Chapter V

Relative Religious Freedom and The Emergence of Tibetan Civil Society

Buddhism came to Tibet from India during the 7th Century - about twelve hundred years after Buddha's birth. This was long after Buddhism had reached China and other eastern countries. In spite of its late arrival, Buddhism flourished in Tibet and eventually took a firm hold uniting all native Tibetans. For Tibetans, this religion became a whole complex universe, encompassing the entirety of their culture, economy, politics, art of life and civilization. In fact Buddhism constitutes the very essence of their lives. Of all the bonds, which bind and define Tibetans as a people and as a nation, religion is undoubtedly the strongest.

The native religion of the Tibetans used to be Bon, founded by Shen-rab Miwo of Shang Shung in western Tibet. Bon was originally an animist cult teeming with spirit and its followers called Bonpo-revered their founder Shen rab. However, with the advent of Buddhism, the influence of Bon the religion diminished in Tibet. There are still a number of Bon devotees in Tibet, but their creed has absorbed so much from Buddhism. At the same time, Tibetan Buddhism too has taken much from the Bon religion as well as from Indian (Hindu) Tantrism to form Lamaism with Tibetan characteristics.

Tibetan Buddhism belongs to the Mahayana school of Buddhism, which emphasizes ideal compassion and the doctrine of emptiness (a tenet proclaiming the
inter-dependence of all that is) Lamaism’s basic teaching which holds that all beings can achieve enlightenment, is central to their lives. Practitioners gradually over many lifetimes, work to attain enlightenment (spiritual awakening) which releases them from the cycle of death and rebirth. At the same time, Tibetan Buddhism also embraces Tantrism, which maintains that certain rituals can shorten the road to enlightenment.

Tibetans also cherish and honour previous Dalai Lamas, great teachers and practitioners, the founders of sects and monasteries and the early Kings who brought the faith to Tibet. They also pray to Goddess Tara, pay homage to local deities and many other entities. They express their faith and devotion by going on a pilgrimage and by performing several acts of piety. Tibetans believe that these acts protect them from harm, as they deem religion as insurance against harm. It is also an appeal to the gods and deities to give them the best deal in their present and subsequent lives.

Tibetans believe in reincarnation and many of their saints are Boddhisattvas—great practitioners. The reincarnations of the Boddhisttavas are called tulkus-usually discovered at a young age and brought to live in the monasteries of their predecessors. Tenzing Gyatso, the present Dalai Lama is the most revered tulku and the Tibetans believe that he is the reincarnation of Chenrzi or the Bodhisattava of compassion. His lineage goes back seventy-four lives before appearing in Tibet in 1391 as the first Dalai Lama. The tulkus and other highly learned practitioners including great teachers and doctors of Buddhist philosophy are called lamas and for this reason Tibetan

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Buddhism is often called Lamaism.

Before 1959, it is said that Tibet used to be full of monasteries, temples and hermitages filled with monks and nuns. Prominent monasteries such as Ganden, Sera, Drepung and Tashilhunpo, etc. became the high seats of learning, and every Tibetan Buddhist home had its altars.

Tibetan society was also a self-sufficient one, founded on the Buddhist faith. Hence, Tibetan national identity was indistinguishable from its religion. Until the Communist Chinese takeover, religion guided every aspect of Tibetan life.

**Communist China’s Violation of Religious Freedom**

Communist China invaded Tibet in 1949, and when the process of annexation of Tibet with China was underway, it pledged that no restrictions would be imposed on the practice of religion. Even in the so-called “Seventeen Point Agreement” of 1951, China promised to protect and respect Tibet’s religious traditions. The agreement explicitly stated that the traditional status, functions and powers of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama would not be altered by the central authorities.

However, soon after the annexation of Tibet to China was completed, the Communist government started undermining the traditional social system and religion of Tibet. Initially, China targeted only monks and monasteries who controlled land and levied taxes. But soon, they discarded their promises and began assaulting religion in general. High monks were reportedly selected for “struggle session” in
which they were verbally abused and physically assaulted to show villagers that the 
monks had no supernatural powers to call to their defence.²

To the Chinese, the Tibetans were backward, uncultured, and a superstitious 
nation, who used their primitive religion as an opium. Their prevailing prejudice was 
well summed up in the famous exchange after an amicable discussion between Mao 
Zedong, and the Dalai Lama, at the end of the 1949 People’s National Assembly in 
Beijing, when Mao said in final dismissal that, “All this religion business is fine but 
you and I know it is eyewash”.³ Mao further went to tell the Dalai Lama that, “but of 
course, religion is poison. It has two great defects: It undermines the race – and 
retards the progress of the country. Tibet and Mongolia have both been poisoned by 
it”.⁴

China had always said that, religious establishment was the chief oppressor of 
the masses and monks and nuns were parasites who exploited the innocent people. It 
collected evidence to expose monastic greed and practices to turn the masses against 
religious institutions. In most cases, it was true that monasteries taxed the serfs 
sometimes cruelly and often amassed great wealth. However, Tibetans revered their 
Lamas and were reluctant to believe in Chinese evidence or even speak of monastic 
abuses. Instead of turning against the lamas, Tibetans found the assaults on their faith 
demeaning and cruel. They said that Communist ideology left them with nothing to 
hope for, neither in this world nor in the next.⁵

⁵ Goldstein, Re-examining Choice, 111 No.37, Dawa Norbu, Red Star over Tibet, 162, 210, 220.
For the Communists, everything associated with Tibet was regarded as a remnant of the feudal past that had to be destroyed. By the beginning of 1970, all the monasteries and temples had been vandalised by the Red Guards and left to ruin. In the name of “democratic reforms” China confiscated all the land holdings of monasteries. The “reforms” led to imprisonment, execution or exile of tens of thousands of monks and to the closing down of hundreds of monasteries. The government statement even claimed that, “It is completely right for us to kill a few bogus lamas who betrayed the motherland”. Thus in the 1956 uprising in eastern Tibet, in the former Tibetan province of Kham, hundreds and possibly thousands of monks were killed and numerous monasteries were destroyed.

In this way, the monks who once dominated Tibetan society disappeared and religious practice of any kind was forbidden. Even clandestine worship was not possible. People were told that believing in religion is blind faith and should be condemned. China even denounced the Dalai Lama as a ‘Jackal’ whose ‘hands are stained with blood of the million former serfs in Tibet’. Tibetans could not stand Chinese oppression and the cruel ridicule and insults directed at their path. So in 1959, tens of thousands of monks and lay people rebelled, protesting against China’s rule in Tibet. The People’s Liberation Army in no time crushed the rebellion, which led to the flight of the Dalai Lama to India.

Thousands of Tibetans followed the Dalai Lama to India. They called the

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8 SWB, 1974, no.FE/4691/B11/15.
Communist Chinese "the enemies of faith", and when they began to flee into exile, they said that their primary reason was to escape from Communist constraints on religion.\(^9\) Many escaped to India because they could not worship with freedom anymore.

China further intensified its assault on religion and the institutions after the failed rebellion of 1959. It unleashed holy terror in Tibet and, the Red Guards, most of them Tibetans destroyed all religious, historic and cultural buildings, monuments, artifacts, books and religious scriptures.

It was clear that China’s intention during this period was to destroy Tibetan culture and the spiritual core of Tibetan civilization. Even the *International Commission* of jurists reported at that time, that China was committing religious genocide in Tibet by killing Buddhist leaders and prohibiting the practice of Buddhism.

However, the most brutal, violent and direct attack on Buddhism and all other faiths occurred during the Cultural Revolution. The destruction of monasteries and monastic system in Tibet was completed. Monks and nuns were executed, forcibly disrobed, or sent to concentration camps – where hundreds of them died of torture and starvation. The practice of religion both communally and individually was suppressed with brutality even the most trivial expression of devotion – Buddhism as well as every other faith was banned. From 1966 to 1976, not a single prayer flag flew in

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Tibet. In its place Moa’s portrait hung in the monasteries chanting walls, and Marxist Materialism was the only creed allowed.

It is reported that altogether 6,254 monasteries and temples (the cultural and spiritual core of the Tibetan civilization) in all provinces of Tibet, were razed to the ground. Their valuable artifacts were either destroyed or sold for foreign exchange on the Tokyo and Hongkong antique markets. According to officials of the TAR government, 80 percent of the destruction occurred before the start of the so-called Cultural Revolution – between 1956 and 1966.\(^\text{10}\) When it was finally over in 1976, only 13 religious monuments had reportedly survived the destruction.\(^\text{11}\) The late Panchen Lama had also complained and referred to the extent of religious destruction in Tibet during the first General Meeting of China’s Institute of Tibetology in 1988, Beijing. He declared that “the destruction suffered by Monasteries in Tibetan inhabited areas was total and a hundred percent. About 99% suffered total destruction. Those seven or eight which remained also did not escape damage. The condition of the Potala Palace was the best among those which remained. But it too suffered damaged. Therefore, I say that the destruction caused was a 100%”.\(^\text{12}\)

**Restoration of Religious Freedom**

The post Cultural Revolution reforms included the new policy of adopting greater religious tolerance in the whole of China, which was also extended to Tibet. At the

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\(^\text{10}\) Pu Quing, VC TAR, Regional Government, at News Conference in Lhasa on July 18, 1987, reported in *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, July 20, 1987, see also the Heritage foundations “Why the World is Watching Beijing Treatment of Tibet?”


\(^\text{12}\) Cited in Tibet: Proving Truth…. P.82.
Third Plenary Session of the 11th Party Central Committee in 1987, various party and state policies including the policy of ensuring religious freedom was implemented in Tibet.\textsuperscript{13}

Moreover, the 1982 constitution also affirmed freedom of religious belief, and outlawed, discriminations against any citizen because of belief or disbelief in religion. However, it protects normal strictures; no one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Finally, it declares that no religious body or affairs may be subject to foreign domination.\textsuperscript{14}

The regional party then began to address the Tibetans' demand for greater religious freedom. The credit for this must also be given to Wu Jinghua, who was then posted as party Secretary to the TAR. Having called for 'a fresh understanding of Tibet',\textsuperscript{15} Wu Jinghua argued that the party had to accept the fact that there was 'a universal belief in Buddhism among the Tibetan people'.\textsuperscript{16} Wu also accepted the fact that religion dominated every aspect of life in Tibet, and that any attempt to undermine the centrality of Buddhism would be met with resistance.

Since then, religion, which had been denounced in such a lurid fashion, re-emerged as the centre of Tibetan life. The state seemed to genuinely protect religious freedom and also instructed the cadres to respect the religious practices of the people.

\textsuperscript{13} China Facts and Figures, Beijing, 1990, p.8.
\textsuperscript{14} 1982 Constitution, Art. 36, Beijing Review, 52, 27th December, 1982, p.16.
\textsuperscript{15} SWB, 1985, No. FE/7987/B11/7.
\textsuperscript{16} SWB, No. FE/7980/B11/8.
Tibetan lamaists could freely carry out their religious activities – installing shrines in their homes and building sutra chanting halls for daily prayers without interference from the authorities. Tibetans were also allowed to go to any monastery to pray and make offerings, and the celebrations of different religious activities were also permitted.

According to the Chinese government, the state has spent millions of Yuan from the state coffers for the reconstruction and restoration of more than 1,400 ruined monasteries and temples. Repairing of monasteries was done in order to satisfy the wishes of religious believers and to correct the ‘leftists mistakes’. Religious structures including the Potala Palace, the Tashilhunpo Lamasery, Samye Monastery, Sakya Temple, Norbu Linga, etc. were reconstructed and renovated. According to an official report, starting from 1989, 400 million Yuan was earmarked, payable in several stages for the repairs of the Potala\footnote{About Tibet 8. 'Freedom of Religious Belief', New Star Publisher, p.7.}, which has been restored to its former grandeur.

Further, the government funded a lavish stupa and memorial hall in the 10th Panchen Lama's honour in the Tashilhunpo, monastery in Shigatse. The six main halls of the Sera monastery too have been restored to their old splendour with the help of the state. Now, buttered lamps in the Buddhists hall burn all day long and each day, two or three hundred Buddhists come to worship. It is also reported that the monasteries received more than 800 tourists from 66 countries from as even way back as 1983.\footnote{China Daily, 29 April, 1983.} Beijing also reports that, there are now 34,000 monks in Tibet monasteries, the youngest aged barely sixteen.\footnote{Questions and Answers About China's National Minorities, p.7, New World Press, Peking, 1985.
In reality, Tibetans were only too happy to participate in the rehabilitation of their patrimony and contributed a great deal of money themselves. In fact, China also acknowledged that 90 percent of the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries are built with private donations and 90 percent are run on donations from the general population. At the same time, the government discourages contributions to monasteries but allow them if they are "freely given and smaller in quantity".20

The government also reinstated the Tibet Branch of China Buddhist Association in all prefectures and cities in the region. It also founded the Tibet Buddhist Academy, in Beijing, Amdo, TAR and Kham, and all large monasteries have opened Sutra learning classes.21 These Buddhist Associations are set up as an advisory body of the government. However, Tibetans and China watchers charge that these are puppet groups controlled by the Chinese and the colleges also teach Chinese propaganda and history in an effort to produce government collaborators.

Emergence of Tibetan Civil Society

Tibetans took full advantage of China's liberal policy towards religion. As soon as the new policy came into force, Tibetans from all walks of life went back to their earlier practices. All the customary personal rituals and religious observances of Tibetan Buddhism, for which Tibetans had previously received harsh treatment reappeared in

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their daily life. Tibetans discarded the drab uniform of socialism and reverted to traditional clothes. Agricultural practices in nomadic and farming areas reverted to traditional methods. In rural areas, traditional social institutions and patterns of marriage quickly reemerged as the norm. It was evident that years of propaganda and ideological education had made little or no dent on Tibetan society. In no time the Tibetans had discarded the veneer of socialist or proletarian cult imposed by the Chinese and returned to their way of doing things.

It is also clear that twenty years of Communist rule and Chinese presence in Tibet had barely made a dent in their faith or their love and devotion to the Dalai Lama. Tibetans perceive the Dalai Lama simply as their saviour, and even though China tried to separate the Dalai Lama's spiritual and political authority, in the minds of the Tibetans, the two are fused. Tibetans set up altars in their homes, and for the first time since 1959, Tibetans openly displayed pictures of the Dalai Lama which was otherwise banned. They also began making offerings to deities, turning prayer wheels, placing flags on their tents, prostrating in monasteries etc. Just as they used to do before 1950, many Tibetans scrimp and save in order to make generous offerings of money and yak butter to the monasteries.

With relaxation and loosening of control on the social level, daily life became more relaxed as there was no longer any pressure to attend countless meetings. The authorities also allowed hordes of faithfuls to visit holy places on pilgrimage. When the Dalai Lama gave a kala chakra teaching at Bodh Gaya in Northern India in 1983, the Chinese authorities allowed hundreds of Tibetans to travel to India on pilgrimage and also visit relatives.
The government allocated funds for rebuilding of some important monasteries, though the local people were supposed to seek permission from the authorities (Religious Affairs Bureau) for rebuilding some monasteries and temples. However, Tibetans paid no heed to restrictive laws and there was a spontaneous restoration of monasteries throughout Tibet. This was a collective project of the local people, which was paid off with individual donations. Initial tolerance towards religion led to an increase in the number of monks and nuns. In most cases, Tibetan villages decided on their own to rebuild monasteries and staff them with their children.

In Chamdo prefectures alone, it was reported that eighty-six monasteries and 121 smaller temples were restored or newly opened. In some cases the number of monasteries was greater than before the Cultural Revolution.\(^\text{22}\) The authorities could not do much to prevent increasing construction or the growth of population. Young Tibetans began choosing religious life again on their own and hundreds of young boys were sent to join monasteries. In some remote areas like Dagyab, there were reportedly more students entering monasteries than local schools. In fact, it is believed that the number would be higher if the government did not interfere in monastic affairs. However, though Tibetans defy Chinese laws restricting the rebuilding of monasteries and temples, they are also painfully aware that the number of monks and nuns as well as monasteries would never return to the pre-1959 levels.

The Chinese administration on their part, had sought a variety of ways to

curtail and control the process of monastic revitalization. Tibetans and their supporters also claim that the government sponsored only those prominent sites that were highly selected monasteries and monuments which are on the tourists circuit — intended only to serve their political and economic gains. They say that these monasteries serves as museums to attract tourists rather than manifesting living cultural and religious institutions. This seems to be the case because, according to a Chinese source, even during the period of construction, the Potala remained open to domestic and oversees pilgrims and tourists. It is also believed that more money is taken from the monasteries than is returned to the monks for operating expenses and reconstruction.

Nevertheless, till the late 80’s, China seemed to be serious about allowing the Tibetans some freedom to define the type of reforms they wanted. In February 1986, at the request of the local religious followers, China allowed the monks to hold the Monlam ceremony (the great prayer festival), for the first time in twenty years, since it was banned in 1967. This is a major religious event that takes place in Lhasa once a year. On hearing the news, thousands of pilgrims reportedly flocked to Lhasa from every corner of the country to celebrate. It would appear that more than anything the party had done over the past five years, the decision to allow the Monlam ceremony was universally appreciated by the Tibetans.

This display of religious tolerance was probably the authorities’ way of

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24 "Under the Care and Concern of the Party Committee, the People’s Government of the TAR has decided to open the grand prayer ceremony festivals, which has been closed for 20 years since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution" The Grand Buddhist Prayer Ceremony Festival in Lhasa, undated, no author, no publication, apparently the souvenir book of the 1986 Monlam Celebration produced in Tibet.
showing the world that liberalization and reforms included the religious establishment as well. China was forced to keep up the charade by letting the Monlam festival take place in 1988 also, as it had in the previous two years, despite the 1987 demonstration. It had to show the world at large that, their commitment to religious tolerance remained intact.

China makes much of Tibet’s new freedom, but as far as the Tibetans are concerned, no amount of Chinese concession could restore the authority of the religious community. Tibetans considered that the changes had only achieved the righting of the wrongs of the past three decades – and were not an end to grievances. They want full guarantee of the dominance and centralisation of Buddhism in society. Buddhism had always been seen as the core of Tibetan identity, and its clergy the epitome of ‘Tibetans’.

However, the Communist State has always been hostile to religion and has advanced the atheist creed of Marxism. While saying that it respected individual belief, the government had ceaselessly tried to discredit Tibetan Buddhism. Government mistrusts popular faith and see the Tibetans’ demand for greater religious freedom, and institutions of monasteries independent of the party, as a statement of defiance and separatism. The authorities of course do their outmost to resist any demand that advocate independence. It arrests and imprisons any one who advocates Tibetan independence.

While the party policy calls for freedom of religion as well as “freedom to propagate atheism”, it also says that religion has been the root of Tibetan
backwardness.\textsuperscript{25} So the revival of religion as the centre of Tibetan life was seen by the Chinese as well as many Tibetans as a step backward, both in terms of ideology and of the modernization of the region. The authorities also stressed that it would not tolerate the use of religion to undermine the ‘unity of the motherland’ or impede economic development.

In 1983, the party formulated guidelines on religious policy which stated that the long term aim of the party’s religious policy was to see the ‘natural’ withering of religion. It is obvious that the Communist Party could not obscure the fact that its ultimate aim was to see the disappearance of religion.\textsuperscript{26}

Since the late 80’s, attempts were made to limit the growth of religion in Tibet, but these policies were rarely implemented, even after the outbreak of unrest at monasteries in Lhasa in 1987. The party accepted the growing prominence of religion in Tibet, at the same time they were deeply concerned at the continued popularity of Tibetan Buddhism. Religion itself was not really an issue, but they were aware of the potential danger of allowing the monasteries’ unrestricted growth, which the hardliners in the party, feared would inflame separatist’s aspirations. The party saw the key danger as being the development of separatists movement. It was stated that ‘the greatest political dividing line’\textsuperscript{27} was whether one supported the unity of the motherland. Therefore, China was prepared to meet some of the religious grievances, as long as the monks did not make demands for independence. This necessitated the

\textsuperscript{25} Indian Express, New Delhi, 30 July, 1979.
\textsuperscript{27} SWB, 1987, no. FE/8373/B11/1.
use of both the Panchen Lama and Ngapo Ngwang by the party leaders, to expound the message that there was a limit to Chinese tolerance. In June 1987, Ngapo announced that religion must not be taken as an excuse to interfere with economic development. The Panchen Lama, too spoke about the need to limit the number of monks and explained that not all the monasteries that were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution could be renovated.

Tibetans charge that China imposes restrictions in the real teaching and practice of Buddhism, but allows open demonstration of religious fervour by Tibetans, which foreign tourists can see. The limited number of monks allowed to join some of the reconstructed monasteries serve more as showpiece for tourists and, in most cases, caretakers rather than true religious students and practitioners. The central government acknowledge the value of monasteries for tourism, calling for "painstaking efforts to safeguard" monasteries, and to keep them in good repair "so that the surroundings are clean, peaceful, and quiet, suitable for tourism". It is believed that religious practice in Tibet amounts to nothing more than a "façade" for the benefit of the tourists, which reportedly brought in a profit of $11.3 million in foreign exchange in 1995. For the same reason, monks at Kumbum monastery south of Xining were reportedly ordered to put on a religious show when important officials came to visit. Even the Dalai Lama in his statement of March 10, 1987 said that "The so-called religious freedom in Tibet today amounts to permitting our people to


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worship and practice in a merely ritualistic and devotional way. There are both direct and indirect restrictions on the teachings and study of Buddhist philosophy. Buddhism thus, is being reduced to blind faith, which was exactly how the Comunist Chinese view and define religion".34 A monk at the Drepung monastery also dismissed China’s much talked about religious freedom by stating that, “reciting *om mani padme hum*, visiting temples and making offerings to deities are not considered real freedom of religion”.35

**Restrictions on Religious Practices**

China had been bent on showing that it is committed to religious tolerance and reform. However, it could not keep up the show as by December 1989, there were definitive signs that the Chinese authorities had actually began re-imposing explicit restrictions on religious practices.

China forbid by law certain acts of religious devotion, imposed an informal ban on the admission of new monks to monasteries, and ordered a halt on the rebuilding of some monasteries destroyed by the Chinese. It used quotas, and imposed the expulsion and limitation of registration cards to check the growth of the monastic population. Over all, it controlled all religious institutions through its democratic management committee, taking away power from the abbots and other traditional leaders.

34 Proving Truth.... P.82
China also banned all major religious ceremonies except when official approval had been granted. In December 1989, the government issued a statement declaring both tsampa throwing and mass juniper branch burning to be illegal. The authorities banned tsampa throwing as some 1000 Tibetans walking around the Jokhang on October 11, 1989, threw tsampa over each other, celebrating the award of the Nobel Peace prize to the Dalai Lama, six days earlier. It became a political crime and tsampa throwers were declared in the neighbourhood meeting that month to be liable to three years imprisonment. The PLA went searching for Tibetans with bags of tsampa and flour covered fingers. Later, there were reports that a number of people were arrested. The authorities then cancelled the 1990 Monlam festival for two consecutive years. By cancelling the festival the Chinese renounced the symbolic centre of their claim to religious tolerance in Tibet.

The Chinese authorities were concerned at the perceived relationship between the clergy and the continuing activism of the pro-independence movement since the late 80s. Hence, admission to the monasteries is controlled by various departments in the Chinese administration. It has placed limitations on the number of monks allowed in each university and has laid down criteria for admission to a monastery. Previously, boys joined the monastery between the ages of seven and ten, but the government has forbidden to admit anyone under 18 years. The candidate should "love" the country and the Communist party and should have the consent of parents, who are certified as having a 'good political background'. They should also obtain approval in the

Monastery's democratic management committee, etc\textsuperscript{39}. The implication is that without having clearance from the public security that they are good citizens of China, no candidate can be allowed to become a monk.

The restrictions on the admissions, led to the growth of a number of monks and nuns who reside in the monasteries and nunneries illegally, i.e., without registration cards. Whenever there was a security sweep, the government expelled members who lacked local registration cards. By one estimate, as many as ten percent of the monks from large monasteries had been expelled as of 1990, and some nunneries have effectively been emptied by expulsions.\textsuperscript{40} The government reportedly expelled 200 monks and nuns from monasteries and nunneries near Lhasa and returned them to their homes and families, between December 1989 and April 1990.\textsuperscript{41} This was the result of major riots that broke out in the late 80's. Those expelled members were suspected of supporting the independence movement. Thus, many monasteries lost their most promising scholars and leaders. And there is reportedly a lack of textbooks and teachers too. At the same time, registered monks are required to work at the monastery for several years before being allowed to enter formal religious studies.

Following the protests of 1989 and the imposition of martial law in March 1989, all major monasteries like Sera, Ganden and Drepung etc., had permanent encampments of PLA soldiers. The government had also stopped giving resident

\textsuperscript{39} Tibet: Proving Truth From Facts ., p.84.
\textsuperscript{41} See Defying the Dragon, 1991: pp.18-19.
registration cards to monks in these monasteries. In 1992, the Drepung monastery lost many of its members through their participation in the early protests, which resulted in their being put under heavy surveillance. Further, in 1990, China moved tanks into the capital, outside the Jokhang temple. Monks and nuns are closely watched, so as to restrict their contact with tourists. The government also sent 'work teams' to prominent monasteries to conduct political education classes. Monks and nuns are taught in these classes that the west is bad and that Tibet was always a part of China and monks should not stage demonstrations.

The presence of the 'work teams', police, PLA soldiers and tanks in monasteries vividly illustrate the continuing and intensified interference in monastic life, which further weakens China's claim to religious tolerance. However, while on a visit to Ganden monastery on October 13, 1987 Raidi justified the Chinese actions by explaining to the officials of the monastery that, "it is necessary to teach monks to abide by law and behave themselves". 42

However, monks regard monastic disciplinary action and expulsion of monks as an internal matter and deeply resent these interferences in their monastic affairs, which they believe is the responsibility of the assembly of monks, its elected leaders and the democratic management committee. The Chinese administrators have no place interfering in the traditional procedures and rules of the Buddhist Sangha. 43

Monks and nuns, as well as lay people strongly resented the keeping of police and paramilitary forces at the monasteries, regimenting the functions of the monasteries through the state bureaucracy. Even the late Panchen Lama, on September 28, 1988 had called for the eradication of Chinese “administrative interference in the religious activities in Tibet (TAR) and other Tibetan inhabited regions and increased Tibetan regulations of religious affairs”. Later in 1989, he said that the “leftist mistakes” Chinese code for religious intolerance still poses a more serious threat than the “rightist” errors of separatist militants.

In Tibet, before 1959, large monasteries received income from extensive estate holdings, as well as endowment funds, government grants and donations, from the faithful. Monasteries also controlled enormous estates: for example, Drepung monastery was reported to have held 185 estates, 20,000 serfs, 300 pastures, and 16,000 nomads. The yields from the holdings were used in part to maintain the ten thousand-odd monks it housed. Since the 80’s monasteries have supported entirely and voluntarily by layman, consisting of donations to temples, sponsored (money and food) ceremonies or contributions to individual monks. But these funds and donations earmarked for religious purposes are controlled by the resident democratic committee. It is reported that monks are forced to live in cramped quarters with many sharing a single room without monastery support for food, clothing and other necessities.

The government, while expressing ‘liberal religious policy’ still minimizes the

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44 Tibet – Proving Truth, p.85.
45 Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 30 January, 1989.
restoration of religious sites, just enough to satisfy the needs of religious practitioners. It rules that restoration and maintenance of the monasteries must be authorise by the government and financed by government appropriations.\textsuperscript{48} All provincial-level have clauses to the effect that "any renovation, constructions, or extensions of Churches and temples must be approved by the department incharge of religious affairs of the people's government at the country level or above".\textsuperscript{49} Moreover it says that people may not "on their own initiative and without permission construct temples or organise religious activities".\textsuperscript{50} Human Rights Watch / Asia reported that Tibetans must be persistent in their attempts to attain building approval and that there have been arrests for unauthorized construction activities.\textsuperscript{51} Particular emphasis is placed on curtailing voluntary contributions to religious institutions, and holds that all monasteries should now become self-supporting. Only the few monks and nuns serving on democratic management, the administration councils of the larger monasteries, receive salaries. Communist China disregards the fact that Tibetans consider voluntary giving as the highest religious value. They believe in acquiring religious merits for future lives through good deeds and unselfish actions for the benefit of others. Donations to the monasteries is one way of achieving it. Universally, in Buddhist societies, the laity offers support to the monks who, merely by the act of receiving, confer spiritual benefit on the laity.

Tibetans also claim that the authorities arrest and torture monks and nuns suspected of having independent thoughts. A compilation made in the Autumn of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{50} ibid, Art. (31).
\item \textsuperscript{51} Asia Watch, Human Rights in Tibet, (New York, 1988) p.15
\end{itemize}
1991, of Tibetans imprisoned for political offences since the outbreak of protests in 1989, identifies 360 prisoners by name of whom 120 were released,\textsuperscript{52} two-thirds of these imprisoned were monks and nuns, one-third of the prisoners were women, 80% being nuns. Tibetans were also arrested for carrying pictures of the Dalai Lama because China alleged that it had political significance. Prayers composed by the Dalai Lama, have been banned, even though it has no political content.\textsuperscript{53}

These restrictions on religious practices and the government control over the monasteries were seen by almost all Tibetans as directly interfering with the traditional relationship between the monastic community and the laity. However, China fears that monasteries are at the heart of resistance to Chinese rule and complete freedom would allow the monasteries to grow and become centres of nationalism. It has therefore decided to impose controls on monks and monasteries but let the lay people perform their individual devotion.

However, party members are still required to be atheists. In a propaganda guide for party cadres issued by the Ganze Prefectures Propaganda Department in February 1996, cadres are instructed to "creatively carry out the party's policy to mobilize the masses to work harder, to create and improve the material and spiritual conditions, to accomplish our due responsibilities in order to promote the natural extinction of religion".\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} "Political Prisoners in Tibet", \textit{Asia Watch}, and \textit{TIN}, February 1992.
\textsuperscript{53} Proving Truth, p.85.
\textsuperscript{54} Chapter 5 of "Propaganda Speeches on Strengthening National Solidarity and Preserving the unification of the motherland", by the propaganda committee of the Ganze prefectures committee of the communist party of China, February 1990, translated from Chinese and reprinted in \textit{Defying the Dragon}, 1991, p.112. Ganze prefectures, one of the two autonomous prefecture in Sichuan province.
Since the beginning of early 90’s, there has been further tightening of bureaucratic controls over religion. TIN reported that by the end of 1993, the work team returned, and have been more active since then, though in 1992, it was less evident and active. The work teams were sent to nunneries around Lhasa in 1993 and early 1994, before the third forum was convened. It searched for suspected dissidents in monasteries and nunneries to forcibly “educate” monks and nuns in “acceptable” behaviour and political beliefs. An American scholar who visited Tibet in the summer of 1993 confirms that “thought control units are being increasingly established in monasteries and nunneries.”

In June 1995, the government announced a new category of monastic administrative; the temple registration official was to report directly to the work teams. According to a senior Chinese official, registration was necessary to give religious places legal stature and to “improve the management of religious affairs”, and that the process of registration should be used to publicize the party’s policies on religion. Tibetans charged that the committee and the Buddhist Associations were staffed with government collaborators and informers. This report also indicated that the officials were called upon to act as enforcers of policies, along with their existing role of informants and ideological educators.

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57 Jipu Ping – Cuocideng (Kyibug Phutso Tseten), V. Chairman of the TAR government, quoted in Tibet Daily, SWB, July 21, 1995.
It is obvious that the Communist Chinese party had certainly not relinquished the hope of eliminating all religion, the opium of the people. It had officially declared that a sufficient number of monasteries, monks and nuns now existed to “satisfy the daily religious needs of the masses” and that more rebuilding was not needed, and that religion should never be allowed to “spread unchecked”. It stated that “there is too much religious activity” which interferes with productivity and that some of the party members were “quite enthusiastic about participating in religious activity”. 58 In February 15, 1996, Tibet Daily reported that Monasteries where “Political Problems often arise must be close for restructuring and given at that line to rectify”. 59 Since 1994, the government outlawed the display of the Dalai Lama’s photos in homes and monasteries. It announced that party workers and cadres would not be allowed to possess or display photos of the Dalai Lama, who according to the Chinese had the intention of splitting Tibet from the motherland. By the spring of 1996, attacks on religious belief grew even more shrill when a Xinhua article reported that some cadres “do not realise the deceitfulness, ignorance and poisoning of religion”. 60

The Panchen Lama affair and the arrest of monks from Tashilhunpo monasteries in July 1995, show a dramatic escalation in the range of religious restrictions in monastic institutions. This has convinced many observers that China is not keeping its promise to allow religious freedom. The captive boy, six year old

59 Retures, “China Vows to close problem temples in Tibet ”, Feb 23, 1996
Gedhun Choekyi Nyima—named by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, has become a symbol of religious repression to Tibetans inside the TAR, and a sign that atheist China insists on controlling the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. The new religious policies established by the Third Forum also announced a campaign against the Dalai Lama, demanding that Tibetans should denounce their highly revered figure in order to demonstrate their loyalty as Chinese citizens. In January 1995, a committee in charge of a propaganda campaign against the Dalai Lama was publicly launched in the official media. 61 By April 1996, the Chinese authorities once again intensified their campaign against the Dalai Lama and ordered all religious buildings, shops, hotels, and even private houses to take down any photograph of the man now described by the Chinese as a ‘Political fugitive’ and ‘not a religious leader’. 62 The party also required each monk and nun to “Politically draw a clear line of demarcation with the Dalai Clique”, in other words to give a formal declaration of his or her opposition to the Dalai Lama and his politics. 63

China had frequently repudiated the Dalai Lama’s political status and views, but had not challenged him on personal or religious grounds. For the first time since the reform, the Chinese authorities attacked his religious standing and suitability for leadership. China is taking the position that he is no longer a religious leader. 64 For the last ten years, authorities permitted respect for the Dalai Lama as a religious leader. But with the new strategy this situation appears to be changing. According to

61 Ibid.
62 Tesering Sakya, The Dragon in the Land of the Snows, p446.
63 A Golden Bridge...into the new era (Dus rabs gsar par skyod-pa'; gsen zam) by the propaganda committee of the TAR committee party, (Tibetans People’s Publishing House, October 1, 1994), (this is the public parts of the decision of the Third forum which were divided into 14 sections and issued as document.)
64 See “Tibetan Deputy says Dalai Lama not Religious Leader”, Xinhua New Agency, March 10, 1996. 188
some observers, the shift could potentially lead to religious respect for the Dalai Lama being regarded as a political crime.\textsuperscript{65}

All these reports from Tibetan, and China watchers and supporters, on China’s management of religious activities in Tibet, point to a tightening of bureaucratic control over religious practices in Tibet which the state had always retained but not always chosen to exercise.\textsuperscript{66} However, in response to all these reports and accusations, Shen Guofeng of the Chinese Foreign Ministry reportedly said that some of the events held up as example of repression “never happened”. He once more called attention to Tibet’s economic growth and asserted that “religious beliefs have been protected, we have built many temples”, meaning that there should be no further cause for complaints as China has successfully improved the economic conditions in Tibet.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The Religious issue was and still is regarded by the Chinese leaders as central to the Tibetan question.\textsuperscript{67} China is aware that religious repression would definitely antagonise the Tibetan people irreconcilably. However, officials believe that they are the ultimate authority on religion and that it makes perfect sense to impose restrictions on religion. China views its repressive policies as a response purely on the level of security. It believes that imposing conditions in one way or another limits the

\textsuperscript{65} “China Bans Photograph of Dalai Lama”, \textit{TNN}, October 16, 1994.
\textsuperscript{67} “Yang Shangleun Discusses Tibet with NPC Deputies”, \textit{NCNA (Xinhua)}, March 31, 1989, in SWB, FC/0425 C1/5, April 4, 1989.
autonomy of religious institutions and the growth of the individual elements of religion. But, for Tibetans the two issues are intimately bound up with National Consciousness. They see the re-introduction of specific restrictions on their religion clearly as the collapse of a commitment to liberalization.

The re-emergence of Tibetan Civil Society, has been discussed from 1980-87. It can be seen that the re-emergence of this civil-society is signified by the relative religious freedom, re-opening and restoration of Gompas in Tibet. Traditionally, Gompas are autonomous socio- religious institutions in Tibetan society and state, relatively free from the state intervention. They are real indicators of civil society in the sense that monastic institutions are informal, civil, cultural, or social institutions functioning within the society and are relatively free from politics. The communist authorities have demolished or restricted the social space by denying religious freedom and by controlling the religious institutions (Gompas). Therefore the brief period from 1980-87 marked the resurgence or regaining of Tibetan civil society.

Compared to the conditions during the Cultural Revolution, there has been tremendous change or relaxation in “normal” religious activities. Tibetans no doubt, appreciate the freedom they enjoy since the reforms. At the same time, it is apparent that, Tibetans do not perceive the toleration of some religious practices as constituting religious freedom. The issue for Tibetans is not individual religious freedom per se, but the role of the monasteries in society. They see restrictions on religion as preventing the monasteries from recovering their former institutional autonomy, and their rebuilding and restaffing are understood by Tibetans, monks and the people
alike, as the restoration of an institution outside government political control. Thus, despite an atmosphere of greater leniency and return of outward religious practice to a certain degree, Tibetans say that there is actually very little religious freedom in Tibet.

China is officially an atheist state and it continues to generate policies such as the ban on party members practising religion. Tibetans cite a whole series of restrictions on their religion – interference in monastic affairs, religious practices, appointment of leaders of their choice, setting quotas on the number of monks and nuns a monastery should have, stepping up religious arrests and efforts to repress religion as a source of political instability. Most of all, the Panchen Lama dispute and China’s attack on the Dalai Lama’s belief Beijing’s claim that Tibetans are free to worship as they please.

The government may have pledged to protect Tibetan religious rights on paper, but there is no guarantee considering China had always seen religion as a custom of minorities, linking it with minority affairs. China even when bent on showing religious tolerance had always subtly attacked the Tibetan’s faith. It shows condescension and contradictions of China’s official policy towards religion. In fact China would be happy to do away with religion altogether. But this would alienate the people and invite an all out defiance against China’s rule. It would also destroy China’s most prized profitable tourist industry.

China’s attitude towards religion and the arrogance and contempt displayed by so many Chinese cadres, coupled with it’s inability to fathom the souls of the

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68 Donald D Schwartz, Circle of protest, p.69.
Tibetan peoples’ deep spiritual yearning, has stiffened the resistance of monks, nuns and lay people alike. They simply refuse to give up their religion.

The Chinese media maintains that things are almost like they were before the Chinese takeover. However, judging from these experiences, evidences point to the fact that the real policy of the Chinese remains, to eradicate religion from all parts of China, including the occupied territories such as Tibet. The Red Flag makes this perfectly clear.69

The Chinese statement speaks for the future of Tibetan religious culture itself. An official document entitled, “Policy on Nationalities and Religion” brought out in 1991 states, “We should oppose all those who work to split the motherland in the name of nationality and religion. There should be no hesitation in taking harsh decisions to deal with any political disturbances, carried out in the name of nationality and religion and in doing so, the states’ political, judiciary, and even military forces should be used”.70

China definitely shifted its religious policy in Tibet to actively suppress and restrict further religious growth. According to John Ackerly director of the Washington based ICT, and author of the report “A Season to Purge”, “as far as the Chinese are concerned, Tibetan Buddhism is out of control and it has to stop”. The Chinese see Buddhism so closely intertwined with Tibetan nationalism, that they are

70 Cited in Tibet: Proving..., pp.85-86.
willing to crush Buddhism to crush the independence movement.71 Most of all, China’s interference in the choice of the Panchen Lama’s reincarnation is the ultimate affront to Tibetan faith, indicating that China is now prepared to mock and even appropriate everything that is sacred to Tibetans. By stripping the Dalai Lama of the customary right to choose the Panchen Lama, China is seeking to make the Dalai Lama irrelevant to Tibetans inside Tibet. If the present Chinese religious policies on Tibet continues, it will definitely lead to substantial erosion of religious freedom and Tibetan culture. It is probable that very soon Tibet will be functioning without religion and culture as well. The only hope is that, as long as the present Dalai Lama is alive it will be difficult for Beijing to obliterate the Dalai Lama from the fate of the Tibetans. As things stands, it is evident that there is universal devotion and loyalty for the Dalai Lama and it is clear that the Tibetans see him quite simply as their saviour, Kyabgon.

Thus having examined the above reports, no matter how many promises China has made to “protect religious belief” all the above evidences belie China’s claim to religious tolerance. Rather, it is obvious that all talks about ‘religious freedom’ is to beguile the international public opinion, and to placate popular discontent while mobilizing support for the economic reform in Tibet, and to ultimately win the acceptance of Chinese rule in Tibet.