

Religious Policy towards Tibetan Buddhism in the People's Republic of China: Some Preliminary Notes

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The aim of the present paper is not a detailed analysis of the development of the religious policy of the Chinese Communist state towards Tibetan Buddhism on the institutional (i. e. in relation to the web of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries) and individual levels (i. e. in relation to the individuals: monks, nuns and laymen) since 1949 up to the present day. I want just to focus on some issues which – with regard to Tibetan Buddhism - make the state – church relation special and therefore will illustrate the obstacles, hindrances and conflicts in the implementation of the religious policy in Tibetan areas in the People's Republic of China.

The freedom of religion, forming part of human rights, is protected by the Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

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 community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.¹

The international protection of religious freedom was further elaborated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which in its Article 18 deals in greater detail with the content of this right and its implementation. In China, the primary legal protection of freedom of religion is found in the Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China adopted in 1982:

Citizens of the People's Republic of China shall enjoy freedom of religion and belief. No public body, social group or private individual may compel a citizen to practise or not to practise a religion. The State shall protect normal religious activities (Chin. *zhengchang de zongjiao huodong*). No one may, in practising a religion, engage in activities which endanger public order or the health of citizens or interfere with the system of public education. Religious groups and religious affairs may not be subject of foreign authority.²

These basic provisions have been further elaborated on central and provincial administrative levels in a number of measures and regulations related to the religious life of different religious groups in 1980s and 1990s.³ These legal documents – especially the Constitution and other laws adopted by the Central government - should guarantee the status of all the five officially approved religions (i. e. Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism). They provide a general framework which is not tailored for the needs and traditional practices of individual churches. The example of Tibetan Buddhism will illustrate the fact that this official understanding and perception of religion and religious activities has its limits and can not satisfy the followers of this faith.

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¹ Quoted from C. Evans, "Chinese Law and the International Protection of Religious Freedom," *Journal of Church and State* 44.4 (2002): 752.

² *Constitution of the People's Republic of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), 30.

³ For an example of these measures related to Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in Sichuan Province see Anon., *Relative Freedom? Tibetan Buddhism and Religious Policy in Kandze, Sichuan, 1987-1999* (London: Tibet Information Network, 1999), 48-51.

There is an apparent congruence between religion and ethnicity which can be observed in discourses about the identities of various particular groups.⁴ However, this assumption of the overlap of religion and ethnicity is valid to a different degree with various groups. The case of Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism is a strong argument for this. It seems obvious that Tibetan Buddhism is considered to be the most important element of identity of Tibetans by both Tibetan and foreign authors,⁵ and for Tibetans it is even perceived as a symbol of the superiority of their civilisation.⁶ In this sense, Tibetan Buddhism being and integrating and identity constructing element of the Tibetan society, religion should be understood in two levels: first, as a set of religious doctrines and dogmas which are generally accepted and form the core of moral and ethical values; second, as an institutional web of monasteries covering all the areas inhabited by Tibetans which have also functioned as educational centres preserving and reshaping this religious tradition.⁷ Tibetan Buddhism was the *raison d'être* of the traditional Tibetan state before 1950.

The distinctive characteristic of the official religious policy in China is the fact that it is closely interrelated with the policy towards national minorities as the phenomenon of religion is predominantly associated with various minority ethnic groups such as Uighurs, Hui (followers of Islam), Mongols and Tibetans. Up to late 1990s when the religious movement Falungong has gained a massive support mainly among the Han-Chinese, the implementation of religious policy was primarily aimed at these non-Chinese ethnic groups. Official Chinese publications on religious policy repeatedly stress the close relationship between the ethnicity and religion⁸ and state that in relation to the national minorities the State and the Party should take this linkage into consideration and deal with them as a complex issue. The central role of religion as an identity building factor is to a certain degree also reflected in the official Chinese documents dealing with the religious policy towards Tibetan Buddhism. Due to the fact that unlike in the case of Hui, Uighurs and some other ethnic groups in China which follow Islam and thus form a part of the international community of Muslims, *umma*, Tibetans believe in an autochthonous religious tradition which originated in the 10th-12th cent. in their homeland. Therefore the identification with Tibetan Buddhism is very strong and any restrictions and limits imposed by the Chinese authorities on the religious practice on individual and collective level are perceived by both the clergy and the laity as inadequate infringements which touch the core of "Tibetanness".

⁴ D. B. MacKay, "Ethnicity," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. W. Braun and R. T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 96.

⁵ See for instance S. G. Karmay, "Mountain Cults and National Identity in Tibet," in *Resistance and Reform in Tibet*, ed. R. Barnett and Sh. Akiner (London: Hurst & Company, 1994), 114; H. Stoddard, "Tibetan Publications and National Identity," in *Resistance and Reform in Tibet*, ed. R. Barnett and Sh. Akiner (London: Hurst & Company, 1994), 128.

⁶ M. C. Goldstein, "The Revival of Monastic Life in Drepung Monastery," in *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*, ed. M. C. Goldstein and M. T. Kapstein (Berkeley - Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 15.

⁷ The importance of religion for the self-identification of Tibetans can be further illustrated by the fact that it serves as a criterion for the inclusion/exclusion of a particular individual from the Tibetan community: one is either an "insider" (Tib. *nang pa*, i. e. believer in Tibetan Buddhism) or an "outsider" (Tib. *phyi pa*, i. e. non-believer in Tibetan Buddhism) – K. Sagaster, "Identität im Tibetischen Buddhismus," in *Religion und Identität: im Horizont des Pluralismus*, ed. W. Gephart and H. Waldenfels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 185.

⁸ See for instance Coll., *Zhongguo gongchandang guanyu minzu wenti de jiben guandian he zhengce* [Fundamental standpoints of the Chinese Communist Party on the nationalities issue] (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2001), 207-211; Gong Xuezheng, *Dangdai Zhongguo minzu zongjiao wenti yanjiu* [The research on the nationalities and religious issues in contemporary China] (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang xuexiao chubanshe, 1998).

The second distinctive – and among the ethnic groups in China unique – feature of Tibetan society is the close relation between religious authority and political power in Tibet. Since the 13th cent. the dignitaries of various Buddhist schools had started to play an influential role in Tibetan politics and this tendency had reached its height with the assumption of political power by the 5th Dalai Lama Ngawang Lozang Gyatsho (*Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1617-1682) in 1642 in Central Tibet (Tib. *Dbus-Gtsang*).⁹

The traditional political system of Central Tibet in the years 1642-1950 is in Tibetan often termed as "having two: religious and political [authority]" (Tib. *chos srid gnyis ldan*) which reflected the fact, that the supreme political and religious power was in the hands of the successive reincarnations of Dalai Lama.¹⁰ The ecclesiastical élite of Tibetan society had played an important role in the government and therefore the Tibetan polity is often characterised as theocratic. The influence of Buddhist clergy in Tibet is also obvious from the structure of government agencies and posts, where the so-called monk officials from the biggest Gelugpa (*dge lugs pa*) monasteries had occupied crucial posts.¹¹ Due to these positions the Buddhist clergy had successfully asserted its political and economical priorities in traditional Tibet and in fact they perceived the role of state as the protector of their interest and the Buddhist faith. In case these interests were endangered, the monks were ready to challenge the authority of the central government in Lhasa as illustrated for example by the armed opposition of the monks from the Che (*byes*) college in the Sera (*se ra*) monastery in 1944.¹² The authority of Tibetan Buddhist dignitaries was even much higher in peripheral areas in the east (Tib. Kham, *kham*s) and the northeast (Tib. Amdo, *amdo*) which were beyond the immediate control of the central government in Lhasa. There the high local reincarnations (Tib. tulku, *sprul sku*) had exercised a direct political control over the Tibetan population. The example of the Labrang Tashikhyil (*bla brang bkra shis 'khyil*) monastery in Amdo can illustrate this situation.¹³ Its highest reincarnation Jamyang Zhepa (*'jam dbyangs bzhad pa*) was the *de facto* ruler of large parts of the north-eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau and his authority was not challenged by either central Tibetan or Chinese authorities. The local population was directly subordinated to him and his administration which was composed exclusively of monks.¹⁴ This subordination had included all political, religious, economical and military matters.

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China the religious policy towards Tibetan Buddhism was based on the principle of the separation of religion and politics (Chin.

⁹ See Ts. W. D. Shakabpa, *Tibet. A Political History* (New York: Potala Publications, 1988), 61-124.

¹⁰ Phuntsog Wangyal, "The Influence of Religion on Tibetan Politics," *The Tibet Journal* 1.1 (1975): 78-81.

¹¹ See F. Michael, *Rule by Incarnation, Tibetan Buddhism and Its Role in Society and State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 51-60.

¹² For details see M. C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951. The Demise of the Lamaist State* (Berkeley - Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 437-445.

¹³ On Labrang see Li An-che, *History of Tibetan Buddhism, A Study in the Field* (Beijing: New World Press, 1994), 134-267; P. C. Nietupski, *Labrang, A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery at the Crossroads of Four Civilizations* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1999). For the developments in Labrang after 1949 see M. Slobodník, "Destruction and Revival: The Fate of the Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Labrang in Socialist China," *Religion, State & Society* 30.4 (2003), in press. This monastery was frequently visited also by Mongolian and Buryat pilgrims and monks – see B. Baradin, *Zhizn' v tangutskom monastyre Lavran. Dnevnik buddiiskogo palomnika* (Ulan-Ude – Ulaanbaatar: Institute of Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies, 1999).

¹⁴ Therefore, in my opinion, this political system is a more typical example of theocracy than the often quoted case of Central Tibet, where the influence and status of monk officials was balanced by a parallel structure of lay officials who had represented the secular arm of the Lhasa government.

zheng jiao fenli de yuanze)¹⁵ which is a typical approach of the secular state towards religion also in the Western countries. This policy, however, was in direct contradiction with the traditional understanding of the role of monasteries, reincarnations, high lamas and monks in Tibetan political life. The attempt of Chinese authorities to reduce Tibetan Buddhism to “spiritual” matters has caused a permanent conflict between Tibetans and the state authorities. This intermingling of religion and politics in Tibet manifested itself during the anti-Chinese revolt in Lhasa in March 1959 when large numbers of monks and nuns participated in the protests against Chinese authorities.¹⁶ The involvement of monks and nuns in public life and politics has again confronted the state authorities in the course of the process of religious revival which have started in late 1970s and early 1980s. The religion resurfaced as the centre of Tibetan life, the people were permitted to carry out religious practices and the cadres were instructed to respect them.¹⁷ This relative freedom of religion was again restricted only to religious matters.

However, the renaissance of Tibetan identity which was caused by the revival of Tibetan Buddhism soon brought with it also such political issues as the protection of human rights and Tibetan independence. A crucial role in this movement was played by Buddhist monks and nuns who since 1987 have participated in numerous anti-Chinese protests mainly in Lhasa but also in other parts of Tibet.¹⁸ From the Tibetan point of view the participation and organisation of protests by Tibetan monks and nuns was a logical consequence of their traditional role in the society. On the contrary, from the Chinese perspective their activities represented an abuse of religion and religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution for political activities aimed against China. These developments have posed a dilemma for the Chinese leadership how to proceed with the implementation of the new religious policy in Tibet, as this process is in their eyes inevitably connected with the further intensifying of anti-Chinese protests.¹⁹

The Chinese authorities have repeatedly blamed the exiled 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatsho (*bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho*, 1935-) for inciting the protests and the demonstrations only stress their perception of religion as something subversive, potentially dangerous which may function as a tool for interference in internal matters and for erosion of social stability. This understanding of religion is also included in the short Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China adopted in 1982 quoted above and further elaborated in the crucial document (so-called Document No. 19) on the new religious policy entitled “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period” (Chin. *Guanyu wo guo shehuizhuyi shiqi zongjiao wenti de jiben guandian he jiben zhengce*), issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in March 1982 which explicitly mentions the “criminal and counter-revolutionary activities under the cover of religion”.²⁰

¹⁵ Jiang Ping *et al.*, *Xizang de zongjiao he Zhongguo gongchandang de zongjiao zhengce* [Tibetan religion and the religious policy of the Chinese Communist Party] (Beijing, Zhongguo zangxue chubanshe, 1996), 96.

¹⁶ Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 185-211

¹⁷ Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, 392.

¹⁸ For a detailed account of these protests and the role of monks and nuns in them see R. D. Schwartz, *Circle of Protest. Political Ritual in the Tibetan Uprising* (London: Hurst & Company, 1994).

¹⁹ The choice between the focus on solely religious matters and involvement in politics to a certain degree also splits the monastic communities, as there are advocates of direct involvement in the fight for Tibetan independence and those who oppose this because it can endanger the fragile status of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the People's Republic of China.

²⁰ D. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today. Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 22.

The reaction of the state was immediate and it aimed at tightening the control of the internal life of the monasteries. The influence of the state in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries has been primarily maintained by the establishment of the so-called Monastery Management Committees (Tib. *dgon pa'i do dam u yon lhan khang*, Chin. *siyuan guanli weiyuanhui*). In the beginning of the 1980s these administrative bodies were established in all reopened monasteries in Tibet. The existence of such a committee is a necessary precondition for any monastery to obtain official approval. These bodies are composed of senior monks of the monastery and they are in charge of all administrative, economic, and security activities related to the monastery.²¹ The members of these committees have to be approved by the local Religious Affairs Bureau (Chin. *zongjiao shiwu ju*).²² The creation of these Monastery Management Committees in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries throughout Tibet has created a certain controversy between the state and the monks as they represent an interference with the traditional autonomy of the monasteries in Tibet and are perceived as tools of Chinese authorities in the monasteries. Since the mid-1990s the authorities have started an ideological campaign under the slogan of “patriotic education”. During regular meetings organised by the cadres the monks and nuns have to voice their opposition to separatism, publicly support the unity of the motherland and the leading role of the Chinese Communist Party, and cherish patriotism.²³ The refusal to accept these standpoints may lead to the exclusion of an individual monk or even to the closure of a monastery.

In order to handle the religious issue in Tibet in a more transparent way, the authorities have striven to limit the number of monks and nuns in individual monasteries since late 1980s. Local Religious Affairs Bureaus have fixed a certain quota of monks for every individual monastery and therefore only some monks have received the official status in the monastery and subsequently a long-term residence permit. The size of monastic communities is also reduced due to the fact that according to Chinese regulations children less than 18 years of age are officially prohibited from entering a monastery.²⁴ The quantity of monks have been reduced by administrative measures approximately by one third in comparison with the situation in “old” Tibet.²⁵ This tendency is in deep contrast with the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of mass monasticism (especially in the Gelugpa School) and limits imposed on the age and quantity of monks and nuns are often mentioned in interviews with Tibetans as particular examples of violations of their freedom of religion.

²¹ On the internal structure of the Monastery Management Committee in Labrang see Anon., *Zangchuan fojiao aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu xuexi xuanchuan cailiao* [Propaganda materials for education and study to patriotism in Tibetan Buddhism] (Lanzhou: Zhonggong Gansu sheng wei tongzhan bu - Gansu sheng zongjiao shiwu ju, 1998), 200-209.

²² This state authority which is functioning on the central and lower administrative levels, is in charge of the implementation of the state religious policy – see MacInnis, *Religion in China Today*, 1.

²³ For a detailed account of this campaign see Anon., *A Sea of Bitterness, Patriotic Education in Qinghai Monasteries* (London: Tibet Information Network 1999). The Chinese documents openly state that though this patriotic education campaign is aimed at all the various religious groups officially sanctioned in China, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries will be first subjected to it as there is a “fight for the masses of believers” between “the Dalai Lama clique” and the Chinese government and therefore the situation is urgent - Anon., *Zangchuan fojiao aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu*, 189.

²⁴ Anon., *Relative Freedom?*, 49.

²⁵ According to Chinese figures, there were 114 100 monks in Central Tibet in 1958 and about 42 500 monks in 1994 - Yan Hao, “Tibetan Population in China: Myth and Facts Re-examined,” *Asian Ethnicity* 1.1 (2000): 17.

The interference of state authorities into traditional religious procedures may be also illustrated on the example of identification and enthronement of new reincarnations. Reincarnations, tulkus, have traditionally occupied a high status in Tibetan society and they embodied the supreme religious and political authority. The issue of the identification of a new Buddhist reincarnation in Tibet was highlighted in 1995 when the choice of the 11th Panchen Lama have stirred a controversy between the Dalai Lama government in exile and the Beijing government.²⁶ The Chinese authorities have been striving to acquire the highest authority in the final approval of a candidate who has traditionally been identified and enthroned by the Buddhist dignitaries using established procedures. Now the process is always closely supervised by the different administrative levels of the Religious Affairs Bureau and according to Chinese documents should be conducted under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party.²⁷ This is valid not only for the highest reincarnations in Tibet (e. g. Dalai Lama, Panchen Lama) but also for all the local reincarnations who have traditionally played an important role in the religious and social life of Tibetan Buddhist communities. The attempt of Chinese authorities to subordinate the process of the choice of a new reincarnation to a dull set of bureaucratic regulations which in great detail deal with the territorial, social, and organisational aspects of the search, identification and enthronement, illustrates the deep contrast between the administrative perception of religion and the spiritual understanding of it. However, the issue of identification of new reincarnations is important for the process of religious revival as it was prohibited by the authorities since 1958 till early 1990s. In case of the next, 15th reincarnation of Dalai Lama this process will play a crucial role – which will encompass not only religious but above all political issues - for Tibetans both in Tibet and in exile, and to a certain degree for Mongolians, Buryats and other followers of Tibetan Buddhism too.

Another aspect of the dramatically changed situation of Tibetan monasteries is the economical basis of their functioning. Due to their political influence and as a result of their high social status in the pre-1950 Tibet the monasteries held 37 percent of arable land²⁸ and the population subordinated to a monastery had to pay taxes to it and provide it with various services. These represented the main source of income of the numerous monasteries while some of them, usually the most important, were financially also supported by direct subsidies from the central Lhasa government. After the foundation of the People's Republic of China these privileges were also guaranteed by the Beijing government as the basic document regulating the relations between China and Tibet, The Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet (Chin. *Zhongyang renmin zhengfu he Xizang difang zhengfu guanyu heping jiefang Xizang banfa de xieyi*) signed on the 23rd May 1951, stipulated in its seventh provision that “the policy of freedom of religious belief ... will be protected. The central authorities will not affect any change in the income of the monasteries”.²⁹ However in the late 1950s, in the course of the implementation of the so-called “democratic reform of the monasteries” (Chin. *siyuan minzhu gaige*) Tibetan Buddhist institutions were completely deprived of their possessions and all the formal economic links between monasteries and local population were broken off. After 1980 these possessions have not been returned to the monasteries. The

²⁶ The Dalai Lama has identified Gendun Chökyi Nyima (*dge 'dun chos kyi nyi ma*, 1989-) as the 11th Panchen Lama and in disapproval the Chinese government has subsequently enthroned its candidate Gyaltshen Norbu (*rgyal mtshan norbu*, 1990-) - see Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, 440-447.

²⁷ Anon., *Zangchuan fojiao aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu*, 194.

²⁸ Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 3.

²⁹ M. C. van Walt van Praag, *The Status of Tibet. History, Rights, and Prospects in International Law* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 339.

Chinese authorities have perceived the monasteries as a heavy financial burden for the Tibetan population and in internal documents explicitly warn for the restoration of the “feudal religious privileges and the system of oppression and exploitation” (Chin. *fengjian zongjiao tequan he yapo boxue zhidu*).³⁰ The state authorities do not provide financial support for the monks and they depend on the financial help of their relatives and on local people who give them alms. The aim of the Chinese authorities is that the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries will provide services and organise self-supporting production units which will finance their religious activities, and this forms part of official policy towards Tibetan monasteries, under the slogan “let the monastery support itself” (Chin. *yi si yang si*, Tib. *dgon par brten nas dgon pa skyong*).³¹ In order to implement this policy, the monasteries have established restaurants, shops and hostels, produce Tibetan medicine, etc. and are receiving Chinese and foreign tourists. These economical activities influence the internal life of Buddhist institutions in a negative way and scarce financial resource directly limit the scope of religious activities.

The religious policy towards Tibetan Buddhism in the People’s Republic of China has changed the traditional character of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. The state-imposed restrictions of the political and economical role of the monasteries, and of the size of the monastic communities have contributed to the fact that the current state of monastic Buddhism in Tibet is qualitatively and quantitatively different in comparison with the past. The recent swift economical, political and social reforms of the Tibetan and Chinese society would undoubtedly anyway modify the character of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, but the official view of religion and its reduction to “spiritual” matters have speeded up these developments. The divergent Chinese and Tibetan perceptions of the role of religion, religious institutions and religious figures in the society have led and will inevitably lead to further confrontations and conflicts which will negatively influence the overall Chinese policy in Tibet of which the religious policy forms only a small, though very important part.

The future will show whether in the course of the revival of Tibetan Buddhism it will be possible to reconcile two entirely different sets of interests: on the one hand the desire of the Chinese authorities administratively to control the internal life of the monasteries, and on the other hand the endeavour of Tibetans to proceed further with the revival of monasteries with the aim of re-establishing their traditional role, which encompassed not only religious authority but political and economic power as well. These two trends are contradictory: the alternative of a limited revival is as unacceptable for Tibetans as the vision of the gradual resurrection of the traditional role of the monasteries which would result in the creation of parallel administrative structures independent of the Chinese state, is for the Chinese.³²

³⁰ Anon., *Zangchuan fojiao aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu*, 201.

³¹ MacInnis, *Religion in China Today*, 175; Anon., *Zangchuan fojiao aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu*, 205-206.

³² From a comparative viewpoint it is interesting to note that the followers of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, Mongolia and Buryatia have encountered similar periods of religious persecution and revival in the 20th cent. – for a brief analysis of these almost simultaneous processes see L. Bělka and M. Slobodník, “The Revival of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Asia: A Comparative Perspective,” *Asian and African Studies* 11.1 (2002): 15-36.