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# Opposition to Evangelism in India, China, and Tibet

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

OPPOSITION TO EVANGELISM  
IN INDIA, CHINA, AND TIBET

By

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A Thesis submitted to the  
Department of Religion  
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## ABSTRACT

Christian evangelism in Asia often faces opposition from various political and religious forces. Although the specific types of opposition vary between different locations, opposition to evangelism and resistance to Christianity are nearly always the result of the view that Christianity is “foreign” and that the spread of the religion poses a threat to the existing power structure in any given area. In India, various anti-conversion laws prohibit conversion to Christianity in many cases, while Hindu nationalist organizations often attempt to “re-convert” Christians from tribal or Dalit communities. In both the Christian and Hindu attempts to convert these individuals, the question of what constitutes conversion by “force” or “coercion” is often an issue.

In China, the governmental agencies responsible for controlling religion ultimately decide who may preach, what they may preach, where they may preach, and to whom they may preach. As a result, many evangelical Christians choose not to register with the official church and participate instead in illegal underground organizations, while some choose to remain within official church groups yet continue to participate in unauthorized evangelistic activity.

In the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, foreign missionary activity is still at a relatively early stage, and very little information is known about the methods that missionaries are employing. By examining the failures of various historical missions among Tibetan Buddhists, the current methods and hopes of missionaries in the TAR are placed in an historical context.

## INTRODUCTION

For nearly 2,000 years, Christians have interpreted Jesus' commission to "make disciples of all the nations"<sup>1</sup> as a literal command, and many have set out to distant lands in order to fulfill this order. Throughout this long history of Christian missions, evangelists have often been met with great opposition. Today, in many areas of Asia—even in areas where Christianity has existed for hundreds or even close to thousands of years—the view of the Christian tradition as something that is inherently "foreign" remains. According to this perception, attempting to propagate Christianity within a society in which a dominant cultural, religious, or political foundation already exists is equated with attempting to supplant that foundation with another, foreign one. This view of Christianity suggests that the religion is, by its very nature, a threat to the existing forces of authority within a society. The most fervent opposition to the spread of Christianity in societies where this view is prevalent most often originates with those who are in, or desire to be in, positions of power. In the following chapters, methods of Christian proselytizing that evangelists use and the forms of resistance that they face in three particular regions of Asia—in India, China, and Tibet—are examined. Each of these chapters presents a very specific case study of the ongoing struggles between Christian missionaries and the political and religious forces that present opposition their evangelistic activities.

The first chapter, "Between Hindus and Christians: Conversion and Re-conversion Among Dalits and Ādivāsīs in India," examines the major legal and religious issues involved in Christian attempts to convert Indians from "Untouchable" (Dalit) and tribal (Ādivāsī) backgrounds. Christianity has traditionally been more accepted by members of these communities, who have been all but excluded from the rest of Indian society, than by caste Hindus. Because Dalits and Ādivāsīs are literally the weakest members of society, the Indian government naturally feels compelled to protect these groups. Missionary work among these communities is often viewed with suspicion by the government, and many anti-conversion laws have been enacted in an attempt to prevent

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 28:19 (New American Standard Bible).

conversion by force or by coercion from among Ādivāsīs in particular. Although these laws have been designed to protect those who would otherwise be unable to protect themselves from forced conversions, various laws and legal rulings can be (and have often been) interpreted in such a way to mean that *any* form of conversion (even conversion that is the result of an individual's genuine belief in a particular religion) is illegal. For many Christians who view proselytizing as a religious obligation this view of conversion obviously poses a problem.

In addition to the legal restrictions that are placed on conversion and evangelism, Christian missionaries working among tribal groups also face strong opposition from Hindu nationalist organizations. For the members of these organizations, foreign traditions such as Christianity are seen as a direct threat to the establishment of Hindutva. Like Christians, proponents of Hindutva also carry out extensive missionary activity among Dalits and tribals as they aim to convert (or, as the Hindu nationalists themselves would say, to “re-convert”) them to Hinduism, which they see as the necessary cultural element for the unity of all Indians.

In India, the government authorities often try to prevent any and all forms of conversion as they attempt to protect the members of society who are deemed powerless. Ādivāsīs in particular are often given special protection as the government seeks to preserve the cultural traditions of these “indigenous people groups.” Various anti-conversion laws have been passed as a direct result of this desire to defend the helpless Ādivāsīs from unwanted conversion by force; yet many Indians have argued that these laws may also serve to inhibit the religious rights of Christians, who see evangelism as a necessary religious duty, and of the tribals themselves, who should be given the ability to convert if they genuinely desire to. Opposition to Christian missionaries also comes from those who are striving for power and see Hinduism as the rallying point for their own political ideologies. For Hindu nationalists, foreign religions such as Christianity are viewed as a direct threat to their desired unification of Indians under the banner of Hindutva.

Under the red flag of the People's Republic of China (PRC), there is also obvious opposition to Christian evangelistic activity. However, the motives for the Chinese government's restrictions and prohibitions of evangelism are very different from those of

the Indian government and also from those of Hindu nationalist organizations. While the secular Indian government's legal restrictions on evangelism and/or conversion have typically been the result of a desire to protect the weakest sections of society from forced conversions, the Chinese government's restrictions on Christian activity do not appear to stem from a similar concern. Unlike in India, where conversion to Christianity has typically been popular mostly among those in extremely low social positions (i.e. Dalits and Ādivāsīs), Christianity in modern China has become increasingly popular among the growing number of educated urbanites. Thus, the Indian government's concern that conversions may be the result of individuals' lack of power to resist being converted is not an issue for the Chinese government. The type of opposition that evangelists in China face from government officials appears to have more in common with the type of opposition that evangelists in India face from Hindu nationalists in that each of these cases deals with issues of religion and national identity. However, the obvious differences in the ways that Hindu nationalists and Communist Party officials view the role that religion plays in forming national identity have led to very different actions in each of these cases.

In the PRC, no single religion is promoted as the rallying point for Chinese identity; in fact, in the eyes of the Chinese government, the absence of all forms of religion would actually be the ideal way to unify the Chinese people. Although Hindu nationalists in India and Communist government officials in the PRC both oppose the spread of Christianity because it ultimately has the power to prevent the unification of citizens under a common national identity, their views of the role that religion in general ought to play in nationalism differ drastically. According to the proponents of Hindutva, religion exists as a fundamental part of culture; thus, it is believed that a single religion can be used to unify a people under a national identity. Christianity is opposed by Hindu nationalists simply because it interferes with the establishment of Hinduism as the cornerstone of this national identity. In the eyes of the Communist government officials, however, religion is not a necessary aspect of culture. Their view is that when religion unifies a group of people, the resulting unification is unrelated—and may even be opposed—to nationalism. Identification with a particular religious tradition is viewed as a threat to the authority of the government itself because with this new identity as a

member of a religious tradition comes the potential to refuse to accept the nationalist identity.

To ensure that individuals' religious identities do not interfere with their identities as loyal citizens of the PRC, the Chinese government strives to control all aspects of religious life in China. Under the direction of the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), the five legal forms of religion (Catholicism, Protestantism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Islam) in China are each strictly monitored by a specific governmental organization. The second chapter, "Self-supporting? Self-propagating? Self-governing? Evangelicals and Evangelism in China," looks at the freedoms and restrictions that have been placed on evangelism in China by the official Protestant organization, the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Through the TSPM, the Communist government is ultimately in control of how and where evangelism may take place. Legally, only state-ordained ministers are allowed to preach, and this can only happen on the property of an official TSPM church.

A large number of Chinese Protestant Christian groups refuse to register with the TSPM, out of the belief that the government should not be in control of matters of religion. Many individual Chinese Christians choose to attend underground house church meetings rather than participate in state-controlled church activities. Although underground religious movements in China are definitely not unique to Protestant Christianity, the Protestant house church movement is distinct from other underground religious movements in China. It is not like the underground Catholic movement, which retains close ties to the Vatican, or underground Buddhist movements that retain ties to figures like the Dalai Lama. Although the leaders of Protestant house churches choose not to identify themselves with the TSPM, they also do not identify themselves with *any* organization or figure. In fact, many of the leaders of Protestant house churches have made appeals to the government of the PRC to understand that house church members are not anti-China or even anti-Communist, but that they are actually very patriotic citizens. In the eyes of these underground Christian groups, the government should be obeyed in all aspects, unless the demands of the government go against the demands of the Bible. Unlike some Catholic and Buddhist groups, which openly denounce the Chinese government and align themselves with foreign powers, the Protestant churches have

stated that they will be obedient to the government of the PRC in all respects so long as the demands of the state do not go against the commandments of God himself. Concerning the issue of evangelism, however, the majority of Chinese Protestants believe that the government's restrictions against preaching are in direct conflict with Biblical commands for all believers to preach the Gospel. Although the government's conflict with these Protestant groups who refuse to register is different from its conflicts with other religious groups who not only refuse to register but also openly oppose the government, this refusal to submit entirely to the government's authority is still viewed as a major threat to the power of the Communist party. Although the Protestants claim to identify themselves as patriotic Chinese citizens, the government ultimately views allegiance to any other power—even to what the Christians would view as a Higher Power—as disloyalty to China and as a threat to its own authority.

The third and final chapter, “If At First You Don't Succeed: Modern Approaches to Christian Missions in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in Light of Historical Missions to Tibet,” offers a look at modern missionary methods in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China (TAR) against the backdrop of historical attempts to bring Christianity to the Tibetan people. Although the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) is under the control of the PRC, a distinction has been made between evangelism in the TAR and evangelism in China in general. Unlike the previous chapter, the focus of this chapter is not on the Chinese government's opposition to evangelistic activity carried out among Han Chinese populations by Han Chinese Christians themselves, but on Western missionary activity among the Tibetan minority in China.

Despite the relatively long history of missionary activity in Tibet, which is outlined in the chapter, very little is known about the current state of Christian activity in the area. As a result, this chapter serves as a journalistic piece that utilizes evangelical Christian publications and interviews with missionaries who have worked in the region to outline some common missionary methods that are being used by Western evangelical groups in the TAR. Although only time will ultimately prove whether these current methods are effective, the apparent usefulness or ineffectiveness of these methods are examined in light of the Western missionaries' goals for the future of Tibetan Christianity.

In traditional Tibetan society, power was ultimately held in the hands of religious institutions. It is not surprising, then, that Christian missions were traditionally opposed by the leaders of Buddhist monasteries who viewed this new religion as a direct threat to their own authority. Throughout history, the greatest oppositions to missionary work are traced back to monks and lamas who warned lay Tibetans not to trust foreign missionaries or to adopt their religion.

Although monasteries exist in the Tibetan Autonomous Region today, they no longer hold temporal power. The Chinese government's attitude toward religion in the TAR is no different than its attitude toward religion throughout the rest of China: religion is permissible as long as it remains within the government's immediate control. The danger of Christianity in Tibet, as far as the PRC is concerned, is that it is always tied to foreign groups. Although, as Chapter Two shows, there is a significant population of Han Chinese Christians who are not related to any foreign political or religious groups, there has never been a significant number of Tibetan Christians. While any form of evangelism outside of state-approved churches in China is viewed as a threat to the government's authority, evangelism in the TAR is nearly always carried out by Western missionaries. Thus, if a Tibetan Christian population were to be established, this group would most likely have close ties with foreign religious and political organizations.

Because foreigners have only been allowed into the TAR for a little more than two decades, foreign missions in this region are still in the very early stages. Missionaries in Tibet today are aware of the possibility of government opposition to their evangelistic activities, and often resort to clandestine methods in order to avoid drawing attention to their actions as they strive to establish Christianity in modern Tibet. Besides the governmental opposition, missionaries in Tibet sometimes also face opposition from nationalist Tibetans who view Buddhism as a rallying point for their own culture. Although this type of nationalist identity is definitely more prevalent among exiled Tibetans, even within the TAR itself the idea that Buddhism is a necessary element for Tibetan cultural identity is still seen as an obstacle to establishing Tibetan Christianity.

Although each of these chapters offers a very specific case study of Christian evangelism in a particular region, the forms of opposition that missionaries in each of these areas face can all be traced back to similar issues of power and authority. In each of

these areas, the spread of Christianity is most often opposed because its “foreign” nature is viewed as a threat to the existing authority structures. Even in cases where Christians identify themselves as dedicated citizens of a particular nation and do not openly oppose the governmental authority, adherence to and propagation of this “foreign” ideology is often viewed as disloyalty to the temporal power that is already in place.

## CHAPTER 1

### BETWEEN HINDUS AND CHRISTIANS: CONVERSION AND RE-CONVERSION AMONG DALITS AND ĀDIVĀSĪS IN INDIA

Within Hinduism, there is a seemingly endless number of gods and an equally infinite number of ways to worship any of these; yet the concept of “conversion”—at least as it is understood in the Christian context—does not exist. Many Indians simply do not see the point in an individual completely renouncing one religious tradition in order to adopt another. Yet, for some Indian converts, embracing Christianity entails a complete denunciation of their former traditions and a call to believe in Christianity as the one true religion.

The concept of changing one’s own religion has not only been met with difficulties in the cultural realm, but also within the legal realm of India. When an Indian becomes a Christian, many of the new convert’s family members and neighbors cannot comprehend the individual’s perceived need to abandon Hinduism; likewise, Indian courts have often had difficulty viewing conversion as something that can be *willingly* undertaken by an individual. As a result, the legal system in India has focused on the implications of conversion as the result of force or inducement. The question as to how terms like “force” and “inducement” ought to be legally defined has also raised questions as to whether or not individuals can claim that they actually have a right to seek to convert others to their own religions.

To further complicate matters, these debates become particularly heated when those who are being converted are members of outcaste or tribal groups. The popularity of Christianity among Dalits and Ādivāsīs, combined with the Hindu nationalist claims that such groups rightfully belong to “the Hindu fold” have only served to spark numerous clashes between Christians and proponents of Hindutva ideology, and have resulted in the launching of campaigns to “reconvert” tribal Christians to Hinduism.

Conversion in India, specifically conversion to Christianity, is a difficult subject to approach both from a cultural level and also from a legal standpoint. The Christian tradition’s claims to Absolute Truth are often met with misunderstanding by Hindus,

while the legal system's emphasis on protecting individuals from the threat of "conversion by objectionable activities"<sup>2</sup> is often misunderstood by Christians as a prohibition of all conversion attempts. Within this chapter, the legal views of conversion in India will be examined in light of the greater cultural and religious traditions of both Hindus and Christians in India. Special attention will also be paid to the views of conversions held by Hindu nationalist organizations and how conversion to Christianity has affected Hindutva ideology.

Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes the "freedom to change [one's] religion or belief,"<sup>3</sup> the subject of conversion within India is "a troublesome issue,"<sup>4</sup> to say the very least. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration grants individuals the right to *willingly* change religions, yet the subject of conversion against an individual's own will (i.e. by "force") does not appear within the text. In A Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the Hindus, composed nearly five decades after the original Declaration was set forth by the United Nations, Article 18 is amended to also state that, "There shall be no compulsion in religion."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in each of the three major Freedom of Religion Acts passed at the state level within India<sup>6</sup>, an emphasis is placed upon the prohibition of the use of force, inducement, or fraud as conversion

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<sup>2</sup> Sebastian C. H. Kim, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India* (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Article 18 (1948) states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in a community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." (Arvind Sharma, *Hinduism and Human Rights: A Conceptual Approach*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 163.)

<sup>4</sup> Ronald W. Neufeldt, "To Convert or Not to Convert: Legal and Political Dimensions of Conversion in Independent India," in *Religion and Law in Independent India*, 313–331. (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), 330.

<sup>5</sup> Article 18 (1994) states, "(1) There shall be no compulsion in religion. It is a matter of choice. (2) Everyone has the right to retain one's religion and to change one's religion. (3) All human beings are entitled to participate in all the religions of the world as much as their own, for all are legatees of the religious heritage of humanity. (4) Everyone has the duty to promote peace and tolerance among religions and ideologies" (Sharma, 171).

<sup>6</sup>The three Acts referred to are (1) The Orissa Freedom of Religion Act (1967), (2) The Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantrya Ashiniyam (1968), and (3) The Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act (1978). For further information on the legal and political implications of each, see Neufeldt, "To Convert" and Ronald W. Neufeldt, "Conversion and the Courts," *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin* 13 (2000): 12–18.

tactics. The latter of the three acts, the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, is described as

A Bill to provide prohibition of conversion from indigenous faith of Arunachal Pradesh to any other faith or religion by use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means and for such matters connected therewith.<sup>7</sup>

In each of the three state acts the act of carrying out conversions by force, inducement, or fraud is clearly presented as a violation of religious freedom. These acts were intended to protect individuals (particularly women, children, and members of scheduled castes—those who are considered to be members of the “weaker” segments of society) from falling victim to conversion against their own free will. The question as to how terms such as “force” or “inducement” ought to be interpreted, however, has led to ambiguity within individual states and within India as a whole. While some may assume that the use of force applies only the use of physical violence, others may just as easily argue that any active attempt to persuade another to reject his religion and/or adopt another religion would constitute some use of force. In fact, within the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, the definition of force includes not only physical violence but even the “threat of divine displeasure.”<sup>8</sup> O.P. Tyagi’s Freedom of Religion Bill<sup>9</sup> likewise defines it as “force or threat of injury of any kind including the threat of divine displeasure or social excommunication.”<sup>10</sup> The Bill further states that inducement includes “the offer of any

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<sup>7</sup> Neufeldt, “To Convert,” 322. It should be noted here that the Arunachal Pradesh Act differs from the two previous Acts in that it specifically pertains to conversion from “indigenous faiths.” The implication here is that conversion to non-indigenous (i.e. foreign) religions (such as Christianity or Islam) must be regulated, while conversion to Hinduism or any other specifically Indian religious tradition does not need to be regulated in the same way.

<sup>8</sup> Neufeldt “Courts,” 12.

<sup>9</sup> This is one of a number of Bills that were proposed with the intention of making certain aspects of the individual State Acts apply to the entire nation. (See Neufeldt, “To Convert,” 324–6.)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 324.

gift or gratifications either in cash or in kind and shall also include the grant of any benefit, either pecuniary or otherwise.”<sup>11</sup>

Concerning Christianity, such a broad understanding of these terms proves to be problematic. Based on the most liberal interpretations of these terms, preaching about the Christian belief that all who reject Christ will receive eternal damnation would amount to the use of force. Likewise, preaching about the belief that all who accept Christ will receive eternal life would amount to the use of inducement. Yet, for many Christians, the words of Jesus found within the Gospel of Matthew are taken as a literal command to, “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [Jesus] commanded [them].”<sup>12</sup>

There is therefore a tension between many Christians who view “preaching the Gospel” as a religious responsibility and the Indian courts that have questioned whether or not it can be viewed as a constitutional right. One example of such a debate is the 1973 case of *Yulitha Hyde vs. State*, in which the Orissa Act was judged to be unconstitutional because it “infringes the fundamental right guaranteed under [Article] 25 of the Constitution.”<sup>13</sup> According to Article 25, “all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion.”<sup>14</sup> In his judgment concerning *Yulitha Hyde*, Justice R. N. Misra deemed that

The true scope of the guarantee under article 25 (1) of the Constitution, therefore, must be taken to extend to propagate religion and as a necessary corollary of this proposition, conversion into one’s own religion has to be included in the right so far as Christian citizenship is concerned.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Matt 28:19-20a (NASB).

<sup>13</sup> Neufeldt, “Courts,” 13.

<sup>14</sup> The Constitution of India, Article 25 (1), <http://indiacode.nic.in/coiweb/welcome.html> (accessed June 18, 2006). The entire Indian Constitution can be found in both Hindi and English at this website.

<sup>15</sup> Neufeldt, “Courts,” 13; Kim, 78.

Here, the propagation of the Christian faith with the intention of converting others was seen as a personal right guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. Although Justice Misra agreed that “the threat of divine displeasure and the threat of excommunication did in fact constitute forms of force and threat,”<sup>16</sup> he found fault with the act’s broad definition of inducement. The definition was too general, according to Justice Misra, in that “even invoking the blessings of the Lord or to say that ‘by His grace your soul shall be elevated’ may come within the mischief of the term.”<sup>17</sup>

Although this particular case resulted in the decision that the freedom to convert another ought to be viewed as a fundamental right, the opposite conclusion was reached just two years later when the Madhya Pradesh Act was challenged in a similar case. In *Rev. Stanislaus vs. State*, Justice C.J. Tare’s judgment was not concerned with whether or not the terms used within the Madhya Pradesh Act were too broad. Instead, he argued that the goal of the Act was to “establish the equality of religious freedom for all citizens by prohibiting conversion by objectionable activities.”<sup>18</sup> The chief justice further refuted the verdict from the Orissa case, in which conversion was seen as a right guaranteed to Christians within Article 25 of the Constitution, by stating that *propagation* does not entail *conversion*. Instead, “the right freely to... propagate religion” set forth within the first section of Article 25, was seen simply as the right to educate others about one’s own religion. According to *Stanislaus*, this does not mean that one necessarily has the right to convert others to that religion.

Because the cases were so similar, yet the State trials had resulted in markedly different judgments, both of these cases were heard together by the Indian Supreme Court in 1977. The final decision echoed that which had previously been set forth by Justice Tare and the Madhya Pradesh High Court. Neither of the two State Acts was found to be in violation of Article 25 because, according Supreme Court,

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<sup>16</sup> Neufeldt, “Courts,” 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Kim, 79.

[W]hat the Article grants is not the right to convert another person to one's own religion, but to transmit or spread one's religion by an exposition of its tenets... there is no fundamental right to convert another person to one's own religion because if a person purposely undertakes the conversion of another person to his religion... that would impinge on the 'freedom of conscience' guaranteed to all the citizens of the country alike.<sup>19</sup>

Although this ruling does not explicitly prohibit conversion in the general sense,<sup>20</sup> it does state that there is no such thing as a constitutional right to convert another. To summarize this decision, as Sebastian C.H. Kim has done quite bluntly, "Christians as citizens of a democratic nation, have to accept the fact that propagation aimed at conversion is not guaranteed as a fundamental right in the Constitution but is under the discretion of the local legislature."<sup>21</sup> Critics of the ruling have claimed that, by taking a very literal approach to the Chief Justice's words, any attempt to convert another person could be considered illegal. Upon examining this case in his article "Conversion and the Courts", Ronald Neufeldt writes,

The language of the Chief Justice would seem to suggest that if I am offended by someone's attempt to convert me, this is enough to make the attempt illegal. The Chief Justice also appears to be saying that since conversion does not appear in the fundamental rights it cannot by implication be included as a right even if my religion commands that I seek to convert in order to fulfil [*sic*] my religious duties.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Nepal would be an example of a nation that completely forbids all religious conversions. For a comparison between the legal views on conversion within Nepal, India, and Japan, see Sharma, 104–7.

<sup>21</sup> Kim, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Neufeldt, "Courts," 15. It should be noted that with this particular statement, Neufeldt is merely examining a possible interpretation of the Court's decision, and is not necessarily stating that the case serves to make all attempts to convert another illegal. In fact, in the conclusion of his article, Neufeldt claims that groups like the VHP have taken the Chief Justice's words out of context by using them to suggest that any conversion attempts by Christians are illegal. Neufeldt also makes a distinction between

Another concern of those who oppose the decision is that, by overemphasizing the right to *not be converted*, the result is that the right of an individual to willingly *be converted* is placed in jeopardy. As Kim argues, the Supreme Court's decision was "based on the questionable assumption" that individuals who are converted always play a "merely passive" role, while those who propagate religion are always active participants in the conversion process.<sup>23</sup> As Kim points out, one of the main criticisms of the Supreme Court's decision is that it assumes that responsibility always lies within the hands of those who seek to convert others rather than within the hands of those who choose to be converted. He writes, "While the verdict guaranteed 'freedom of conscience' *not to change one's religion*, in practice, it severely limited 'freedom of conscience' *to change one's religion* by denying the *other's* right to propagate."<sup>24</sup>

As critics have claimed, the outcome of this case poses problems for members of the Christian minority in India who view conversion as a necessary part of their own religious practice, but are not necessarily granted the right to convert others. In the Court's attempt to protect citizens from conversion by objectionable means, it has also created the potential for added difficulties for individuals who choose to convert to another religion. While the frustration that many Indian Christians feel as a result of such an outcome is not unwarranted, the decision of the Supreme Court can perhaps be better understood by examining how the Hindu majority in India views religious conversions.

Although India is a secular nation, one could easily define the country as culturally Hindu. It seems only logical, then, that legal views of conversion ought to be understood within the context of the Hindu religious views of conversion. It has been said that one of the main strengths of religious Hinduism is that it can "accommodate within its vast fold, people who accept all sorts of religious beliefs and practices, however contradictory or inconsistent."<sup>25</sup> Thus, although many Hindus may revere Jesus as a great

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having "a right to convert someone" and having "a right to seek to convert someone" (Neufeldt, "Courts," 15).

<sup>23</sup> Kim, 80.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Atul Y. Aghamkar, "Hindu Reactions to Christian Conversion: A Case Study From Pune," in *Conversion in a Pluralistic Context: Perspectives and Perceptions*. (Delhi: CMS/ISPCK, 2000), 136–7.

saint or even as a god, “[o]ne can continue to be a Hindu while believing in other religions; hence they feel that there is no need to change religions.”<sup>26</sup> Although individuals are free to adopt the beliefs of other sects within Hinduism, conversion in the Christian sense (which involves not only adopting new beliefs but also renouncing one’s original religion) poses a problem within the Indian context. For Hindus, who believe that the “essential nature of Ultimate Reality is unknowable,” and can therefore “only be partially apprehended in human experience,”<sup>27</sup> the Christian claims to Absolute Truth are difficult (if not impossible) to comprehend. As a result, the process of propagation and conversion, which directly hinges on this concept of Christianity as Absolute Truth, is seen quite differently from the Hindu perspective.

In the eyes of those who do not believe that there can be only one true religion, the concept of an individual actively seeking to be converted to a particular tradition because he deems it to be somehow truer than his previous belief system, seems completely illogical. If one examines the subject of conversion from this viewpoint (the view that conversions cannot be driven by an individual’s decision based upon his own spiritual experiences or religious beliefs), then only two possible explanations for the existence of conversions remain: individuals are either forced to convert against their own wills, or they willfully choose to convert for reasons other than religious ones. The first explanation, in which conversions are carried out in violation of the rights of individuals to possess ‘freedom of conscience,’ would help to clarify why such an emphasis has been placed on legally protecting those who could potentially fall victim to forced conversions. The second option, in which the choice to convert is based on motives other than a genuine belief in the spiritual worth of a particular religion, would explain why there is also an emphasis on preventing decisions to convert as a result of bribery or inducement. Although the legal views on conversion within India have often been met with dissatisfaction by the Christian minority, these views are not surprising given the fact that the majority of Indians approach the issue from a Hindu perspective.

In an attempt by some members of the Christian religious community to better understand their Hindu neighbors’ views on the subject, members of the Catholic Bishops

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 137.

Conference in India (CBCI) invited Arun Shourie, a well-known newspaper editor and outspoken member of the Hindu nationalist organization the Bhāratīya Janatā Party (BJP), to present a Hindu view of the situation during their 1994 convention.<sup>28</sup> Shourie argued that the “premise” of Christianity was conversion, which he described as a direct result of “the exclusive Christian claims of ‘one Prophet, one Text, one Church’ in which ‘[t]he Prophet becomes The Last Word on Everything, the Text becomes dogma, and the organization takes over.’”<sup>29</sup> In short, Shourie called for an end to Christian proselytizing, which was met with mixed responses by those in attendance at the conference, and later with outrage by some Christians and moderate Hindus. His critics questioned Shourie’s motives when he published his writings from the conference as a book that also included forty-five pages of additional material concerning his views of Christian missions. Because Shourie emphasized the fact that the majority of Christian conversions are carried out among tribals in India, critics argued that Shourie was simply “setting up Christians as a new ‘target’ for Hindu fundamentalism after Ayodhya.”<sup>30</sup>

Whether or not Shourie’s words from over a decade ago can actually be connected to the present situation, it is interesting that tensions between Christians and so-called “Hindu fundamentalists” over the issue of conversion among tribal peoples in India have continued to increase since that time. Although Christians have not yet experienced a clash with Hindu nationalists that could be considered comparable in scope to the Ayodhyā conflict, the differences in ideologies (particularly concerning Dalit and tribal communities) have led to numerous conflicts, often resulting in violence.

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<sup>28</sup> It is unclear why the organizers of CBCI conference chose to invite Shourie, a proponent of Hindutva and a very outspoken critic of Christian missions, to present “a Hindu ‘assessment’ of the situation.” The criticisms that Shourie presented to the CBCI during the conference were later published, further increasing tensions between Hindus and Christians. For more information on the conference and the subsequent debates, see Kim, 142–51.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 146. In 1992, a Muslim mosque in Ayodhyā, the Babri Masjid, was destroyed by thousands of Hindu extremists under the direction of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). This mosque, which was built in 1528, stood on a site that many claim is the birthplace of Lord Rāma, the avatāra of Viṣṇu whose story is recounted in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*. Many Hindu nationalists claim that a Hindu temple originally stood on the site and had been unjustly destroyed by Muslims centuries before. To this day, the battle for control of this sacred space remains a heated one as many Hindus want a temple to be built on the site and many Muslims want their mosque to be rebuilt.

Among Christians in India, the majority of them come from communities that exist outside of the traditional caste system. It has been estimated that perhaps “as many as 75 percent” of Indian Christians come “from a Scheduled Caste background.”<sup>31</sup> Numerous explanations have been offered as to why conversion is “more successful among the untouchable castes than among twice born and Śūdra castes,”<sup>32</sup> and as to why Christianity has taken root among tribal groups in particular. One common argument is that many tribals have embraced Christianity as a way to attain to a better standard of living. This sentiment was echoed by Arun Shourie during his address at the CBCI convention, as he criticized Christian missionaries for offering to fulfill Dalits’ and tribals’ desires for “an ‘earthly paradise’ of equality and justice.”<sup>33</sup> Here, Shourie’s charge against missionaries was based on his belief that Christians were essentially preying upon these desires for social equality by making hollow promises that would only result in “doubly disillusioned” converts.<sup>34</sup>

Although Shourie has made the claim that tribals who convert to Christianity to escape the socio-economic plight of those groups that are outside of the caste system will inevitably be disappointed by failure on the part of Christian missionaries to actually offer what they have promised, others argue that Christian missions in India have served to aid Dalits and tribals in their quest for social justice. For many Dalits, “conversion to Christianity is a way of escaping the cosmically ordained oppression that is embodied in the caste system.”<sup>35</sup> In “Tribals Embracing Christianity” Agapit Tirkey makes the argument that conversion to Christianity among certain tribal peoples has helped to lead to a heightened social status. Concerning tribal groups in northeast India, he writes

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<sup>31</sup> John C. B. Webster, “A Historic Rally for Dalit Christians,” *Christian Century* 108 F 27 (1991): 237.

<sup>32</sup> G. Prakash Reddy, “Caste and Christianity: a Study of Śūdra Caste Converts in Rural Andhra Pradesh,” in *Religion and Society in South India : a Volume in Honour of Prof. N. Subba Reddy*. (Delhi: B. R. Publications, 1987), 113.

<sup>33</sup> Kim, 143.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> John B. Carman, “When Hindus Become Christian: Religious Conversion and Spiritual Ambiguity,” in *The Stranger’s Religion: Fascination and Fear*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 145.

Most of them have embraced Christianity of different denominations before and after independence. With Christianity, the level of modern education has gone up quite high among them. This in turn has rendered them a high degree of socio-political and economic awareness regarding their rights and duties and they assert themselves quite effectively in these matters.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to point out that, even in this case, no claim has been made that the tribals gained a heightened social status or more legal rights instantly upon adopting Christianity, as Hindus often “continue to treat them as outcastes.”<sup>37</sup> Instead, Christianity is seen as merely providing the tools (such as education) that could possibly enable the converts to better their social situation. Nevertheless, Tirkey presents the argument that missionaries among Ādivāsī groups successfully make converts due to the fact that the tribal converts’ “needs” are met by embracing Christianity.<sup>38</sup> The needs of which he speaks, however, do not include only those of social or economic nature. According to Tirkey, “These needs [are] both social and religious, temporal and spiritual, never one or the other only.”<sup>39</sup>

As Tirkey points out, a second explanation for why Ādivāsīs are turning to Christianity is that those who convert are genuinely attracted to the religion itself. In fact, many have argued against the notion that most Ādivāsīs convert to Christianity *only* because of the socio-economic benefits by pointing out that, quite often, those who choose to convert to Christianity continue to face hardships. Unlike Shourie, however, who has argued that tribals whose social situation does not improve after converting to Christianity become “doubly disillusioned,” others have argued that tribals who choose to convert even when their *earthly* situations are not improved by Christianity must have genuine *spiritual* reasons for their conversions.

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<sup>36</sup> Agapit Tirkey, “Tribals Embracing Christianity,” *Sevartham* 25 (2000): 41.

<sup>37</sup> Carman, 145.

<sup>38</sup> Tirkey, 48.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Although Tirkey's assessment of Christianity within tribal groups includes evidence that certain individuals and groups have used Christianity to improve their social situations, there is also evidence that many tribals who choose to convert to Christianity often face additional hardships as a direct result of their conversion. The government assistance promised to members of Scheduled Castes does not legally apply to those who choose to convert to Christianity. Often, individuals are persuaded not to convert to Christianity when they realize that "if [they] were to become Christian, they would cease to be *Harijans* and would therefore not receive any of the special *Harijan* benefits."<sup>40</sup> In fact, the President's Order of 1950, which defines which social groups are eligible for "Scheduled Caste benefits" and legal protection against the practice of Untouchability, does not allow Christians to be considered for these benefits. The Order states that "no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion may be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste."<sup>41</sup>

This statement makes it clear that Ādivāsīs who convert to Christianity cannot be considered members of Scheduled Castes. Yet, this statement also implies that all members of scheduled castes are originally Hindus. While members of Hindu nationalist organizations have used this idea to justify various campaigns to prevent Ādivāsīs from converting to Christianity (and also to "reconvert" Ādivāsī Christians to Hinduism), there are still many others who balk at the notion that the indigenous religions practiced among India's tribals could be classified as Hinduism. In fact, there is often "a dominant and credible argument made by these communities that they are not only non-Hindu but pre-Hindu in composition."<sup>42</sup>

Among Ādivāsī groups in Chotanagpur, for example, there is "a remarkable similarity" between indigenous belief systems and Christianity. Chotanagpur Ādivāsīs have traditionally been monotheists. As Tirkey's study reveals,

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<sup>40</sup> Carman, 135. *Harijan*, meaning "child of God," is the phrase that Mohandas Gandhi used to refer to individuals outside of the cast system. In this chapter, I have chosen instead to use the term *Dalit* ("downtrodden"), which is the term that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and others have chosen use to describe themselves.

<sup>41</sup> Webster, 237. Although the Order was later amended to include Sikhs (1956) and Buddhists (1990), professing Christians and Muslims are still excluded (237).

<sup>42</sup> Sathianathan Clarke, "Hindutva, Religious and Ethnocultural Minorities, and Indian-Christian Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 95 no. 2 (April 2002): 206.

[T]he ādivāsīs of Chotanagpur believed in one God calling Him by different names in their respective mother tongues. His attributes were that he was a creator, provider and sustainer. He was the supreme Master and Lord of the universe and its creatures. He was a good, benevolent, provident and loving father.<sup>43</sup>

He also states that within certain Ādivāsī traditions “there was no place for idolatry of any kind. They had no statues, no temples.”<sup>44</sup> Tirkey makes the claim that, because Christian beliefs are very similar to what many of Chotanagpur’s Ādivāsīs already believed, Christianity was easily accepted by those within this region. According to Tirkey’s portrayal, not only can tribal religions be classified as non-Hindu, but some even appear to be more closely related to Christianity than they are to Hinduism. This claim, however, is in complete opposition to the views that are commonly held by the proponents of Hindutva ideology. Hindu nationalist groups, such as the Rāṣṭrīya Swayamsevak Saṅgh (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, RSS), view Christianity as a foreign religion that threatens to steal tribals away from the “Hindu” fold. As a result, conversion to Christianity is seen as both “an antinational and anti-cultural act”<sup>45</sup> that must be prevented.

In order to understand the nationalist claims that Ādivāsīs are actually Hindus, one must first examine the ideology that drives Hindutva. The term “Hindutva” was originally set forth by V.D. Savarkar in 1923 as an alternative for “Hinduism”. According to Savarkar, the term Hinduism is considered faulty because it is of “alien growth.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Savarkar and other critics of the term would argue that it “is associated with religious dogma; thus it fails to take seriously the inclusion of other religious offspring of

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<sup>43</sup> Tirkey, 44.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Clarke, “Hindutva,” 205.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 201.

the land of *Saptasindhu*, i.e. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.”<sup>47</sup> Savarkar’s idea of “Hindutva” is an attempt to go beyond the scope of Hinduism by defining India and its peoples according to three main ideas. The first theme of Hindutva is that all Indians share “a sacred geography.” According to Savarkar, “Hindustan means the land of Hindus, the first essential of Hindutva must necessarily be this geographic one.”<sup>48</sup> According to this ideology, the inhabitants of this “motherland” must also be bound together by “a common blood.”<sup>49</sup> Savarkar states that “the Hindus” (he is presumably speaking of all Indians here) are not only a nation of citizens, but a race. He writes

The Hindus are not merely the citizens of the Indian state because they are unified not only by the bonds of love they bear to a common motherland but also by the bonds of a common blood. They are not only a Nation but also a race-jati. The word *jati*, derived from the root *Jan* to produce, means a brotherhood, a race determined by a common origin—possessing a common blood.<sup>50</sup>

According to Savarkar, all communities share this “common blood,” even Dalits and Ādivāsīs. He also specifically refers to members of Dalit and Ādivāsī communities when he defines this “Hindu” race.

The race that is born of the fusion...of the Aryan, the Kolarians, Dravidians, whose blood we as a race inherit, is rightly called neither an Aryan, nor Lolarian, nor Dravidian—but the Hindu race; that is, that people who live as children of a common motherland, adorning a common holyland...Therefore the Santals, Kolis, Bhils, Panchama, Namashudras and all other such tribes and classes are Hindus.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 203.

Although traditionally, Dalit communities have existed outside of the caste system due to the fact that they are the result of intermarriage between *jatis*, Savarkar here proposes that the entire “Hindu race” is the result of mixture. Therefore, even those groups that have been excluded from the caste system are to be considered part of this race. On one hand, this concept of “a common blood” even between Brahmins and Dalits “is a major step in espousing the universalization of human rights for all people.”<sup>52</sup> Yet, according to Hindutva ideology, these claims of a shared landscape and race among Indians must lead to the third aspect of Savarkar’s view of Hindutva: that all must share “a common culture.”

Not surprisingly, the common culture by which all Indians are bound together is “the one common Hindu culture with deep roots in Brahmanic religion, symbolized by its sacred language (Sanskrit).”<sup>53</sup> Thus, although Savarkar’s “Hindutva” is characterized as a more inclusive term than “Hinduism,” a shared belief in the Hindu religion is a necessary element of Hindutva. As a result, “Dalits and Ādivāsīs can claim common blood with all other Hindus” only if “they abandon their religious and cultural differences and give themselves up to the synergy of Hindutva,” and are thus assimilated into a culture that is “rooted in Vedic Hinduism.”<sup>54</sup>

Although Hindu nationalists view Dalits and Ādivāsīs as members of the “Hindu race” who also share “a sacred geography,” all three of the elements previously set forth must be met in order for a group to genuinely be a part of the Hindu nation. Although it is certainly not impossible for followers of tribal religions to become assimilated within the religiously centered Hindu culture, it is obvious that Christians “do not find a place in Hindutva, since ‘they belong, or feel that they belong, to a cultural unit *altogether* different from the Hindu one.’”<sup>55</sup> Even though Indian Christians can be considered a part of the common nation and the common race, they “do not meet the third criteria because

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Clarke, “Hindutva,” 202.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

they do not participate in the common civilization.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, because Christian converts are unlikely to join the Hindutva movements, conversion to Christianity is seen as a direct threat to Hindu nationalism. A common goal of nationalist organizations is “to defend Hinduism and to arrest the growth of other religions that could be considered as enemies of Hinduism.”<sup>57</sup> As a result, nationalist groups such as the Viśva Hindū Pariṣad (Vishwa Hindu Parishad, VHP) have attempted to put an end to Christian conversions among the Scheduled Castes.

The methods employed by such groups have been questioned, not only by Christians, but also by members of the media. In *Frontline*, a publication related to *The Hindu* newspaper, Aijaz Ahmad’s “The Politics of Hate” is a scathing example of opponents’ responses to nationalist “reconversion” campaigns. In his article, Ahmad outlines the VHP’s “ongoing terror campaign against hapless Christians,” which he claims is based principally on “the issue of conversions.”<sup>58</sup> Ahmed and others take particular issue with the terminology used by nationalist groups in which “[o]pting out of Hinduism for some other religion is called ‘conversion’; opting out of some other religion in favor of Hinduism is called ‘re-conversion.’”<sup>59</sup> Although Sathianathan Clarke has argued that some Ādivāsī religions are “not only non-Hindu but pre-Hindu in composition,”<sup>60</sup> and Tirkey’s findings have suggested that some tribal religions are actually more similar in belief and practice to Christianity than they are to Hinduism,<sup>61</sup> the proponents of Hindutva continue to assert that Dalits and Ādivāsīs were originally Hindus. In fact, Hindu nationalists have gone so far as to substitute the term “Vanvāsi” (or Vanavāsi) for “Ādivāsī.” While Ādivāsī refers to “the original (aboriginal) inhabitants

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Plamthodathil S Jacob, “Hindu and Christian: Conversions and Transformations” in *Conversion in a Pluralistic Context: Perspectives and Perceptions*. (Delhi: CMS/ISPCK, 2000), 90.

<sup>58</sup> Aijaz Ahmed. “The Politics of Hate,” *Frontline* 16, no. 03, Jan. 30 - Feb. 12, 1999, <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1603/16030160.htm> (accessed June 18, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Clarke, “Hindutva,” 206.

<sup>61</sup> Tirkey, 44.

of India,” Vanvāsi simply means “forest dweller.”<sup>62</sup> The implication of this, of course, is that tribals do not actually belong to a “pre-Hindu” religion or culture, but are themselves Hindus.

These assertions have often led to aggressive campaigns to “reconvert” tribals, particularly those who have previously converted to Christianity. One recent example of such an event is the ShabariKumbh (or ShabriKumbh) that took place in the Dangs region of Gujarat in February 2006. The Kumbh (“religious gathering”) is named for Shabari, the legendary devotee of Rāma. Shabari’s actions as recorded within the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* are viewed by many Hindus as an example of extreme piety. Before offering berries to Rāma, she personally tasted each one to ensure that they were sweet enough for her lord. The organizers chose this area in the Dangs to hold the event because they believe that “[i]t is in this region that Shabari Mata, the immortal devotee of Sri Rāma met her Lord and lovingly offered him sweet berries which she had tasted herself.”<sup>63</sup>

Even before the Kumbh began, the motives of its organizers were questioned by numerous human rights organizations, members of the secular media, and by Ādivāsī Christians themselves. Although some of the articles posted on the official Shabarikumbh website promised a peaceful religious gathering that would become “a symbol of national inspiration,”<sup>64</sup> rumors continued to circulate that the main goal of the “kumbh” was actually to “reconvert” Ādivāsī Christians. Members of the Vanwasi (Vanavāsi) Kalyan Parishad (VKP), a group that is affiliated with the RSS,<sup>65</sup> vehemently rejected accusations that the event was an attack on Christianity or Christians as part of a “disinformation campaign ... started by the so-called mainstream media.”<sup>66</sup> However, articles from their own official website not only make reference to the expected “reurn of

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<sup>62</sup> Chetan Bhatt, Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*. (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 114.

<sup>63</sup> “Shabarikumbh: Toward a Massive Hindu Awakening,” *Shabarikumbh.org*, <http://www.shabarikumbh.org/archives/shabari-kumbh/> (accessed June 18, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> “Challenge of Shabarikumbh,” *Shabarikumbh.org*, <http://www.shabarikumbh.org/archives/challenge-of-shabarikumbh/> (accessed June 18, 2006).

<sup>65</sup> Nandini Oza, “Fluctuating Faith: Kumbh Calls to Indianise Muslims and Christians,” *The Week*, February 26, 2006, [http://www.the-week.com/26feb26/statescan\\_article4.htm](http://www.the-week.com/26feb26/statescan_article4.htm) (accessed June 18, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> “Shabarikumbh: Toward a Massive Hindu Awakening.”

thousands of Christian vanavasi converts back to the Hindu fold,”<sup>67</sup> but also serve to portray Christianity (and, by default, those who convert to Christianity) as the enemy of Hindutva. In an article entitled “Shabarikumbh: Towards a Massive Hindu Awakening,” VKP members portray the Dangs region as a “hotbed” of Christian missionary activity. Such activity, which is described in militaristic terms, is seen as a vicious attack upon Hinduism and upon the “Vanavāsi Hindus” (Ādivāsīs) in particular. The author writes

For long, Bharat has been a special target of the Christian Church worldwide. To the Church, the Hindus represent the greatest stumbling block in their grand design to establish Christ’s kingdom on earth. The poor, illiterate, mild Vanvasi Hindu is an obvious target in this nefarious scheme. For years, under the garb of social service, the Church has been spreading its tentacles in far-flung, tribal regions of our country. These converted vanavasis become alienated from their customs and traditions. They get uprooted from their cultural milieu. Conversion to Christianity is invariably associated with separatism and terrorism.<sup>68</sup>

Although organizers insisted that the goal of this event was to peacefully “awaken” the “Vanavasi Hindus,” and openly criticized the secular media and Christian organizations for spreading “misinformation” about their intentions,<sup>69</sup> articles such as the one mentioned above appear to justify the concern of both Christians and the secular media. With slogans such as “Hindu Jaage, Christi Bhaage”<sup>70</sup> appearing among the articles and commentaries that are posted on the organizers’ website, the claim that the Shabarikumbh was to be merely a peaceful “gathering” of Hindus to celebrate Shabari’s devotion to Rāma was difficult for many to believe.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> The Shabarikumbh website reports that the publishers of *The Week* were “slapped...with a legal notice” for publishing “a defamatory article on Shabarikumbh” in its publication from December 18, 2005. Although the website does not give any indication as to the outcome of this legal issue, the original article could not be found on *The Week*’s website ([www.the-week.com](http://www.the-week.com)) as of June 18, 2006.

<sup>70</sup> Literally, “Arise Hindus, throw out the Christians!” “Shabarikumbh: Toward a Massive Hindu Awakening.”

Despite fears among many international human rights groups (particularly among Christian groups) of a violent conflict that would result in the forced “re-conversions” of many Ādivāsī Christians (and despite the hopes of the organizers of the event), the number of Ādivāsīs who were “re-converted” was much lower than the Shabarikumbh organizers had anticipated. Most likely, the fact that “[t]he state government had asked the organisers to refrain from acts that would create tension”<sup>71</sup> came as a direct result of the negative publicity that had preceded the event. Yet, contrary to the claims of its organizers, “reconversion of tribals was a major issue at the kumbh,” and the majority of its speakers focused on the topic.<sup>72</sup>

The fact that so much controversy has surrounded this particular event is an indication of the much larger dispute that exists among Indians over the issue of religious conversion in general. In the case of the Shabarikumbh and other similar events, the issue is focused specifically on missionary activities aimed at conversion to Christianity and “re-conversion” to Hinduism among Ādivāsī groups. Christian missionaries, Ādivāsī Christians, and even some members of the secular media, have argued that many Ādivāsīs who practice Christianity or tribal religions are being “re-converted” to Hinduism by questionable means. Among the proponents of Hindutva ideology, however, a similar argument is being made that many “Vanvāsi Hindus” are being converted to Christianity either by force or by inducement. Each side presents the case that conversion (or “re-conversion”) has a positive effect on the Ādivāsī converts themselves and that the opposition is aggressively targeting members of tribal classes in an effort to hinder the occurrences of conversion (or “re-conversion”). Because each of the parties involved in this issue are acting out of their beliefs in a particular religious or political ideology, it does not seem likely that any form of compromise can be made between Christians and Hindu nationalists on the issue of tribal conversions.

The issue of conversion among Ādivāsīs and Dalits is particularly heated due to the current surge of Hindu nationalist activity, though the issue of conversion in general remains a major issue in India even without this specific problem. Even among the many individuals who have openly condemned the attempts of nationalist organizations such as

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<sup>71</sup> Oza, “Fluctuating Faith.”

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

the RSS to prohibit Christian conversions or to “reconvert” Ādivāsīs to Hinduism, many still oppose conversion to Christianity.

Despite the Christian belief that “preaching the Gospel” is a spiritual act, many Hindus have been critical of Christian missionary activity because it is widely viewed as an attempt on the part of the missionary to fulfill a particular political agenda or as an attempt on the part of the convert to gain some sort of social justice. Christians claim that making converts is a necessary aspect of their religion, and should therefore be considered a freedom granted to them by the Indian Constitution. In contrast, the concept of conversion as a purely religious act undertaken by an individual based on his own free will is still difficult for many Hindus to understand or accept since Christian claims to exclusive Truth are incompatible with the Hindu worldview. As a result, members of the Hindu majority often have difficulty accepting the claims that conversions to Christianity have not been brought about by questionable methods. While the legal system has continually sought to prevent conversions that may be brought about by force or inducement, many have argued that the freedom to “propagate religion” has been significantly hindered as a result. A suitable way to adequately and equally uphold the rights of the various individuals affected by conversion<sup>73</sup> is simply impossible until each group comes to an understanding of the opposing viewpoints. Those who claim that “propagation [with the intent to convert] is ... the single most important issue for the future of Hindu-Christian relationships,”<sup>74</sup> cannot be far from the truth.

Although the Indian government has placed legal restrictions on Christian evangelism and conversion, the greatest direct opposition to the spread of Christianity in modern India comes from Hindu nationalists who view the opposing religion as a threat to their goal of Hindutva. In China, the government’s response to evangelistic activity is surprisingly more similar to the response of Hindu nationalist groups than it is to that of the Indian government. Just as the nationalist organizations oppose the spread of Christianity because it threatens to undermine the desired unification of India under the banner of Hindutva, so the government of the People’s Republic of China opposes the

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<sup>73</sup> Namely, 1) those who do not wish to be converted, 2) those who willingly choose to convert, and 3) those who wish to be able to convince others to convert.

<sup>74</sup> Neufeldt, “Courts,” 12.

spread of Christianity because it threatens to undermine the desired unification of China under Communism. The following chapter will examine the oppositions to evangelism and Evangelicalism in modern China.

## CHAPTER 2

### SELF-SUPPORTING? SELF-PROPAGATING? SELF-GOVERNING? EVANGELICALS AND EVANGELISM IN CHINA

Shortly after the People's Republic of China (PRC) was formed, the new communist government became directly involved in the religious affairs of its citizens. Foreign missionaries were forced to leave the country as the government sought to eliminate any traces of "Western imperialism" within religion. Although many religious traditions were regarded as "reactionary institutions" (*fandong hui dao men*, 反动会道门) and were completely banned, a list of five officially accepted religions was created. National associations were created for each of these five major traditions—Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism—in order that the PRC government could more effectively monitor the religious activities of adherents to these religions. It is interesting to note that, among the five major religions recognized by the PRC, Protestant and Catholic forms of Christianity are listed separately. Each of these Christian sects, therefore, has a separate national organization at its head. For Chinese Catholics, the officially recognized head of the Church is not the Vatican, but a PRC organization known as the Catholic Patriotic Association.<sup>75</sup> For Chinese Protestants, the government organizations responsible for overseeing the Church are the Chinese Christian Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the Chinese Christian Council (CCC). Although these technically exist as two separate organizations, the TSPM and the CCC are so closely related that they are often referred to simply as "the Two Organizations" (*liang hui*, 两会).<sup>76</sup> Individual Protestant ministries that have officially registered with the PRC government are colloquially referred to as "Three Self Churches." The Communist government does not recognize any Christian "churches" outside of the TSPM and CCC, and Three Self officials claim that there is, in fact, no such thing as a "Three Self

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<sup>75</sup> For more information on the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), see David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington DC: Regency Publishing Inc., 2001), 213–215.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

church;”<sup>77</sup> yet the expression is often used in order to distinguish the official churches from the many unregistered “house” churches that exist within the PRC.<sup>78</sup> Despite the fact that the Chinese government recognizes both Protestant and Catholic forms of Christianity as legal, many Christians refuse to align themselves with the “State Church” in China, preferring instead to participate in the illegal “underground” ministries. In this chapter, the relationship between the legal expressions of Protestant Christianity (under the auspices of the TSPM) and illegal underground Protestantism will be examined.<sup>79</sup> Attention will be given to the historical beginnings of the TSPM and government-approved Protestant Christianity, the reasons why many Chinese Protestants refuse to join the TSPM, and the issues raised by evangelism and evangelicalism within both the official and underground church movements.

The Three Self Patriotic Movement is named for the three principles that it seeks to embody: self-support, self-propagation, and self-governing. The “three self” concept is by no means unique to the TSPM. A number of indigenous Protestant churches already existed in China long before the Communist government came to power and the TSPM was established. One such ministry is that of Wang Mingdao (王明道) (1900–1991), a Chinese preacher who is perhaps most well known for spending more than twenty years in prison for his repeated refusals to join the TSPM. In *Jesus in Beijing*, David Aikman

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 135–6.

<sup>78</sup> Unregistered ministries are often colloquially referred to as “house churches” due to the fact that they cannot legally own church buildings; these “underground” Christians often meet in private houses or office buildings.

<sup>79</sup> Here, *Protestantism* is used in the broadest sense of the word: namely, those forms of Christianity that are neither Catholic nor Eastern Orthodox. It is important to note that the Chinese government does not recognize any further division of the branches of Christianity beyond the two main categories (Catholic and Protestant). Thus, Christians within official state-run Protestant churches do not belong to specific denominations. The unofficial Protestant church movement also typically includes Christians who would define their beliefs as Protestant Christianity simply in the sense that it is not Catholicism. Although in the West, there can be a distinction between *Protestantism*, as it refers only to the “mainline” denominations (such as Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, etc.), and Evangelicals, the fact is that even unofficial Christian groups in China rarely have any ties to Western denominations, and such distinctions are not made within Chinese Protestantism. The vast majority of underground Chinese Protestants would be characterized as Evangelicals by Western standards, yet they are simply identified as Protestants in the sense that they are not Catholics. For an in-depth study on Catholicism in the PRC, see James T. Myers, *Enemies without Guns: the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China* (New York: Paragon House, 1991).

affectionately refers to Wang as one of the “Patriarchs” of modern Chinese Christianity.<sup>80</sup> As Aikman points out, Pastor Wang, who vigorously opposed the TSPM on theological grounds, never disagreed with the Three Self concept itself. In fact, he argues, these three goals had actually been realized within Wang’s ministry decades before the TSPM even existed.

Since starting his own independent church in Peking in the 1920s, he had never been connected with any foreign group, above all with any foreign Christian missionary or denominational group. And though he spoke from time to time at missionary conferences, such as those organized by the China Inland Mission, Wang never received any financial support from the British or the Americans.

Throughout his career as a pastor and evangelist, Wang insisted that the Chinese churches needed to be completely independent of foreign mission organizations or foreign church denominations. Chinese Christian churches should also support themselves financially, he held, and do their own evangelizing and disciplining of new Christian believers. In effect, long before Communism came into power in China, Wang Mingdao was living out his own Christian version of the so-called Three Self principles (self-support, self-propagation, self-governing) that later became the slogan of the Three Self Patriotic Movement, the “official” Protestant organization claiming to represent all of China’s Christians.<sup>81</sup>

It is ironic that this preacher, who would eventually spend decades in prison for refusing to partner with the Three Self Patriotic Movement, actually employed the Three Self principles before the TSPM was formed; yet it is perhaps more ironic that the Three Self model of an indigenous Chinese Church completely free from foreign involvement did not even originate in China but is itself a very foreign concept.

The idea for a native church in China “that could become self-governing, self-supporting, and self-extending” was first proposed by two nineteenth-century missionary

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<sup>80</sup> Aikman, 49–57.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51

administrators—Henry Venn (1796–1873) of the Church Missionary Society and Rufus Anderson (1796–1880) of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.<sup>82</sup> According to both the British Venn and the American Anderson, the goal of a foreign missionary ought to be “to proclaim the faith of the Bible, not to extend Western civilization.”<sup>83</sup> Although both of these men were involved in missionary societies, it is important to note that neither of them actually ever set foot in China. Yet, each of these men envisioned a native Chinese Church that, although “planted” by Western missionaries, could “grow and flourish on its own.”<sup>84</sup> Together, Venn and Anderson, who regularly corresponded with each other, formulated the Three Self model based on their own interpretations of the New Testament. According to Anderson, the “ecclesiastical imperialism” that often accompanied foreign Christian missions was in direct contradiction to the apostolic pattern set forth in the New Testament epistles—particularly the pattern set forth in the letters of the Apostle Paul. In Anderson’s own words,

When (Paul) had formed local churches, he did not hesitate to ordain presbyters over them, the best he could find; and then to throw upon the churches thus officered, the responsibilities of self-government, self-support, and self-propagation.<sup>85</sup>

Both Anderson and Venn held to the belief that the intent of the apostolic missionary pattern was to result in the formation of a local Church that would be completely independent of foreign involvement shortly after the initial preaching of the Gospel. Had this pattern not been discarded at some point within the history of

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<sup>82</sup> Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China’s United Front* (Maryknoll, NY: 1988), 37.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

Christianity, they asserted, the modern tendency of Western imperialism to become intertwined with foreign missions could have been completely avoided.<sup>86</sup>

Although this revolutionary concept is usually traced back to Venn and Anderson,<sup>87</sup> apparently neither of them had “the time nor the inclination to give their understandings of the Three-Self a systematic expression.”<sup>88</sup> For many Western missionaries who actually lived in China during and shortly after this time, the fact that Christianity was viewed as a distinctly foreign tradition was motivation enough to try to actually put these concepts into action. Unfortunately for missionaries like Roland Allen (1868-1947), who were in China during the Boxer Rebellion, mere theories alone were not enough. Instead, the need to establish local churches that could be completely and visibly independent of foreign power was still a very pressing one even after the Three Self concept had been created. As Allen himself recognized, at this time “the Chinese commonly look[ed] upon the missionary as a political agent, sent out to buy the hearts of the people, and so to prepare the way for a foreign dominion.”<sup>89</sup>

Thus, although the Three Self idea originated in the West, it appears that none of the Western missionaries who tried to establish local churches based upon these principles were ever actually successful. During the decades leading up to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, a number of indigenous ministries led by Chinese preachers like Wang Mingdao and Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 倪柝聲) (1903–1972), were established without any help from foreign missionaries. Although the concepts of self-support, self-government, and self-propagation were never actively sought out by these organizations, these indigenous churches are often cited as examples of Three Self Christianity existing in China before the TSPM.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>87</sup> Although most sources agree that Venn and Anderson were the originators of the revolutionary Three Self concept, David Cheung has argued that the notion of a self-sufficient Chinese Church can also be traced to the Rev. John Van Nest Talmage. According to Cheung, although Talmage did not actually use the key terms that have become associated with the Three Self movement (self-support, self-government, and self-propagation), “*the essential features of the Three-self ideal were already contained in the Talmage ideal as early as 1848 even though the actual terminology was somewhat different*” (David Cheung, *Christianity in China: The Making of the First Native Protestant Church* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 56.)

<sup>88</sup> Wickeri, 38.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

In *Chairman Mao Meets the Apostle Paul*, K. K. Yeo examines the relationship between Chinese Christianity and Communism. Although he agrees that indigenous Christian groups such as Watchman Nee's "Little Flock" did indeed embody the Three Self ideals, he posits that the underlying difference between these groups and the official Three Self Patriotic Movement is that these other ministries were free from the influence of *any* outside power, not just foreign powers. According to Yeo, when the TSPM is compared to indigenous churches such as the Little Flock,

The Three-Self Movement...was unique because it had government involvement. When the communist government came to power in 1949, it seriously adopted the policy of religious freedom and tolerance but added a political twist. C.M. Chen, an official of the Religious Affairs Bureau, once said that the purpose of the government was not outright extermination of the church but restriction, reformation, and control. Chen pointed out that the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) had been created to make religion serve politics and to make the church politically harmless.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, although the Three Self ideals originally proposed by Venn and Anderson stemmed from their own "theological convictions,"<sup>91</sup> the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB)<sup>92</sup> of the PRC adopted these concepts for obvious political reasons as the Three Self Reform Movement (the name would later be changed to the Three Self Patriotic Movement) was "officially launched in April 1951."<sup>93</sup> As long as Christians in China were connected to foreign missionaries and/or overseas Christian organizations, they

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<sup>90</sup>Khiok-Khng Yeo, *Chairman Mao Meets the Apostle Paul: Christianity, Communism, and the Hope of China* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 154.

<sup>91</sup> Wickeri, 38.

<sup>92</sup> Today, the name of this organization has been changed from the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) to the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA). For the sake of convenience, all references to this organization will continue to use the original name (RAB).

<sup>93</sup> Aikman, 153.

were viewed as a threat to the newly formed Communist government.<sup>94</sup> Initially, one of the main goals of the newly formed Three Self Reform Movement was to urge Chinese Christians to sever all ties with foreign Christian organizations, particularly with American ministries.<sup>95</sup> Leaders from various Chinese churches were invited to participate in “Three-Self Learning Meetings,” the first of which was held in Beijing in July 1951.<sup>96</sup> Although the leaders of many churches that were connected to foreign ministries attended these meetings, and most of these groups immediately began to end their relationships with non-Chinese Christian organizations; many of the indigenous Protestant church leaders, including Wang Mingdao in Beijing and Watchman Nee in Shanghai, refused to attend these meetings.<sup>97</sup> Many Christians, even from among the churches that did take part in the Beijing meeting and subsequent “Learning Meetings,” began to wonder whether the Three Self Reform Movement had actually been initiated to modify Protestant theology. In order to appease the many Protestant believers who questioned the motives of the Movement, the RAB decided to change the name of the Three Self Movement during the First National Conference on Religious Work in the autumn of 1953.<sup>98</sup> Although the decision had been made then to drop the word “reform,” the name of the movement was not officially changed to the Three Self Patriotic Movement until the following year during the National Christian Conference.<sup>99</sup> During this conference, the “Letter to Christians Throughout China,” composed by TSPM president Y. T. Wu (Wu Yaozong, 吳耀宗) (1893–1971) and other leaders of the Movement, was drafted.

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<sup>94</sup> It is interesting to note that, although individual government organizations were formed to manage each of the five officially approved religions, only the two Christian traditions (Protestantism and Catholicism) were organized into “Patriotic” associations. Buddhism, Daoism, and even Islam were viewed as “backwards” or “feudal” religions, yet they were viewed as valid expressions of “Chinese” religion, unlike the “foreign” Christian traditions. As a result, PRC government never officially equated any of these other traditions with imperialism as they did Christianity.

<sup>95</sup> George Neilson Patterson, *Christianity in Communist China*. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1969), 84–7.

<sup>96</sup> After this initial meeting in Beijing, the Three Self Movement quickly spread among Protestant Christians throughout the country as “Learning Meetings” were held in various other cities. See Patterson, 82–99 for more information on the beginnings of the TSPM in China.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>99</sup> Aikman, 154; Patterson, 89.

The purpose of this document was to reinstate the mission of the TSPM, and to bring special attention to the fact that “the movement had no intention of changing Christian doctrine.”<sup>100</sup> It states that,

The purpose of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement is to unite Christians throughout the country in order to promote the thoroughgoing realization of self-government, self-support and self-propagation in the Chinese church, to take an active part in opposing imperialism, supporting patriotism and safeguarding world peace. We know that the goal of self-government is not the unification or modification of the organization of each church, but that each church cut off all relations with imperialism and to have Chinese Christians ourselves unite to govern the church. The goal of self-support is not to interfere with the finances of any church, but to have each church cut off all economic ties with imperialism and become a church that is entirely the responsibility of Chinese Christians. The goal of self-propagation is not the unification or modification of belief, but the thoroughgoing eradication of vestiges of imperialist thought, and the bringing of preaching into harmony with the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. We should have mutual respect for the differences that exist among the churches in creed, organization and ritual.<sup>101</sup>

Although the TSPM leaders had officially stated that they did not desire “the unification or modification of belief” among the various branches of Chinese Protestant Christianity, that very same year the head of the RAB reportedly stated that the intentions of the Bureau were to eradicate denominational differences among Chinese Protestant Churches by infusing Marxist-Leninist thought into Protestant theology.<sup>102</sup> In *Christianity*

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<sup>100</sup> Wickeri, 151.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Although George N. Patterson states that Ho Zhengxiang (Ho Cheng-hsiang) made these statements “after the Second National Conference on Religious Work was held in Peking in 1954” (Patterson, 12), he does not offer specific dates for the conference; it is unclear whether this meeting took place before or after the National Christian Conference. With the exception of David Aikman (who quotes Patterson himself), no other author mentions Ho’s “new directive” to the RAB during the Second National Council on Religious Works.

*in Communist China*, George N. Patterson quotes RAB director Ho Zhengxiang (Ho Cheng-hsiang) as stating that,

The positive values of patriotism should take the place of negative religious propaganda. We Communists can accept as reasonable certain parts of the Bible which Christians use, but we must also pay attention to the doctrines that they preach. If we infuse those doctrines with our Marxist-Leninist thought, then they will have a positive significance and can serve our cause.<sup>103</sup>

The “reasonable” parts of the Bible, according to Ho, included passages, such as the Ten Commandments, that could be used to “advocate peace and philanthropy.”<sup>104</sup> Ho made it clear, however, that preaching from parts of the Bible that speak of “supernatural” occurrences such as the Second Coming of Christ, were to be prohibited. Patterson again quotes Ho,

We must oppose sermons on supernatural things, especially subjects like “the Last Judgment” in Catholicism and “Jesus will come again” and “Doomsday” in Protestantism. We must promote propaganda of world peace, patriotism, love of the people, and support for the realistic world.<sup>105</sup>

Although many Christians viewed the TSPM as a sort of “common ground between Christianity and Communism,” Wang Mingdao, Watchman Nee, and other conservative preachers not only refused to join the TSPM, but openly spoke out against it during the early years of the Movement.<sup>106</sup> The issue at hand, they asserted, was not a political disagreement, but purely a theological one. In his famous declaration against the TSPM, “We, Because of Faith,” Wang Mingdao outlines his disagreements with the Movement. As David Aikman notes,

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 11–2.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Yeo, 157.

The pamphlet spends no time at all on political issues, above all on the “patriotic” and “anti-imperialist” themes being drummed up constantly by the Three Self. Instead, Wang argues from the outset that the contention between him and the Three Self leadership is purely over the Christian faith itself. To be fair to his opponents, he quotes them verbatim at considerable length, and then rebuts their arguments.<sup>107</sup>

Wang’s “opponents” had publicly accused him of “counterrevolutionary activities,”<sup>108</sup> yet he made it clear that his refusal to align himself with the TSPM was completely unrelated to politics. For Wang and many other Protestant leaders during the early years of the Three Self, the decision to not join the TSPM was not necessarily based on a negative view of the Communist ideology in particular, but rather on the view that matters of religion should not be regulated by any government agency, but only by Christians themselves. Just as Wang and other preachers who refused to join the Three Self immediately suffered punishments for their “illegal” religious activities, many Christians who did join the TSPM, including Three Self officials and pastors, were also “maliciously mistreated” as even the official churches were closed at the height of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>109</sup>

Since the 1980s, however, a number of Three Self churches have been reopened;<sup>110</sup> and now, according to the 1982 Chinese constitution, “Citizens of the PRC enjoy freedom of religious belief.”<sup>111</sup> The constitution continues:

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<sup>107</sup> Aikman, 156.

<sup>108</sup> By this time, at least one “accusation meeting” had already been held against Wang (Patterson, 114-6). Other like-minded preachers throughout the country had already been arrested for similar opposition to the TSPM; these include Watchman Nee, who was arrested in 1952 (Ibid., 119).

<sup>109</sup> Aikman, 162.

<sup>110</sup> After the Cultural Revolution, “a limited number of Protestant and Catholic Churches, Buddhist and Daoist temples, and Islamic mosques have reopened for religious services” (Fenggang Yang, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006), 102.)

<sup>111</sup> Aikman, 227.

In China, every citizen enjoys the freedom to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion. Within a religion, every Chinese citizen has the freedom to believe in any denomination or division. Each citizen has the freedom to adopt or reject a religious belief.

This means that believing in or not believing in religion is a citizen's personal affair, and no state organ, public organization, or individual may put pressure on any citizen in this regard.<sup>112</sup>

Although this text claims that citizens of the PRC are guaranteed religious freedom, “the figurative small print” is, as Aikman refers to it, the fact that this freedom only applies to “normal religious activities.” The PRC constitution states, “All normal religious activities held at special sites for religious activities or in believers’ homes according to religious custom shall be managed by religious organizations and believers, and shall be protected by law.”<sup>113</sup> The phrase “normal religious activities,” however, has never been clearly defined in writing. In practice, it appears that any religious activity that takes place outside of the direct jurisdiction of the Religious Affairs Bureau (through religious organizations such as the TSPM for Protestantism, the CPA for Catholicism, etc.) is not included within this category. The most important discrepancy for many Chinese Protestants is the fact that any form of Christian evangelism that occurs outside of government-specified sites does not fall under the protection of “normal religious activities.”<sup>114</sup> As Yang observes, “no proselytizing is allowed outside religious premises,” but “the urge to proselytize is difficult to suppress.”<sup>115</sup> Today, many Protestant Christians in China would be considered “evangelical” due to the fact that they place a great deal of emphasis on the belief that preaching the Gospel to others is the responsibility of all Christians. Unfortunately for Evangelicals in China, what they see as a *responsibility* is

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<sup>112</sup> An English translation of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China can be found at the official website of the Chinese government: [http://english.gov.cn/2005-08/05/content\\_20813.htm](http://english.gov.cn/2005-08/05/content_20813.htm).

<sup>113</sup> Aikman, 228.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, pp. 238–239.

<sup>115</sup> Yang, 109.

not granted to them as a *right*. The fact that, within Three Self churches, the Communist government is ultimately in control of *who* may preach the Gospel (only those who have been ordained by the TSPM after graduating from state-run seminaries), *where* they may preach (only on the grounds of state-approved churches and only within government-assigned districts), and also *to whom* they may preach (only to adults over the age of eighteen) is often cited as the main reason why many Protestants refuse to join the TSPM. In November 1998, a group of house church leaders met and drafted the “Confession of Faith of House Churches in China” on behalf of all unregistered Chinese Protestants.<sup>116</sup> If recent estimates are accurate, then the number of Chinese Christians in unregistered Protestant churches may be as many as fifty million—more than double the twenty million who attend Three Self churches.<sup>117</sup> The Confession of Faith was written on behalf of, quite possibly, a very large majority of Protestants in China; and was personally signed by the leaders of four large house church groups.<sup>118</sup> An additional statement

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<sup>116</sup> An English translation by Jonathan Chao is included in Aikman’s *Jesus in Beijing* as Appendix B (Aikman, 295–307). The Chinese text can be found at [http://www.chinaforjesus.com/StatementOfFaith\\_Ch.htm](http://www.chinaforjesus.com/StatementOfFaith_Ch.htm).

<sup>117</sup> Robert Marquand, “China Opens Door to Christianity—of a Patriotic Sort.” *Christian Science Monitor* (March 8, 2004). Others have argued that estimates such as this one are inflated, and that the actual number of Christians in China is much lower. In *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Paul Freston cites Alan Hunter’s and Kim-Kwong Chan’s *Protestantism in Contemporary China*:

Christianity in China is the subject of wild speculation. The official church claims five million registered believers and few unregistered. Some overseas evangelical sources talk of fifty or a hundred million. This is unlikely; inflated figures plague in-house estimates of evangelicalism in many countries. Hunter and Chan think a judicious estimate would be twenty million, mostly Protestant, making it even so one of the largest Protestant communities in the world (Freston, 102).

What Freston fails to mention, however, is that Hunter and Chan made this estimate in 1993—eleven years prior to his own study—and the actual numbers may, therefore, be much higher.

<sup>118</sup> The four signatures on the confession of faith are:

Shen Yi-Ping (申仪平), representing China Evangelistic Fellowship

Zhang Rongliang (张荣亮), representing the Mother Church in Fangcheng, China

Cheng Xianqi (郑献起), representing the church in Fuyang, China

Wang Junlu (王君侣), representing one of the other house churches in China

regarding their views on the government of the PRC, its religious policies, and the TSPM in particular was also written during this meeting.<sup>119</sup>

Within Section VI of the confession of faith, the authors clarify their view that “the church” is not necessarily the organization that has been officially recognized by the Chinese government, but rather is made up of “all whom God has called together in Jesus Christ.”<sup>120</sup> Their beliefs on the duties of the church are outlined in this section:

The missions of the church are: proclamation of the Gospel, teaching and pastoring the believers, training and sending them, and defending the truth by refuting heresies and bringing them to the correct path. ... All believers are priests, and they all have the authority and responsibility to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth.<sup>121</sup>

This belief that all Christians should be allowed—and actually have a religious responsibility—to “preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth” is one of the main responses from the house church leaders when asked why they do not register with the government and why they do not join the TSPM. In the additional statement that was also drafted during this meeting, the authors attempt to answer these questions on behalf of all underground church members in China. In Section II of this statement, a five-fold answer is outlined as a response to the question “Why do we not register [with the government]?” The first two parts of this answer deal specifically with the issue of evangelism. The authors state that the governmental ordinances and regulations concerning evangelistic activity such as the “three-designates” policy are “contrary to the

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<sup>119</sup> A translation of the statement entitled “Attitude of Chinese House Churches Toward the Government, Its Religious Policy, and the Three Self Movement” (also by Jonathan Chao) is included within Appendix B of Aikman’s *Jesus in Beijing*. Although the names of individual leaders are included as the signatures on the confession of faith, this second statement is simply signed “By the representatives of the House Churches in China” (Aikman, 307).

<sup>120</sup> Aikman, 300.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

principles of the Scripture.”<sup>122</sup> Their views on the “three-designates” policy are as follows:

- a. Designated location: only in registered places we are allowed to conduct religious activities, otherwise such activities are considered illegal religious activities. But the Scriptures tell us that we meet anywhere and that so long as we meet in the name of the Lord, He will be with us.
- b. Designated personnel: only those who have been issued preaching licenses by the Religious Affairs Bureau are allowed to preach. But according to the teachings of Scriptures, so long as preachers are called by the Lord, recognized and sent by the church, they may preach.
- c. Designated sphere: preachers are limited to preach only within the district for which they are assigned; they may not preach across villages or across the provinces. But the Bible teaches us to preach the Gospel to all the Peoples and throughout the ends of the earth, and to establish churches.<sup>123</sup>

These regulations concerning who may preach and where they may preach are, according to the house church leaders, in obvious conflict with their personal religious belief that the Gospel must be preached by all Christians “to the ends of the earth.” The second part of this five-fold answer deals with yet another issue concerning the restrictions on proselytizing: to whom one may preach. According to the authors, even if a preacher were to meet all of the requirements of the “three designates” policy (i.e. he possessed an RAB-issued license to preach and was on the property of a registered church within his own government-assigned district) it would still be illegal for him to preach to a minor.

[T]he state policy does not allow us to preach the Gospel to those under 18, or to lead them to Christ and be baptized. But Jesus said, “Let the children come unto

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 303-4.

me and forbid them not.” Therefore, those under 18 should also have the opportunity to hear, and to believe in, the Gospel.<sup>124</sup>

In addition to their objections to the lack of freedom to preach the Gospel, the authors also find contention with state policies that do not allow Christians to pray for supernatural healings, to “receive fellow believers from afar,” nor to have contact with foreign Christian organizations.<sup>125</sup> Despite the fact that the majority of this statement is a declaration of their refusal to register with the Chinese government and the RAB, the authors also hope to clarify that they are not opposed to the PRC government per se; they simply object to any secular body controlling matters of religion.<sup>126</sup> By offering a detailed explanation of why they refuse to register with the RAB, the authors hope to dispel any notion that Protestants who refuse to register with the government are less patriotic or less “Chinese” than those who do register. In Section I of the statement, they write,

1. We love the Lord, the Chinese people, and the state; we support the unity of the peoples.
2. We support the constitution of the People’s Republic of China and the leaders and the government of the people that God established.
3. Even though we are often misunderstood and persecuted by the government, yet we do not show a reactionary attitude, nor have we taken any reactionary action.
4. We have never betrayed the interest of the Chinese people; we only do what is beneficial to the people.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Unlike the Catholic underground church movement, which has been described as openly anti-Communist due to its close ties to the Vatican, the underground Protestant church does not openly protest the Communist government.

<sup>127</sup> Aikman, 303.

Throughout this statement, the authors are careful to clarify that they will “obey the state when such obedience is in accordance with the Scriptures,”<sup>128</sup> but that their religious views dictate that they must always choose obedience to God when the demands of state and the demands of Scripture are in conflict—especially when “the great commission on preaching the Gospel and plant[ing] churches” is concerned.<sup>129</sup>

It is tempting to assume that, because the majority of Protestants who refuse to join the TSPM do so out of a conviction that the church must be evangelical, there must be an absence of Evangelicals within the Three Self churches. This, however, is simply not true. In case studies of individual Three Self churches, some authors have stated that, aside from the name, there is actually very little to distinguish these churches from evangelical churches in other parts of mainland China or Hong Kong.<sup>130</sup> Although the Communist government is ultimately at the head of TSPM-run churches, many of these churches are in the immediate control of pastors and preachers who are surprisingly evangelical in their theology. Gangwashi Church, one of the four “open” churches in Beijing, for example, has been described as being, “firmly, almost defiantly evangelical.”<sup>131</sup> One American who regularly attended Gangwashi while living in Beijing has said that the senior pastor often urged the congregation to, “pray that everyone in Beijing knows Jesus and that Jesus will be known in the whole country and that China will be a country from which the Gospel is spreading to the rest of the world.”<sup>132</sup> Although there are such reports of Three Self pastors who openly preach evangelical messages, there are also reports of other preachers, like the pastor of Beijing’s Chongwenmen church, who have been removed from their positions for being “too evangelical.”<sup>133</sup> If, as Aikman asserts, “a Christian community that is vibrant with growth

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>130</sup> Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 185.

<sup>131</sup> Aikman, 137.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 137-8.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 137.

and enthusiasm is still deeply threatening to some Three Self officials and the Religious Affairs Bureau apparatchiks,”<sup>134</sup> one may wonder how so many evangelicals can openly exist within TSPM churches. One possible answer to this question may be found in Paul Freston’s study of evangelicalism and politics in China. Within this study, he asserts that the official and unofficial Protestant churches are actually more closely connected than one might assume. Freston argues that the relationship between the Three Self churches and the government is actually dependent upon the relationship between the house churches and the government, and vice versa. He writes,

[E]vangelicals and politics in China include the dynamic and fuzzy relationship between the TSPM, whose authority is based on state power, and the house churches. Rhetoric apart, the official and house churches live a symbiotic relationship. Neither would be what it is and able to do what it does if the other did not exist. Existence of house churches, and the possibility that tighter repression might backfire by making more believers go underground, means the TSPM has a greater margin of manoeuvre *vis-à-vis* the government than it would otherwise. And the TSPM’s existence gains concessions for believers that house churches alone would not obtain.<sup>135</sup>

By restricting evangelicalism within the official church, it seems the Chinese government may actually drive Evangelicals within the TSPM to go underground. Freston asserts that PRC officials are acutely aware of this possibility and, as a result, are often more tolerant of evangelical preachers than they would be otherwise. It has often been speculated that the growth of underground Christianity in China can be directly linked to governmental persecution. Members of house churches that suffer arrests and other hardships often view such persecution as a form of martyrdom; as a result, they are actually more zealous to openly preach the Gospel and to make converts.<sup>136</sup> As the 1998

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Freston, 104–5.

<sup>136</sup> According to the views expressed in an article from *The Washington Post*, governmental repression “actually has encouraged many house church worshipers, who see those arrested as suffering a

statement that accompanied the Confession of Faith of House Churches shows, members of unofficial church movements refer to being “willing to pay the necessary price” of obedience to God in the face of persecution as “walking the pathway of the cross.”<sup>137</sup> The authors of this statement also proclaim to the government that, “although persecuted, the number of believers has increased rapidly—a force that cannot be resisted.”<sup>138</sup> Although they seem to be stating that the church is growing in spite of persecution, the government seems increasingly aware of the fact that much of this growth actually occurs, not *in spite* of persecution, but *because* of it. It seems that, during the past few years, the government has tended to lessen its restrictions on Three Self churches in order accommodate an increasing interest in Christianity. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in June 2005, the government has recently called for the building of more official churches and has even allowed minors to participate in some religious activities. According to the article,

With Christianity spreading, China is trying to broaden the appeal of the state churches it has long used to monitor worshipers. An aggressive campaign to build more state churches is under way. Last year, Beijing broke ground on two churches, the first to be erected in the capital in 50 years. The government ban on worship by children and teenagers is being relaxed.<sup>139</sup>

Although the loosening of restrictions on worship and preaching within Three Self churches seems surprising, it is actually quite logical. As long as Christians remain within the state church, their religious activity can be monitored. If they are driven outside of the official church groups, however, the government will no longer have control over their religious activity. Yet, for many Christians in China, the loosening of governmental restriction within TSPM-led churches is still not enough; and many continue to “shun

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kind of martyrdom equivalent to that of early Christians.” (Joshua Kurlantzick, “Chinese Christians Are a Force—But What Kind?,” *The Washington Post*, November 28, 2004.)

<sup>137</sup> Aikman, 306.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>139</sup> Charles Hutzler, “Business Mission: Mixing Religion and Noodles Lands Ms. Su in Hot Water,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2005.

state churches, which they say preach too liberal a theology and obey a state ban on proselytizing.”<sup>140</sup>

The Protestant faith in contemporary China, it seems, is marked by a number of ironies. In its attempt to create a truly indigenous form of Protestant Christianity, the Chinese government has strived to implement a state church that meets the so-called Three Self ideals—self-support, self-propagation, and self-governing. Ironically, however this very concept of the Three Self ideals is distinctly foreign: two Westerners—Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson—created it without ever so much as setting foot in China. Although the Three Self Patriotic Movement derives its name from this concept, one could argue that churches within the TSPM do not actually meet the goals of self-support, self-propagation, and self-governing because the churches themselves are in reality state-supported, state-governed, and can only propagate with the state’s permission. In fact, Religious Affairs Bureau officials—who are members of the Communist Party, “and thus are not permitted to adhere to any religion”—are the ones who are ultimately in charge of the Three Self churches.<sup>141</sup> Although there are a number of Protestant churches that do actually meet these goals—such as those that were started by Wang Mingdao and Watchman Nee—these groups have historically refused to join the TSPM; and have, as a result, been persecuted by the government. Among the many Chinese Protestants who refuse to join the TSPM, the majority of these do so out of the conviction that the RAB’s restrictions on evangelism and Evangelical theology conflict with Christians’ religious obligation to openly preach the Gospel; yet, a large number of Evangelicals can be found even within the TSPM. In fact, although there still remains some persecution of Evangelicals within the official church—such as the removal of any pastors who RAB officials consider “too Evangelical”—the Chinese government has recently become increasingly tolerant of Evangelicals within Three Self churches in an attempt to keep them from joining the underground church movement, which actually appears to flourish in times of persecution.

The Chinese government’s desire to control religious expression to ensure that adherence to a particular religion does not undermine the authority of the Communist

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Aikman, 175–6.

party in the lives of the citizens of the PRC can be seen throughout modern China. In the following chapter, methods of evangelism within a very specific part of China—the Tibetan Autonomous Region—will be examined. Although there is a significant indigenous Christian population among the Han Chinese majority, Christianity has never taken root among the Tibetan minority. Although Chinese Christians themselves are responsible for a majority of evangelism in other parts of China, evangelism in modern Tibet is carried on almost entirely by Western foreigners. Although Christian missions have been attempted among the Tibetan people for nearly one thousand years, very little is known about the current state of Christianity in Tibet. This chapter will examine the methods that missionaries in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China are currently employing as they themselves seek to understand why Tibet has traditionally resisted the Gospel.

## CHAPTER 3

### IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED: MODERN APPROACHES TO CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN THE TIBETAN AUTONOMOUS REGION IN LIGHT OF HISTORICAL MISSIONS TO TIBET

For centuries, the Tibetan Buddhist world has existed in the minds of many Westerners as a far-off place shrouded in mystery—the forbidden land of Shangri-La. Travelers' accounts of a culture in which the mundane and the miraculous, the ordinary and the otherworldly, the daily and the divine all blend together have sparked in the Western imagination images of a dreamlike world that is completely different from our own. This image of Tibet—a place of enchantment inhabited by an equally magical people—has captivated the minds of generations of Westerners. This same sense of the inherent “otherness” of Tibetans and of their religion that has attracted so many Westerners has, in a sense, led to a reversed fascination with the culture among Christian missionaries.<sup>142</sup> Just as generations of explorers have bravely attempted to reach the forbidden Land of Snows, a number of missionaries have also sought to penetrate the Tibetan Buddhist world in an effort to bring the Gospel “to the ends of the earth.” In fact, for many Christian groups, Tibet has been described as one of the last “frontiers” to be evangelized before Jesus returns.

Although some speculate that Christianity may have entered the Tibetan Buddhist world as early as the seventh century, and a number of different Catholic and Protestant missions have been established in Tibet since the seventeenth century,<sup>143</sup> the fact remains

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<sup>142</sup> In *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), Donald Lopez offers a detailed look at the history of Western interpretations of Tibet. In “Divine Grace and the Play of Opposites” (*Buddhist-Christian Studies*, forthcoming), Trent Pomplun examines Lopez’s treatment of Catholic missionaries’ historical interpretations of Tibet, correcting what he sees as Lopez’s “unfortunate misleading presentation of Christian theology.”

<sup>143</sup> Throughout history, various interpretations of the term “Tibet” have been offered. Many explorers, missionaries, and scholars have struggled to pinpoint which geographic areas ought to be included when referencing Tibet. Throughout this chapter, it should be noted, all references to “Tibet” include not only the present day Tibetan Autonomous Region (T.A.R.) of the Peoples’ Republic of China (P.R.C.) or the Lhasa-dominated area of Central Tibet (*Dbus-gtsang*), but any area in which Tibetan Buddhism plays or has played a dominant role in the culture (this includes areas in China, Ladakh, Nepal, India, etc.). Due to the fact that the borders of Tibet have shifted throughout history, a historical study of

that very few Christian converts have ever been made from among Tibetan Buddhists. Although in many other areas of Asia Christian converts admittedly make up only a small minority, Christians in Tibet seem to be almost non-existent. For many modern-day Evangelicals, the belief that the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be preached to people in every culture and that Christians must come from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation”<sup>144</sup> has resulted in an intense determination to make converts among people groups that have traditionally been resistant to the message of Christianity. Despite the centuries of seemingly fruitless labor in Tibet, many missionaries remain encouraged that the Christian faith will one day be able to penetrate this land, described as “the heart of darkness.”<sup>145</sup> The question that continues to plague the minds of many of these evangelists is, of course, why Christianity does not yet appear to have taken root in the Land of Snows. In order to contextualize the state of Christian missions in the present-day Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, this chapter will begin with an outline of the historical attempts to bring the Gospel to Tibet. Then, attention will be given to various methods of evangelism that are being utilized in the present by those who wish to reconcile the failures of past attempts with their own hopes for the future of Christianity in Tibet.

While most studies of Christianity in Tibet begin with the establishment of Catholic missions in the seventeenth century, it has been speculated that Christian missionaries may have actually begun work among Tibetan-speaking peoples up to one thousand years earlier. According to at least one source, Nestorian Christians may very well have spread their faith not only into China and Mongolia, but also within “the northernmost parts of Tibet” by the seventh century.<sup>146</sup> Another often-ignored event in

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Christian missions in “Tibet” simply cannot be confined to a certain geographic area. Within my research on modern missionary activity in Tibet, however, I have deliberately chosen to place an emphasis upon Christian missionary work that is currently being conducted within the borders of the T.A.R. of China.

<sup>144</sup> Rev. 5:9; 14:6 (NASB).

<sup>145</sup> Carla Brewington, “The Lion of Judah on the Move in Tibet: Intercessors Plowing Up the Ground in the Heart of Darkness,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* Vol. 12 No. 1 (Jan.–Feb. 2005), 21.

<sup>146</sup> Marku Tsering, *Sharing Christ in the Tibetan Buddhist World*, 2nd ed. (Upper Darby, PA: Interserve USA for Tibet Press, 1997), 66–7. It is important to note that the author does not specify which geographical areas actually constituted “the northernmost parts of Tibet” during this time period.

the history of Christian missions among Tibetan Buddhists reportedly occurred in 1266. According to legend, nearly ten years before Marco Polo's famous journey, his father and uncle had already reached the court of Kublai Khan and were sent back to Europe with a request from the for the Pope to send one hundred Catholic missionaries to his court.<sup>147</sup> The historical accuracy of this request for "an hundred persons of our Christian faith ... able clearly to prove by force of argument to idolaters and other kinds of folk that the Law of Christ was best, and that all other religions were false and naught," along with a promise from Kublai Khan that, "if they would prove this, [the Kahn] and all under him would become Christians and the Church's liegemen"<sup>148</sup> is highly unlikely; however the existence of such a legend does at least suggest that European Christians may have seriously desired to evangelize this area of the world as early as the thirteenth century. In addition, while there is even a possibility that this story did not come about until much later, it nonetheless serves to portray the belief of European missionaries that a large area of the world in which Tibetan Buddhism became the dominant religion could have—and even *should* have, according to this account—been permeated by Christianity instead.

In the centuries that followed, a number of individual Catholic priests set out with the hopes of bringing Christianity to Tibet. By the sixteenth century, missionaries from the Society of Jesus had already established missions in China and India and began to search for ways to bring the Gospel to Tibet as well. Although it is clear that many others before him had desired to bring the message of Christianity to the Tibetan people, it was not until 1624 that Antonio de Andrade became the first Western missionary "to have really penetrated Tibet."<sup>149</sup> The harsh climate of the Himālayas was not the only source

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<sup>147</sup> According to legend, the Khan sent his request through Niccolo and Maffeo Polo in 1266. Upon their return to Europe three years later, however, the Polo brothers learned that the Pope, Clement IV had been dead for a year and a successor had still not been chosen. By the time a new Pope was finally appointed three years later, only two missionaries were found who were willing to make the journey. These two men set out with the Polos (including Niccolo's son Marco) in 1272, yet they eventually turned back in fear and "Kublai Khan never received his hundred missionaries." It is around this time that Tibetan Buddhism became the dominant religion within Kublai Khan's court. (For more details on this story, along with speculations on its historical accuracy, see cf. Tsering, *Sharing Christ*, 67–69; 92 n. 7.)

<sup>148</sup> Tsering, *Sharing Christ*, 67.

<sup>149</sup> Jeanne Mascolo de Filippis, "The Western Discovery of Tibet," in *Lhasa in the Seventeenth Century: The Capital of the Dalai Lamas*, ed. Françoise Pommaret, trans. Howard Solverson (Lieden: Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, Vol. 3, 2003), 4. For a very long time, it was actually believed that Ordoric Da Pordenone, a Franciscan Father, was the first Westerner to reach Lhasa shortly after setting out from

of opposition against this Portuguese Jesuit during his journey from India to Tibet; at one point, de Andrade was forced to disguise himself as a Hindu pilgrim in order to outwit “hostile local officials” who wished to put an end to his voyage.<sup>150</sup> The missionary did eventually make it through the perilous journey and, in the city of Tsaparang, he received a royal welcome from the king and queen of Gugé—an independent kingdom that was, at the time, “just as important as those of Central Tibet.”<sup>151</sup> The king of Gugé showed an interest in Catholicism and even gave de Andrade permission to return and establish a mission within his kingdom. When de Andrade and four companions returned the following year, the king requested instruction in Catholic doctrine, and personally laid the cornerstone of the church that Antonio de Andrade and the other missionaries established—“the first Christian church in Tibet.”<sup>152</sup> According to de Andrade’s own accounts, although the king himself warmly received the missionaries, there was an obvious opposition from many of the religious officials in the area. By 1630, Antonio de Andrade himself was re-stationed in India. It was during this turbulent time, as various kingdoms and religious sects were struggling for power in Tibet, that a revolution was incited within the city of Tsaparang by lamas who were “alarmed at their king’s interest in the new religion.”<sup>153</sup> By the time de Andrade learned of the troubles in Tsaparang the following year, he sent two other priests to see if the mission could be saved. Unfortunately, the priests were unable to receive the political help that they needed in order to preserve the work in Tsaparang.<sup>154</sup> By 1635, just eleven years after Antonio de Andrade’s journey had begun, the mission had completely collapsed.

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Europe in 1318. Most historians, however, believe that Ordoric Da Pordenone actually reached Khotan and not Lhasa; his descriptions of Lhasa were most likely based on stories that he heard from people in neighboring areas (de Filippis, 3).

<sup>150</sup> Tsering, *Sharing Christ*, 75.

<sup>151</sup> de Filippis, 4.

<sup>152</sup> Tsering *Sharing Christ*, 75.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> After being sent by de Andrade to assess the political situation in Tsaparang, Fathers Francisco de Azevedo and John de Oliveira attempted to enlist the help of the king of Ladakh. Although the king showed great kindness to the two priests, and even gave them permission to preach within Ladakh, he was unable to intervene in the political situation in Gugé (*Ibid.*, 75).

Shortly after de Andrade's work began in Tsaparang, two other Portuguese Jesuits were attempting to start their own mission in a nearby region. Fathers Cacella and Cabral reached Tashilunpo monastery in the town of Shigatse during the winter of 1627–1628. They had previously spent eight months in Bhutan, where they had even received a royal invitation to stay and establish a church. Although the two priests appreciated the offer, they maintained that their goal was to enter Tibet, and continued on their journey instead. Although they did indeed reach Shigatse, Cacella died suddenly in 1630, and whatever hopes they had had to establish a mission within Tibet were never fulfilled.<sup>155</sup> Although Cacella and Cabral had come relatively close, Western missionaries were not ever able to actually reach the city of Lhasa until some thirty years later. On October 8, 1661, two Jesuit missionaries became the first Europeans to enter the city. Fathers Grueber and d'Orville (from Austria and Belgium, respectively) had been stationed as missionaries in China; the two men decided to journey towards India after "finding themselves unable to return to Europe by sea."<sup>156</sup> Their personal accounts of the time that they spent in Lhasa—a period that lasted just over two months—are regarded as the first real information on the fifth Dalai Lama and his kingdom.<sup>157</sup> Their journey is of great historical significance in that respect; however, since they were simply passing through the area without attempting to establish a mission, there is not much to say about the journey's affect on the history of Christian missions in the area. The city of Lhasa was not specifically targeted as the focal point of a missionary attempt until about fifty years later.

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<sup>155</sup> de Filippis, 5.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> By this time, Lhasa had only existed as the capital of Tibet for about a decade. In 1642, the Gelukpa sect, headed by the Dalai Lama, came to political power. It was not until 1649, however, that the newly appointed "King of Tibet" and his government were officially situated in the Potala Palace. See Samtem G. Karmay, "The Fifth Dalai Lama and His Reunification of Tibet," in *Lhasa in the Seventeenth Century: The Capital of the Dalai Lamas*, ed. Françoise Pommaret, trans. Howard Solverson (Lieden: Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, Vol. 3, 2003), 72–3.

According to de Filippis, "[Father Grueber's] account has the distinctive feature of mentioning for the first time the name of the Dalai Lama and the Potala Palace" (de Filippis, 5). This is not surprising, however, because the fifth Dalai Lama was the first Dalai Lama to exert political as well as religious power. As Karmay writes, "The year 1642 was a crucial year and marked a turning point in Tibetan history because, for the first time, a Dalai Lama, previously merely the abbot of a monastery and leader of one religious school among several others, became the head of the country" (Karmay, 72).

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, both the Jesuits and the Capuchins had set their sights on Lhasa. In 1716, the Capuchin Father Orazio Della Penna arrived in Lhasa; that same year, the Jesuit Fathers Emmanuel Freyre and Ippolito Desideri also arrived in the city. Each order had, unbeknownst to the other, sent missionaries at the same time; this led to disputes between the Capuchins and the Jesuits over which group actually had the right to establish a mission in the area. Although the missionaries themselves were not thrilled about “this forced cohabitation within the same mission,” Della Penna and Desideri developed a deep respect for one another and embarked upon their study of the Tibetan language together.<sup>158</sup> For each of these men, the goal was the same: “to convert the population, not by ridiculing the Buddhist theories of the high lamas, but by disproving them.”<sup>159</sup> Both were given rooms at Sera monastery, where they continued their study of the language and engaged in philosophical debates with the monks. Each of these men displayed an extreme dedication to their study of Tibetan and their mission to present the Gospel in a way that Tibetan monks could understand. Desideri’s works in particular, and the account of his travels, which he wrote upon his return to Rome, have been praised as works of genius.<sup>160</sup> During his short time in Lhasa—just five years—Desideri wrote a total of five works of Christian theology in the Tibetan language and participated in countless philosophical debates in the Tibetan monastic style. Marku Tsering, a missionary who has worked among Tibetans, describes Desideri’s work from a Christian point of view:

Before leaving Rome, Desideri had been trained in medieval Scholastic theology, which attempted to rationally justify the Christian faith using philosophical methods very similar to those used by the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. As

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<sup>158</sup> de Filippis, 6.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Although Desideri wrote a personal account of his travels shortly after returning to Rome in 1721, his work was not actually published until 1904. Many have speculated that the Catholic Church was hesitant to publish the work because it revealed the tensions that existed between the Jesuits and the Capuchins at the time.

An English translation of Desideri’s account has been published by J. Jetley for Asian Educational Services. See Ippolito Desideri, *An Account of Tibet: The Travels of Ippolito Desideri 1712–1727*, ed. Filippo de Filippi, Ed. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995).

a result, he was able to write five major works on Christian theology in Tibetan, in a style that monks and lamas were used to reading. In these books he critically examined Tibetan Buddhist ideas and set forth Christian alternatives. His command of Tibetan scholastic idiom was so great that monks crowded his rooms day and night, eager to read his works and debate with him.<sup>161</sup>

Desideri's genius, which would later be recognized by both Christian and secular historians, was unfortunately overlooked by the Catholic Church at this time. By 1719, administrators in Rome decided that missionary work in Lhasa ought to be carried out by the Capuchins; in 1721, Ippolito Desideri was forced to leave Tibet. This was, according to Tsering, one of the greatest tragedies in the history of Christian missions in Tibet. He writes,

[Desideri] had accomplished a great deal in five years, and was probably one of the most able representatives of the Christian faith ever to set foot in Tibet. His brilliant approach to explaining the Christian faith to Tibetan monks using the tools of medieval Scholasticism was a stroke of genius, one that deserves to be adapted and developed by a modern author. His withdrawal from the field for merely administrative reasons ... leaves one with an aching sense of "what if ...?"<sup>162</sup>

After Desideri's return to Rome, the Capuchin mission continued in the area, even building a chapel in 1726. Della Penna himself left in 1732 as other Capuchins carried on the mission. By the spring of 1742, nearly ninety people, including twenty-seven baptized converts, reportedly attended the Catholic services regularly.<sup>163</sup> However, political pressures from outside of Lhasa and religious friction from Tibetan monasteries within the city led to an ever-increasing hostility towards Westerners in general and the

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<sup>161</sup> Tsering *Sharing Christ*, 77.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

Capuchin missionaries in particular. The Manchus, who were struggling for control of the area during this time period, continually “urged the monks not to trust Western foreigners.”<sup>164</sup> This suspicion of the foreign missionaries was confirmed in the minds of many Tibetan Buddhist clergy members after a significant number of lay Tibetans began to convert to Christianity. By the spring of 1742, the actions of some of the recent converts angered many of the Tibetan monastic officials, and “the mission came to a catastrophic end.”<sup>165</sup>

In an incident at the end of April, one of the new converts, a man named Pu Tsering, publicly refused to bow down before the Dalai Lama. The general consternation over this had barely subsided when only days later another convert openly refused to recite a mantra. That same evening an angry crowd of 400 lamas threatened the Regent with a revolt if the Christians were not expelled from the city. A trial followed during which twelve of the Christians were sentenced to be flogged with twenty lashes each—fifty lashes was considered a death sentence. Though the believers endured this punishment with great fortitude, the fathers were forced to close their mission and withdraw to Nepal. They were hardly out of the city when a mob attacked and destroyed their chapel, of which nothing now remains but the bell.<sup>166</sup>

During this time period, all of the missions that had been started in Tibet were forced to close one by one, as “Lhasa gradually withdrew into itself.”<sup>167</sup> Although the small number of converts that had been left in Lhasa after the Capuchins left reportedly sent to Rome in 1769 asking that a priest be sent to them, their request apparently went unfilled and “nothing more was ever heard of the tiny group of believers.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> de Filippis, 7.

<sup>165</sup> Tsering, *Sharing Christ*, 78.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> de Filippis, 7.

<sup>168</sup> Tsering, *Sharing Christ*, 79.

For fifty years, no other missionaries attempted to reach the Tibetan Buddhist world. Then, in 1797, a visit to Bhutan by the Protestant missionary William Carey resulted in a new interest in Tibetan culture.<sup>169</sup> Although Carey never received permission to start a mission in Bhutan, he left with a fascination for the Tibetan language and culture. Carey's work on a Tibetan-English dictionary, which would be published in 1826, brought the Tibetan Buddhist world into view for many Western Protestants. This surge in interest led to the subsequent establishment of various missions along the Tibetan borders. Along the Indo-Tibetan border, a number of missionary societies—sent from churches in Germany, Scotland, America, and France—began to establish bases. Perhaps the greatest contributions during this time came from the Moravians, who began their work among Tibetans in North India in 1853 and later established a mission in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, in 1885. To this day, a Ladakhi Christian community survives as a testament to the Moravians' dedication. Although Christians admittedly make up only a very small minority among Ladakhis—the community was numbered at about 250 people in 1993, the tradition appears to have taken root in this area. As John Bray has pointed out, the number of converts has historically been small among Ladakhis simply because many equated Christianity with foreignness “and conversion as a betrayal.” He writes,

One of the main reasons for its small size has been the intense social pressure put on would-be converts. In Poo and Kyelang—and at first in Leh—Christians were believed to be ritually unclean and were not allowed to eat with Buddhists or enter their houses for fear that the *pha-lha* (household god) would object. Many would-be converts were in debt either to Buddhist landlords or to monasteries, and the Moravians felt it necessary to establish farms to provide work for local Christians in Poo and Kyelang. Leh was always more cosmopolitan, but even there one prominent Christian was poisoned—unsuccessfully—when he announced his

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<sup>169</sup> William Carey (1761–1834), often referred to by Protestants as the “father of modern missions,” is perhaps most well known for his evangelistic and linguistic work in India. Carey, who had once served as a Baptist preacher in England, set sail for India in 1793. There he worked as an indigo farmer in order to support himself while preaching, teaching, and translating the Bible into various languages. By the end of his forty-one year period in South Asia, Carey had completely translated the Christian scriptures into Bengali, Sanskrit, Marathi, and Punjabi.

conversion in 1934. Christianity was widely seen as a foreign religion, and conversion as betrayal.<sup>170</sup>

Given that Christianity has been traditionally viewed as “foreign,” it is remarkable that there now exists a community of Ladakhis who are actually third- or fourth-generation Christians.

Although the Moravians had managed to establish a Christian community in Ladakh, their main goal—to establish a mission within Tibet itself—was never realized. In spite of their inability to gain direct access to Tibet proper—or perhaps as a result of it—many Moravians in the nineteenth century focused on the creation of Tibetan Christian literature. The ultimate desire of many of these Christian workers was that, even if the physical borders continued to keep them out, their message of hope might somehow still be able to penetrate these boundaries. The process of translating the Bible into Tibetan began with Edward Pagel and William Heyde shortly after their arrival in Leh. By 1857, their efforts were joined by a third missionary, Heinrich August Jaeschke. For years, these men struggled to produce a translation that would be respected as an important religious text, yet could also be understood by a majority of lay Tibetans.<sup>171</sup> Although the Moravians are responsible for beginning this project, it literally took a lifetime to finish. Yoseb Gergen, who had become one of the Moravians’ first converts when he was just twelve years old, dedicated his entire life to completing the translation. The Tibetan Bible in its entirety was not published until 1948, two years after Gergen’s death and nearly a century after Pagel and Heyde had begun their work.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> John Bray, “Christian Missions and the Politics of Tibet, 1850–1950,” in *The History of Tibet*, Vol.III, ed. Alex McKay (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 492–3.

<sup>171</sup> As Jaeschke discovered, a number of colloquial Tibetan dialects exist, and speakers of one dialect may not be able to communicate with speakers of other dialects. Although a more formal literary Tibetan is traditionally used to discuss religious matters, the missionaries understood that only educated religious leaders would actually be able to comprehend a complicated literary form. Yet, they also recognized the need to use a formal style in order to distinguish the Bible as a holy book.

<sup>172</sup> For a detailed account on the events leading up to the translation and publication of the Tibetan Bible, see Allan Maberly, *God Spoke Tibetan: The Epic Story of the Men Who Gave the Bible to Tibet, the Forbidden Land* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1971).

While the Moravians and other Protestant groups were able to work under the protection of the British along the Indo-Tibetan border, missionaries working along Tibet's eastern borders seldom found themselves in peaceful situations. A number of French Catholic missions were set up in Batang and other cities in the eastern regions of Tibet beginning in 1847. However, for six decades, the French mission stations were repeatedly attacked by mobs that had very often been incited by local Buddhist monasteries. In many of these attacks, priests and converts were killed and mission stations were completely demolished. Interestingly, the French Catholic missionaries continually turned to the Chinese government for assistance after these attacks, despite the fact that the Chinese authorities had been responsible for consistently preventing the missionaries' attempts to enter Tibet.<sup>173</sup>

Various Protestant missionaries also attempted to bring the Gospel to Tibet's eastern borders beginning in the late nineteenth century. The two most influential Protestant missionary societies working in the region were the Christian and Missionary Alliance, founded by A. B. Simpson, and Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission (CIM).<sup>174</sup> The beginnings of the Christian and Missionary Alliance can be directly traced to a speech delivered by William E. Blackstone during a convention in Old Orchard, Maine in the summer of 1886. Blackstone's sermon, which he delivered before "an expectant crowd of several thousand people,"<sup>175</sup> included a call to send missionaries to Tibet. Blackstone's statement, "God seems to be holding back that little place [Tibet] to be the last field entered just before his coming," struck a chord in A. B. Simpson, under whose direction the conference had taken place.<sup>176</sup> By the following year, Simpson had officially formed the Christian and Missionary Alliance, an interdenominational Protestant missionary society focused on evangelism in Tibet. As Ralph R. Covell writes,

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<sup>173</sup> For more information, see Bray, "Christian Missions."

<sup>174</sup> Although Hudson Taylor's missionary society was originally called the China Inland Mission (CIM) when it was founded in 1865, its name was officially changed in 1964 to the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. Today, the society is referred to as OMF International.

<sup>175</sup> Ralph R. Covell *The Liberating Gospel in China: The Christian Faith among China's Minority Peoples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 56.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

The field of primary focus for the new mission organization was Tibet. Young people were recruited and mobilized by catchy slogans to go to this distant land: “A chain of mission stations from Shanghai to Tibet,” and, “To place a missionary on Tibetan soil and keep him there.”<sup>177</sup>

Although the mission society began in 1887, The Christian and Missionary Alliance did not actually establish a mission on the northeastern border of Tibet until 1895. At that time, workers from Simpson’s organization began working along the Tibet-Gansu border, joining missionaries from the China Inland Mission who had been working in the area since 1888.

In addition to missionaries from these two organizations, a number of independent Protestant missionaries also worked along the Sino-Tibetan border from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. For many of these missionaries, however, the combination of nearly constant political unrest along the border and the suspicion that many Tibetans had of all things foreign often lead to tragic results. One example can be found in the lives of Petrus Rijnhart and his wife Susie. The Rijnharts were both physicians who desired to offer their medical services and preach the Gospel among Tibetans. The couple entered Tibet in 1898 with the intention to establish a medical mission within Lhasa, but their goal was never realized. The Rijnharts were denied entrance to Lhasa, and, in 1903, Susie Rijnhart was forced to return alone to the eastern border after her husband was killed by bandits during their journey back from Lhasa.

Despite many tragedies like this one, missionaries continued to labor along the borders of Tibet well into the twentieth century. It has been estimated that, by the late 1940s, there were around fifty missionaries working along the various Tibetan borders. Shortly after the start of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), however, nearly all missionaries were compelled to stop their work.<sup>178</sup> Many Westerners were forced out of

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 56–7.

<sup>178</sup> For more information about the impact of the PRC upon evangelism in general, see Chapter 2 above.

the area while a few, including Geoffrey Bull, were imprisoned for their work.<sup>179</sup> Although a few Chinese missionaries remained in the area, it appeared to many that all hopes of bringing the Gospel to Tibet were lost. The flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 brought about a new focus for Christians desiring to do missionary work among Tibetans. Although missionary societies were neither able to work in Tibet nor directly along its borders, relief efforts among Tibetan refugees offered a new opportunity. Along with this new opportunity to minister to Tibetans in exile came a new problem for missionaries: the difficulty of converting Tibetans who equated Buddhism with nationalism. In *Sharing Christ in the Tibetan Buddhist World*, a guide for Christians who desire to be missionaries among Tibetan Buddhists, Marku Tsering warns his readers of this difficulty. He writes,

Except in Mongolia and Bhutan, Tibetan Buddhists live as minority peoples submerged in a dominant culture. ... Under these circumstances, many Tibetan Buddhist peoples see Buddhism as a rallying point for cultural survival. An individual who seriously considers religious change becomes open to charges of treason and social betrayal.<sup>180</sup>

Although, as history has shown, this tendency to view Buddhism as a sort of requirement for “Tibetan-ness” is not a new development, it appears to be magnified among Tibetans residing outside of the boundaries of the People’s Republic of China. And yet, even within the borders of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) itself, Buddhism plays an important role in shaping the cultural identity of Tibetans. Modern Christian missionaries, who act out of the conviction that it is their religious obligation to preach the Gospel “to the ends of the earth,” must necessarily struggle with the question of how to present the message of Christ in a way that is considerate of the cultural needs of those to whom they are preaching. The second half of this chapter will focus on the

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<sup>179</sup> See the autobiography of Geoffrey Bull, *When Iron Gates Yield* (London: Holder and Stoughton, 1960) for more information on his experiences.

<sup>180</sup> Marku Tsering “The Tibetan Buddhist World.” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* Vol. 10 No. 3 (July 1993): 146.

methods that missionaries within the TAR are currently employing as they attempt to bring Christianity to the Tibetan people in a way that is culturally relative.

Tourism within the Tibetan Autonomous Region has been allowed—even encouraged—by the Chinese government since the early 1980s; the political atmosphere, however, still remains a highly sensitive one. As a result, missionaries within Tibet are very rarely able to openly propagate Christianity, and many feel the need to resort to clandestine methods in order to spread their faith. The fact that evangelism within the TAR is nearly always conducted in secret has resulted in a nearly complete lack of scholarly information on the subject. As a result, the majority of the information that is included within this chapter has come from Christian publications and personal conversations with missionaries who have worked or are currently working within the area.<sup>181</sup> Based on these sources, it appears that the vast majority of Christians working as missionaries within the TAR believe in an evangelical form of Christianity. Although missions among Tibetans have historically been under the direction of specific denominations of either Catholic or “mainline Protestant forms of Christianity, the majority of organized missionary societies now working within the TAR are non-denominational or interdenominational.<sup>182</sup> There are even many individuals who choose to work independently of any “sending church” or missionary organization; however even among Christians who choose to operate in this way, most planning to carry out evangelistic work in the area for any significant amount of time deliberately try to “make contacts” from among other local individuals and/ or organizations.

For obvious reasons, Christians cannot obtain visas to work as missionaries within the TAR (or in any part of the PRC, for that matter). In addition, due to the sensitive political atmosphere, it is often difficult for any foreigners to obtain permission to hold a secular job within Tibet for more than a year or two. As a result, the vast majority of

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<sup>181</sup> In order to avoid possibly endangering those who have graciously agreed to contribute information about their work, I have chosen to leave out some specific details (names of places and people, for example) and instead focus on a more generalized study of missionary activity within Tibet. Such specifics are only mentioned in cases where these details have previously been published in print form and/or online.

<sup>182</sup> Non-denominational and interdenominational organizations would generally be characterized as “Protestant,” in that they are not Catholic or Eastern Orthodox; however, many Christians within these types of organizations would simply refer to themselves as “Evangelicals” and not necessarily as “Protestants.”

Christian evangelism within the TAR is conducted on a “short-term” basis using tourist visas. These visas—and, consequently, these missions—often only last a few weeks at most, which makes effective evangelism very difficult. Besides the obvious time constraints, short-term missionaries are often completely unfamiliar with the languages and culture of Tibet, thus making their task an even harder one.

According to Tommy, a missionary who participated in a two month-long mission to various parts of China (including Tibet) in the summer of 2006, linguistic barriers posed a definite challenge for most of the missionaries involved in his trip.<sup>183</sup> For this young man, a first-generation Chinese American, speaking Chinese was not a problem. He admits, however, that among the team of about fifteen missionaries, he alone spoke fluent Chinese and nobody could speak any Tibetan. During the two weeks that his group was in Tibet (they worked mostly in and around Lhasa, and also in Nagchu), a single translator accompanied them. The translator was a young Tibetan woman who regularly works with a missionary agency that Tommy and the others assisted during their stay in Tibet. Although the translator is not a Christian, she was more than willing to assist these missionaries in their conversations with local Tibetans. At one point during their trip, Tommy recalls that a few of the female missionaries were approached by a group of Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Through the translator, these two groups of women began to speak. The translator and the women from the missionary team were invited into a nearby nunnery, where they were allowed into the “most holy inner room” of the temple. Here, the group of American women (through their Tibetan translator) preached the Gospel to these nuns, who had never heard of Jesus or Christianity before.

Although the women on Tommy’s mission team were able to speak about the Christian faith to the group of Buddhist nuns with the help of their translator, the majority of missionaries on short-term trips must operate without translators. As a result, many of the short-term mission trips that have occurred since Tibet was “opened” to foreigners in 1985 have as their focus mass distribution of Christian literature. “Tracting” (or “tract-bombing”) may sometimes involve personally handing religious pamphlets to nonbelievers; however it is usually performed in secret as missionaries stuff tracts into

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<sup>183</sup> The information about Tommy’s mission trip comes primarily from personal telephone conversations with the author on September 29, 2006 and March 10, 2007.

mailboxes, bicycle baskets, and any other place where people may find them.<sup>184</sup> Although the intention of this method is, obviously, to expose a large number of nonbelievers to the Christian faith in a short amount of time, this action rarely seems to have the desired effect. Some missionaries, like Marku Tsering, have openly critiqued this method, arguing that this approach is actually more harmful than it is helpful. Tsering writes,

Some, constrained by visa restrictions in countries that do not welcome missionaries, may adopt “short term” methods tailored to the brief periods of time they can remain locally as tourists. They may place a heavy emphasis on literature distribution in areas where literacy rates are low or the attitude of local people to large scale literature distribution is unknown. Some work without consulting local churches or Christian agencies already working in the area. These groups may then suffer when the authorities intervene.<sup>185</sup>

In recent years, many evangelists have begun to seriously evaluate whether this method is actually beneficial. The faults that Tsering and others have pointed out with this method are most often the result of missionaries “failing to do their linguistic and cultural homework.”<sup>186</sup> Although missionaries have reported stories of individuals being interested in Christianity after reading tracts or other forms of Christian literature, opponents to the method claim that those who rely on such methods usually do so because they do not have the language skills necessary to communicate with the people they are trying to evangelize. If this is the case, then even those Tibetans who demonstrate a genuine interest in learning more about Christianity as a result of reading these pamphlets are often left without anybody to actually offer the further explanation that they desire. More often than not, however, missionaries find that the majority of

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<sup>184</sup> A missionary who was living in Beijing during the September 11 attacks in 2001 said that her organization decided to refrain from using terms such as “tract-bombing” to refer to literature distribution after that event. It is not known at present whether or not other agencies still refer to the action in such terms. More information on methods of tract-bombing within China (although not specifically within Tibet) can be found in Hannah Beach, “When the Smugglers are Working For Jesus,” *The Times* Vol. 156, Issue 11 (September 11, 2000).

<sup>185</sup> Tsering “Tibetan Buddhist,” 146.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

Tibetan lay people (especially those who reside outside of Lhasa) are simply unable to read the material.

A method that is similar to literature distribution, but has the potential to be effective even among illiterate Tibetans, is the use of evangelistic films. There are currently at least two such films available in Tibetan dialects. The first, *JESUS*, is “a two-hour docudrama about the life of Christ based on the Gospel of Luke” that was filmed in 1979. As of March 2007, *JESUS* has been translated into 985 languages, including the Lhasa, Amdo, and Khampa dialects of Tibetan.<sup>187</sup> Another evangelistic film, which was made specifically for a Tibetan audience in 1990, is called *Good News for You*.<sup>188</sup> According to the production company responsible for this film, it “has proven to be an effective tool in reaching Tibetans worldwide by sharing the Gospel through drama, testimonies, indigenous art, and Tibetan Christian music.”<sup>189</sup> This thirty-minute film consists of a series of still pictures accompanied by narration and music. The film includes the testimonies of Tibetans who have converted to Christianity, a narration of the parable of the Prodigal Son, and a look at the life of Jesus using the visual image of a Tibetan-style thangka depicting key events from Jesus’ life. This painting, which is no doubt the “indigenous art” referenced in the aforementioned description of the film, is a Christian-themed version of the popular Tibetan Wheel of Life image.<sup>190</sup> Although it is definitely a Tibetan-style work of art, the actual origin of this image is not known.<sup>191</sup>

Unlike the traditional Wheel of Life paintings, which depict the six realms of

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<sup>187</sup> <http://www.jesusfilm.org>

<sup>188</sup> The Tibetan title is *Khyed-rang gi don la gnas-tshul yag-po*.

<sup>189</sup> <https://createinternational.com/index.php?site=streamingvideos>. This film can be viewed in its entirety in streaming video format on the production company’s website or purchased in VCD format.

<sup>190</sup> Thangkas and other depictions of the Buddhist Wheel of Life display the six realms of samsāra (gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings) held in the clutches of Yama, the Lord of Death.

<sup>191</sup> TibetanResearch.org, an unrelated website, includes a link to an image of this thangka along with the claim that all copyrights to the image belong to Elaine M. Robson, director of TibetanResearch.org, however nowhere does it state whether the artist is a Tibetan or a Westerner. The link from [www.tibetanresearch.org](http://www.tibetanresearch.org) leads to <http://hometown.aol.co.uk/himlithq/thanka.html>. At the time of this writing, email inquiries to Ms. Robson requesting information on the origins of this painting and permission to reprint the image have not been answered.

rebirth in Buddhism, this wheel depicts twelve scenes from the life of Christ.<sup>192</sup> Yama, the “Lord of Death” who holds the Buddhist Wheel of Life in his claws and mouth, appears in the background of the Christian thangka as well. However, his face is not visible in the Christian version, only his outstretched arms and legs can be seen from behind the wheel. According to a description of this painting, this is to symbolize the Christian belief that Jesus has power even over death itself:

In the Christian painting the Lord of Death, who once held the wheel of life, has been forced to let go because Jesus conquered death when he rose from the dead. This is powerfully symbolic to Buddhists because the Lord of Death is seen as a terrifying being, trapping them in the wheel of Life.<sup>193</sup>

While the makers of the film chose to use this particular painting to explain the story of Jesus’ life, it is not the first Christian thangka to be created for evangelistic purposes. Moravian missionaries were using Tibetan-style religious art as early as the nineteenth century. A description of a Moravian thangka makes it clear that the painting that was shown in the video is not the same one. In his discussion of Moravian evangelistic methods, Ralph R. Covell writes, “Tibetans were always attracted to a Tanka, a cloth banner or scroll on which were painted in the center the head of Christ and around it in a circular fashion eight scenes from the life of Christ, with a parable in each of the four corners.”<sup>194</sup>

While all forms of media—art, music, film, and literature included—have the potential to reach a vast number of Tibetans, and are often utilized by short-term missionaries who may be otherwise unable to bridge cultural and language gaps, they can still be rendered ineffective if the missionaries employing these tools are unable to

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<sup>192</sup> Although the life of Jesus is not traditionally divided into twelve parts, the life of the Buddha is often presented in such a way. Āśvaghoṣa is believed to be the first to divide the Buddha’s life into the “Twelve Acts.” This tradition has played an important role in Tibetan Buddhism, and therefore Tibetans would be familiar with such a depiction of the life of an important religious figure. For more information on the Twelve Acts of the Buddha, see Roger J. Corless, *The Vision of Buddhism* (New York: Paragon, 1989), 3–15.

<sup>193</sup> <http://hometown.aol.co.uk/himlithq/thanka.html>

<sup>194</sup> Covell, *Liberating Gospel*, 60-1.

adequately communicate the intended meaning of the message. As a result, a relatively large number of Christians have, since the 1990s, embarked on intensive language study before traveling to Tibet. As Robbie Barnett writes,

In the academic year 1990–1991 fourteen out of fifteen of the Westerners studying Chinese or Tibetan at the Institute [the National Institute of Minorities in Chengdu] were active Christians, of whom several belonged to evangelical organizations and intended to go on to work as missionaries.<sup>195</sup>

Although a working knowledge of the local languages are obviously necessary for anyone desiring to do long-term missionary work in a particular area, there are also a large number of Christians who believe that short-term “vision trips” and “intercession trips” can be effective even if the missionaries are unable to communicate with the local peoples. Vision trips are short-term trips in which teams of missionaries traveling as tourists are able to “catch a vision” of the culture and the region. Often, as was the case during Tommy’ trip, these groups will assist local ministries and foreigners who are already living in the area as long-term missionaries. Although evangelism (through literature distribution, multi-media presentations, or conversations through translators) may occur during these trips, the overall goal is to raise an awareness of the needs of a particular region among Western Christians. These trips are intended to inspire Christians to pray for, offer financial support to, or even serve as long-term missionaries in the area. Another specific type of short-term missionary activity that has been very popular in Tibet since the Chinese government opened the area to tourists is the sending of “intercession teams” into the area. Considering Tibet’s long history of fruitless Christian missions, “Many missionaries would say that spiritual opposition blighted church growth and caused evangelistic efforts to fail.”<sup>196</sup> As a result, many modern missionaries believe that the spiritual opposition to the Christian faith must be dealt with in a spiritual way—through prayer. Intercession teams are groups of missionaries who travel to the area

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<sup>195</sup> Robbie Barnett, “Saving Tibet From Satan’s Grip: Present-Day Missionary Activity in Tibet.” *Lungta* Vol. 11 (1999), 40.

<sup>196</sup> Tsering, “Tibetan Buddhist,” 146.

specifically to pray. In the 1993 article, “The Lion of Judah on the Move in Tibet,” the author writes,

For the past few years, the Lord has been sending relay teams of intercessors, often unknown to each other, into Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, North India, Mongolia and China in order to pray prophetic prayers of release and liberty in the hidden dark places. Through prophetic acts and specific intercession, strategic warfare has been waged in the spirit realms. They have celebrated the Lord’s supper on the rooftop of the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, walked around monasteries praying, and traveled from Lhasa to Mount Kailash, all done to take the land back for the King.<sup>197</sup>

As this article clearly demonstrates, many of these intercessors view their task as an important spiritual act in a literal war between Good and Evil. Ironically, these Christian “prayer warriors” are, in a sense, echoing the most famous event in Tibet’s religious history. Tibetan Buddhists believe that, during the eighth century, Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) was called in to subdue the local demons using his Tantric powers in order that Buddhism might take root; similarly, these modern Christians believe that they are being called in to eliminate local demonic forces through their prayers so that Christianity may take root in Tibet. These intercessors often report stories of miraculous events as a result of such prayers. As Barnett writes,

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. ... Other evangelicals are more sophisticated in explaining their belief that God is working through them in their effort to convert Tibet. “A

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<sup>197</sup> Brewington, 22.

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.<sup>198</sup>

In fact, the beginnings of a medical mission project that has been operating within the TAR since 2000 can be traced back to just such a miraculous event. Touching Hearts in Tibet, an organization dedicated to performing life-saving operations on Tibetan children with congenital heart defects, began in 1998. At this time, Mark Geppert, who now heads Touching Hearts, was traveling throughout Asia on a journey that would lead him to "pray at key public sites for God to 'bless' [these] nations."<sup>199</sup> While praying at a monastery in Tibet, Mr. Geppert felt moved to hand a Tibetan Gospel tract to a nearby monk; the monk began to cry, which in turn drew the attention of a Communist Party official who also happened to be nearby. According to a March 2006 newspaper article,

The official who approached Mr. Geppert was Wang Fashung, director of International Affairs for the Public Health Bureau of the Tibet Autonomous Region. When Mr. Geppert explained that he worked for "a foundation in the United States," Dr. Wang asked whether the foundation would support a health project in Tibet. Mr. Geppert, president of the South East Asian Prayer Center, an evangelical mission based in Oakmont, saw this inquiry as an answer to a prayer.<sup>200</sup>

Since 2000, this organization has worked within the TAR under official contract with the Chinese government. As this contract states, the organization's mission is to offer free screenings and treatments for every child in Tibet.<sup>201</sup> According to the same article,

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<sup>198</sup> Barnett, 41.

<sup>199</sup> Ann Rodgers. "Hearts Join Over Plight of Tibetan Children: Oakmont Center Brings Cardiac Care to Himalayas." (*Pittsburgh*) *post-gazette.com*, March 5, 2006, <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/06064/664904-85.stm> (accessed March 21, 2007).

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> The cost for open-heart surgery (which can only be done in Beijing) is around \$5,000, while catheterization (which can be done in Lhasa) costs around \$1,000.

The most remarkable aspect of the program's contract with China is not medical, but religious. The missionary group has written permission to tell the families of all children it screens and treats that this service is offered in the name of Christ, and to explain the Christian faith to them.

While speaking at Epiphany Lutheran Church in Tallahassee, FL on February 1, 2007, Mr. Geppert stated that a number of the families who have been helped by his organization have professed faith in Christ. The father of one of the children, upon being questioned about his newfound beliefs, reportedly answered that he believed in Jesus because Jesus had been able to do what no other god had—he had saved his son's life. Although the majority of the families of the more than one hundred children whose lives have been saved as a result of this organization have not actually converted to Christianity, Mr. Geppert and others involved with the Touching Hearts project are hopeful that their compassionate action in the name of Christ will continue to have a positive impact upon Tibetans. Their mission is to bring the Gospel of Christ to the Tibetan people not in mere words, but in a way that actually demonstrates the love of Christ in action.

Although Christian missions in the Tibetan Autonomous Region are still in the beginning stages, the long history of missionary attempts throughout the Tibetan Buddhist world has served as a guide for many modern missionaries. A new generation of missionaries has set their eyes on the Rooftop of the World. By studying the many failures of the past, these modern missionaries are attempting to establish Christianity as a religion that will last well into Tibet's future. The ineffectiveness of historical missions has been traced to a variety of factors—most often to political instability in the area, to a lack of cooperation between missionary groups, and to a lack of understanding among missionaries of Tibetan languages and culture. Many of the modern missionaries are striving to avoid the pitfalls of past missions; however, even recent history has shown that there is still much progress to be made in these areas. Despite what could be a discouraging track record, many Christians remain encouraged by the belief that the Christian faith will soon be established in Tibet. As one missionary writes,

Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, made this remark one hundred years ago, “To make converts in Tibet is similar to going into a cave and trying to rob a lioness of her cubs.” Many of us believe that the Lion of Judah is on the move! We believe a new day has dawned. The light of Jesus is breaking through the darkness of the Tibetan Buddhist world.”<sup>202</sup>

Although there still remains very little information on the state of modern missions in the TAR, it is safe to assume that missionary activity will continue in the area for quite some time as Western Christians strive to ensure that a number of Tibetans will be included among those from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation.”

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<sup>202</sup> Brewington, 21.

## CONCLUSION

Despite Christianity's relatively long history in certain parts of Asia, the tradition is still viewed as "foreign" in many regions. As a result, evangelism by Western missionaries and even by local Christians is often met with resistance from governmental and religious forces. Naturally, the specific obstacles that evangelists face within one culture will differ greatly from the difficulties that they face in another. The similarity between all of these cases, however, is that Christianity is viewed as a threat because of this perceived foreignness. Just as individual conversion to Christianity is often equated with losing one's cultural identity, attempting to propagate Christianity within a society is viewed as attempting to replace the existing authority structure with another, foreign one.

For Hindu nationalists who desire to establish an authority structure based on the unity of Indians under a shared Hindu identity, Christianity is seen as a threat because the foreignness of this religion prevents this shared concept of cultural "Hindu-ness" among all Indians. Just as proponents of Hindutva believe that all Indians must share a common religious or cultural identity, the government of the People's Republic of China believes that all Chinese citizens must share a common political identity. As a result, the Chinese government opposes the spread of any form of Christianity that is not directly identified with the Communist government itself. Just as Hindu nationalists believe that one cannot truly be "Indian" if he is not a Hindu, Chinese government officials believe that one cannot truly be "Chinese" if he is not Communist.

Although there are many Chinese Christians who claim that they love their country and their government, the fact that they refuse to allow governmental control over evangelism and other religious matters is viewed as "un-patriotic" and even "un-Chinese" behavior by the government. Even among underground Protestant groups, which do not openly oppose the government, Christians' lack of complete commitment to the government is still viewed as a threat. As a result, the government would rather loosen some restrictions within the state church than drive more Christians into underground organizations, which cannot be monitored by the government.

Within the Tibetan Autonomous Region, the same governmental restrictions on evangelism apply, however the lack of virtually any form of Tibetan Christianity makes the approach to evangelism in this region different from the approach to evangelism in other parts of China. In modern Tibet, Christian missionary work is almost entirely the work of foreigners. Although underground Protestant church movements among Han Chinese are rarely tied to any overseas organizations, all Christian activity in Tibet today is directly related to Western Christian missionary societies and churches. At present, there is not a significant Christian presence in the area, and most missionaries carry out evangelistic activity secretly, so the Chinese government has not taken measures to directly oppose evangelism in Tibet as it has in other areas in China. Most of the missionaries in Tibet today would say that the majority of opposition comes from the Tibetan culture itself, which is rooted in Buddhism.

Although each of these case studies presents only a telescopic view of a much larger picture, it is clear that Christian evangelists in many parts of Asia face opposition due to the concept that Christianity is a foreign tradition. Although the responses to and restrictions on evangelism differ greatly between cultures, it is obvious that those who are the most fervent opponents to the spread of this religion are nearly always the members of society who view the establishment of a foreign tradition as a threat to their own power. Whether that power is rooted in Hindutva, Communism, or any other ideology, the fact remains that Christianity is viewed as an opposing ideology that has the potential to take the place of the one that is currently in authority.

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