remaining clergy lived on modest government stipends and extra income earned by officiating at prayer services, weddings, and funerals. (Gelders, N/A)

Both the Dalai Lama and his advisor and youngest brother, Tendzin Choegyal, claimed that "more than 1.2 million Tibetans are dead as a result of the Chinese occupation."[18] The official 1953 census — six years before the Chinese crackdown — recorded the entire population residing in Tibet at 1,274,000. (Karan, pp. 52-53) Other census counts put the population within Tibet at about two million. If the Chinese killed 1.2 million in the early 1960s then almost all of Tibet, would have been depopulated, transformed into a killing field dotted with death camps and mass graves — of which we have no evidence. The thinly distributed Chinese force in Tibet could not have rounded up, hunted down, and exterminated that many people even if it had spent all its time doing nothing else.

[17] *London Times*, 4 July 1966.

[18] Tendzin Choegyal, "The Truth about Tibet," *Imprimis* (publication of Hillsdale College, Michigan), April 1999.

Chinese authorities claim to have put an end to floggings, mutilations, and amputations as a form of criminal punishment. They themselves, however, have been charged with acts of brutality by exile Tibetans. The authorities do admit to "mistakes," particularly during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution when the persecution of religious beliefs reached a high tide in both China and Tibet. After the uprising in the late 1950s, thousands of Tibetans were incarcerated. During the Great Leap Forward, forced collectivization and grain farming were imposed on the Tibetan peasantry, sometimes with disastrous effect on production. In the late 1970s, China began relaxing controls "and tried to undo some of the damage wrought during the previous two decades."[19]

In 1980, the Chinese government initiated reforms reportedly designed to grant Tibet a greater degree of self-rule and self-administration. Tibetans would now be allowed to cultivate private plots, sell their harvest surpluses, decide for themselves what crops to grow, and keep yaks and sheep. Communication with the outside world was again permitted, and frontier controls were eased to permit some Tibetans to visit exiled relatives in India and Nepal. (Goldstein 1995, pp. 47-48) By the 1980s many of the principal lamas had begun to shuttle back and forth between China and the exile communities abroad, "restoring their monasteries in Tibet and helping to revitalize Buddhism there." (Curren, p. 8)

As of 2007 Tibetan Buddhism was still practiced widely and tolerated by officialdom. Religious pilgrimages and other standard forms of worship were allowed but within limits. All monks and nuns had to sign a loyalty pledge that they would not use their religious position to foment secession or dissent. And displaying photos of the Dalai Lama was declared illegal.[20]

In the 1990s, the Han, the ethnic group comprising over 95 percent of China's immense population, began moving in substantial numbers into Tibet. On the streets of Lhasa and Shigatse, signs of Han colonization are readily visible. Chinese run the factories and many of the shops and vending stalls. Tall office buildings and large shopping centers have been built with funds that might have been better spent on water treatment plants and housing. Chinese cadres in Tibet too often view their Tibetan neighbors as backward and lazy, in need of economic development and "patriotic education." During the 1990s Tibetan government employees suspected of harboring nationalist sympathies were purged from office, and campaigns were once again launched to discredit the Dalai Lama. Individual Tibetans reportedly were subjected to arrest, imprisonment, and forced labor for carrying out separatist activities and engaging in "political subversion." Some were held in administrative detention without adequate food, water, and blankets, subjected to threats, beatings, and other mistreatment.[21]

Tibetan history, culture, and certainly religion are slighted in schools. Teaching materials, though translated into Tibetan, focus mainly on Chinese history and

[19] Elaine Kurtenbach, *Associated Press* report, 12 February 1998.

[20] *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 January 2007.

[21] Report by the International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet, *A Generation in Peril* (Berkeley Calif.: 2001)

culture. Chinese family planning regulations allow a three-child limit for Tibetan families. (There is only a one-child limit for Han families throughout China, and a two-child limit for rural Han families whose first child is a girl.) If a Tibetan couple goes over the three-child limit, the excess children can be denied subsidized daycare, health care, housing, and education. These penalties have been enforced irregularly and vary by district.[22] None of these child services, it should be noted, were available to Tibetans before the Chinese takeover.

For the rich lamas and secular lords, the Communist intervention was an unmitigated calamity. Most of them fled abroad, as did the Dalai Lama himself, who was assisted in his flight by the CIA. Some discovered to their horror that they would have to work for a living. Many, however, escaped that fate. Throughout the 1960s, the Tibetan exile community was secretly pocketing $1.7 million a year from the CIA, according to documents released by the State Department in 1998. Once this fact was publicized, the Dalai Lama's organization itself issued a statement admitting that it had received millions of dollars from the CIA during the 1960s to send armed squads of exiles into Tibet to undermine the Maoist revolution. The Dalai Lama's annual payment from the CIA was $186,000. Indian intelligence also financed both him and other Tibetan exiles. He has refused to say whether he or his brothers worked for the CIA. The agency has also declined to comment.[23]

In 1995, the *News & Observer of Raleigh*, North Carolina, carried a frontpage color photograph of the Dalai Lama being embraced by the reactionary Republican senator Jesse Helms, under the headline "Buddhist Captivates Hero of Religious Right." (Lopez, p. 3) In April 1999, along with Margaret Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, and the first George Bush, the Dalai Lama called upon the British government to release Augusto Pinochet, the former fascist dictator of Chile and a longtime CIA client who was visiting England. The Dalai Lama urged that Pinochet not be forced to go to Spain where he was wanted to stand trial for crimes against humanity.

Into the twenty-first century, via the National Endowment for Democracy and other conduits that are more respectable sounding than the CIA, the U.S. Congress continued to allocate an annual $2 million to Tibetans in India, with additional millions for "democracy activities" within the Tibetan exile community. In addition to these funds, the Dalai Lama received money from financier George Soros.[24]

Whatever the Dalai Lama's associations with the CIA and various reactionaries, he did speak often of peace, love, and nonviolence. He himself really cannot

[22] Report by the International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet, *A Generation in Peril* (Berkeley Calif.: 2001)

[23] Jim Mann, "CIA Gave Aid to Tibetan Exiles in '60s, Files Show," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 September 1998; and New York Times, 1 October, 1998.

[24] Heather Cottin, "George Soros, Imperial Wizard," *CovertAction Quarterly* no. 74 (Fall 2002).

be blamed for the abuses of Tibet's ancien régime, having been but 25 years old when he fled into exile. In a 1994 interview, he went on record as favoring the building of schools and roads in his country. He said the corvée (forced unpaid serf labor) and certain taxes imposed on the peasants were "extremely bad." And he disliked the way people were saddled with old debts sometimes passed down from generation to generation. (Goldstein 1995, N/A) During the half century of living in the western world, he had embraced concepts such as human rights and religious freedom, ideas largely unknown in old Tibet. He even proposed democracy for Tibet, featuring a written constitution and a representative assembly.[25]

In 1996, the Dalai Lama issued a statement that must have had an unsettling effect on the exile community. It read in part: "Marxism is founded on moral principles, while capitalism is concerned only with gain and profitability." Marxism fosters "the equitable utilization of the means of production" and cares about "the fate of the working classes" and "the victims of ... exploitation. For those reasons the system appeals to me, and ... I think of myself as half-Marxist, half-Buddhist."[26]

But he also sent a reassuring message to "those who live in abundance": "It is a good thing to be rich... Those are the fruits for deserving actions, the proof that they have been generous in the past." And to the poor he offers this admonition: "There is no good reason to become bitter and rebel against those who have property and fortune... It is better to develop a positive attitude."[27]

In 2005 the Dalai Lama signed a widely advertised statement along with ten other Nobel Laureates supporting the "inalienable and fundamental human right" of working people throughout the world to form labor unions to protect their interests, in accordance with the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In many countries "this fundamental right is poorly protected and in some it is explicitly banned or brutally suppressed," the statement read. Burma, China, Colombia, Bosnia, and a few other countries were singled out as among the worst offenders. Even the United States "fails to adequately protect workers' rights to form unions and bargain collectively. Millions of U.S. workers lack any legal protection to form unions..."[28]

The Dalai Lama also gave full support to removing the ingrained traditional obstacles that have kept Tibetan nuns from receiving an education. Upon arriving in exile, few nuns could read or write. In Tibet their activities had been devoted to daylong periods of prayer and chants. But in northern India they

[25]Tendzin Choegyal, "The Truth about Tibet," *Imprimis* (publication of Hillsdale College, Michigan), April 1999.

[26]The Dalai Lama in Marianne Dresser (ed.), *Beyond Dogma: Dialogues and Discourses* (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1996).

[27]These comments are from a book of the Dalai Lama's writings quoted in Nikolai Thyssen, "Oceaner af onkel Tom," *Dagbladet Information*, 29 December 2003, (translated from Danish for me by Julius Wilm). [web]

[28]"A Global Call for Human Rights in the Workplace," *New York Times*, 6 December 2005.

now began reading Buddhist philosophy and engaging in theological study and debate, activities that in old Tibet had been open only to monks.[29]

In November 2005 the Dalai Lama spoke at Stanford University on "The Heart of Nonviolence," but stopped short of a blanket condemnation of all violence. Violent actions that are committed in order to reduce future suffering are not to be condemned, he said, citing World War II as an example of a worthy effort to protect democracy. What of the four years of carnage and mass destruction in Iraq, a war condemned by most of the world — even by a conservative pope — as a blatant violation of international law and a crime against humanity? The Dalai Lama was undecided: "The Iraq war — it's too early to say, right or wrong." [30] Earlier he had voiced support for the U.S. military intervention against Yugoslavia and, later on, the U.S. military intervention into Afghanistan.[31] [32] [33]

Exit Feudal Theocracy

As the Shangri-La myth would have it, in old Tibet the people lived in contented and tranquil symbiosis with their monastic and secular lords. Rich lamas and poor monks, wealthy landlords and impoverished serfs were all bonded together, mutually sustained by the comforting balm of a deeply spiritual and pacific culture.

One is reminded of the idealized image of feudal Europe presented by latter-day conservative Catholics such as G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. For them, medieval Christendom was a world of contented peasants living in the secure embrace of their Church, under the more or less benign protection of their lords. (Gelders, p. 64) Again we are invited to accept a particular culture in its idealized form divorced from its murky material history. This means accepting it as presented by its favored class, by those who profited most from it. The Shangri-La image of Tibet bears no more resemblance to historic actuality than does the pastoral image of medieval Europe.

Seen in all its grim realities, old Tibet confirms the view I expressed in an earlier book, namely that culture is anything but neutral. Culture can operate as a legitimating cover for a host of grave injustices, benefiting a privileged portion of society at great cost to the rest.[34] In theocratic feudal Tibet, ruling interests manipulated the traditional culture to fortify their own wealth and power. The theocracy equated rebellious thought and action with satanic influence. It propagated the general presumption of landlord superiority and peasant unworthiness. The rich were represented as deserving their good life, and the lowly poor as deserving their mean existence, all codified in teachings about

[29] *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 January 2007.
[30] *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 November 2005.
[31] *Times of India*, 13 October 2000.
[32] Samantha Conti's report, Reuters, 17 June 1994.
[33] Amitabh Pal, "The Dalai Lama Interview," Progressive, January 2006.
[34] Michael Parenti, *The Culture Struggle* (Seven Stories, 2006).

the karmic residue of virtue and vice accumulated from past lives, presented as part of God's will.

Were the more affluent lamas just hypocrites who preached one thing and secretly believed another? More likely they were genuinely attached to those beliefs that brought such good results for them. That their theology so perfectly supported their material privileges only strengthened the sincerity with which it was embraced.

It might be said that we denizens of the modern secular world cannot grasp the equations of happiness and pain, contentment and custom, that characterize more traditionally spiritual societies. This is probably true, and it may explain why some of us idealize such societies. But still, a gouged eye is a gouged eye; a flogging is a flogging; and the grinding exploitation of serfs and slaves is a brutal class injustice whatever its cultural wrapping. There is a difference between a spiritual bond and human bondage, even when both exist side by side.

Many ordinary Tibetans want the Dalai Lama back in their country, but it appears that relatively few want a return to the social order he represented. A 1999 story in the Washington Post notes that the Dalai Lama continues to be revered in Tibet, but

> . . . few Tibetans would welcome a return of the corrupt aristocratic clans that fled with him in 1959 and that comprise the bulk of his advisers. Many Tibetan farmers, for example, have no interest in surrendering the land they gained during China's land reform to the clans. Tibet's former slaves say they, too, don't want their former masters to return to power. "I've already lived that life once before," said Wangchuk, a 67-year-old former slave who was wearing his best clothes for his yearly pilgrimage to Shigatse, one of the holiest sites of Tibetan Buddhism. He said he worshipped the Dalai Lama, but added, "I may not be free under Chinese communism, but I am better off than when I was a slave."[35]

It should be noted that the Dalai Lama is not the only highly placed lama chosen in childhood as a reincarnation. One or another reincarnate lama or *tulku* — a spiritual teacher of special purity elected to be reborn again and again — can be found presiding over most major monasteries. The *tulku* system is unique to Tibetan Buddhism. Scores of Tibetan lamas claim to be reincarnate *tulkus*.

The very first *tulku* was a lama known as the Karmapa who appeared nearly three centuries before the first Dalai Lama. The Karmapa is leader of a Tibetan Buddhist tradition known as the Karma Kagyu. The rise of the Gelugpa sect headed by the Dalai Lama led to a politico-religious rivalry with the Kagyu that has lasted five hundred years and continues to play itself out within the Tibetan exile community today. That the Kagyu sect has grown famously, opening some

[35]John Pomfret, "Tibet Caught in China's Web," *Washington Post*, 23 July 1999.

six hundred new centers around the world in the last thirty-five years, has not helped the situation.

The search for a *tulku*, Erik Curren reminds us, has not always been conducted in that purely spiritual mode portrayed in certain Hollywood films. "Sometimes monastic officials wanted a child from a powerful local noble family to give the cloister more political clout. Other times they wanted a child from a lower-class family who would have little leverage to influence the child's upbringing." On other occasions "a local warlord, the Chinese emperor or even the Dalai Lama's government in Lhasa might [have tried] to impose its choice of tulku on a monastery for political reasons." (Curren, p. 3)

Such may have been the case in the selection of the 17th Karmapa, whose monastery-in-exile is situated in Rumtek, in the Indian state of Sikkim. In 1993 the monks of the Karma Kagyu tradition had a candidate of their own choice. The Dalai Lama, along with several dissenting Karma Kagyu leaders (and with the support of the Chinese government!) backed a different boy. The Kagyu monks charged that the Dalai Lama had overstepped his authority in attempting to select a leader for their sect. "Neither his political role nor his position as a lama in his own Gelugpa tradition entitled him to choose the Karmapa, who is a leader of a different tradition. . . " (Curren, p. 13, p. 138) As one of the Kagyu leaders insisted, "Dharma is about thinking for yourself. It is not about automatically following a teacher in all things, no matter how respected that teacher may be. More than anyone else, Buddhists should respect other people's rights — their human rights and their religious freedom." (Curren, p. 21)

What followed was a dozen years of conflict in the Tibetan exile community, punctuated by intermittent riots, intimidation, physical attacks, blacklisting, police harassment, litigation, official corruption, and the looting and undermining of the Karmapa's monastery in Rumtek by supporters of the Gelugpa faction. All this has caused at least one western devotee to wonder if the years of exile were not hastening the moral corrosion of Tibetan Buddhism.[36]

What is clear is that not all Tibetan Buddhists accept the Dalai Lama as their theological and spiritual mentor. Though he is referred to as the "spiritual leader of Tibet," many see this title as little more than a formality. It does not give him authority over the four religious schools of Tibet other than his own, "just as calling the U.S. president the 'leader of the free world' gives him no role in governing France or Germany."[37]

Not all Tibetan exiles are enamoured of the old Shangri-La theocracy. Kim Lewis, who studied healing methods with a Buddhist monk in Berkeley, California, had occasion to talk at length with more than a dozen Tibetan women who lived in the monk's building. When she asked how they felt about returning to their

[36] Curren, passim. For books that are favorable toward the Karmapa appointed by the Dalai Lama's faction, see Terhune; Naher; Brown.

[37] Erik D. Curren, "Not So Easy to Say Who is Karmapa," correspondence, 22 August 2005. [web]

homeland, the sentiment was unanimously negative. At first, Lewis assumed that their reluctance had to do with the Chinese occupation, but they quickly informed her otherwise. They said they were extremely grateful "not to have to marry 4 or 5 men, be pregnant almost all the time," or deal with sexually transmitted diseases contacted from a straying husband. The younger women "were delighted to be getting an education, wanted absolutely nothing to do with any religion, and wondered why Americans were so naïve [about Tibet]."[38]

The women interviewed by Lewis recounted stories of their grandmothers' ordeals with monks who used them as "wisdom consorts." By sleeping with the monks, the grandmothers were told, they gained "the means to enlightenment" — after all, the Buddha himself had to be with a woman to reach enlightenment.

The women also mentioned the "rampant" sex that the supposedly spiritual and abstemious monks practiced with each other in the Gelugpa sect. The women who were mothers spoke bitterly about the monastery's confiscation of their young boys in Tibet. They claimed that when a boy cried for his mother, he would be told "Why do you cry for her, she gave you up — she's just a woman."

The monks who were granted political asylum in California applied for public assistance. Lewis, herself a devotee for a time, assisted with the paperwork. She observes that they continue to receive government checks amounting to $550 to $700 per month along with Medicare. In addition, the monks reside rent free in nicely furnished apartments. "They pay no utilities, have free access to the Internet on computers provided for them, along with fax machines, free cell and home phones and cable TV."

They also receive a monthly payment from their order, along with contributions and dues from their American followers. Some devotees eagerly carry out chores for the monks, including grocery shopping and cleaning their apartments and toilets. These same holy men, Lewis remarks, "have no problem criticizing Americans for their 'obsession with material things.' "[39] To welcome the end of the old feudal theocracy in Tibet is not to applaud everything about Chinese rule in that country. This point is seldom understood by today's Shangri-La believers in the West. The converse is also true: To denounce the Chinese occupation does not mean we have to romanticize the former feudal régime. Tibetans deserve to be perceived as actual people, not perfected spiritualists or innocent political symbols. "To idealize them," notes Ma Jian, a dissident Chinese traveler to Tibet (now living in Britain), "is to deny them their humanity."[40]

One common complaint among Buddhist followers in the West is that Tibet's religious culture is being undermined by the Chinese occupation. To some extent this seems to be the case. Many of the monasteries are closed, and much of the theocracy seems to have passed into history. Whether Chinese rule has brought betterment or disaster is not the central issue here. The question is what

[38] Kim Lewis, correspondence to me, 14 July 2004.
[39] Kim Lewis, correspondence to me, 15 July 2004.
[40] Ma Jian, *Stick Out Your Tongue* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006).

kind of country was old Tibet. What I am disputing is the supposedly pristine spiritual nature of that pre-invasion culture. *We can advocate religious freedom and independence for a new Tibet without having to embrace the mythology about old Tibet.* Tibetan feudalism was cloaked in Buddhism, but the two are not to be equated. In reality, old Tibet was not a Paradise Lost. It was a retrograde repressive theocracy of extreme privilege and poverty, a long way from Shangri-La.

Finally, let it be said that if Tibet's future is to be positioned somewhere within China's emerging free-market paradise, then this does not bode well for the Tibetans. China boasts a dazzling 8 percent economic growth rate and is emerging as one of the world's greatest industrial powers. But with economic growth has come an ever deepening gulf between rich and poor. Most Chinese live close to the poverty level or well under it, while a small group of newly brooded capitalists profit hugely in collusion with shady officials. Regional bureaucrats milk the country dry, extorting graft from the populace and looting local treasuries. Land grabbing in cities and countryside by avaricious developers and corrupt officials at the expense of the populace are almost everyday occurrences. Tens of thousands of grassroot protests and disturbances have erupted across the country, usually to be met with unforgiving police force. Corruption is so prevalent, reaching into so many places, that even the normally complacent national leadership was forced to take notice and began moving against it in late 2006.

Workers in China who try to organize labor unions in the corporate dominated "business zones" risk losing their jobs or getting beaten and imprisoned. Millions of business zone workers toil twelve-hour days at subsistence wages. With the health care system now being privatized, free or affordable medical treatment is no longer available for millions. Men have tramped into the cities in search of work, leaving an increasingly impoverished countryside populated by women, children, and the elderly. The suicide rate has increased dramatically, especially among women.[41]

China's natural environment is sadly polluted. Most of its fabled rivers and many lakes are dead, producing massive fish die-offs from the billions of tons of industrial emissions and untreated human waste dumped into them. Toxic effluents, including pesticides and herbicides, seep into ground water or directly into irrigation canals. Cancer rates in villages situated along waterways have skyrocketed a thousand-fold. Hundreds of millions of urban residents breathe air rated as dangerously unhealthy, contaminated by industrial growth and the recent addition of millions of automobiles. An estimated 400,000 die prematurely every year from air pollution. Government environmental agencies have no enforcement power to stop polluters, and generally the government ignores or denies such problems, concentrating instead on industrial growth.[42]

China's own scientific establishment reports that unless greenhouse gases are

[41] PBS documentary, *China from the Inside*, January 2007. [web]
[42] *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 January 2007.

curbed, the nation will face massive crop failures along with catastrophic food and water shortages in the years ahead. In 2006-2007 severe drought was already afflicting southwest China.[43]

If China is the great success story of speedy free market development, and is to be the model and inspiration for Tibet's future, then old feudal Tibet indeed may start looking a lot better than it actually was.

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