

Spirituality in Limbo: An Observation and Analysis of Mongolia's Modern
Religious Climate

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Dedicated to Mom, Al, and Jason for giving me the curiosity, courage, and opportunity to travel across the world to a country they had heard of only in legends.

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This paper is essentially a history of religion in Mongolia with the purpose of illuminating the present state of religion at a socially, culturally, and politically unique point in Mongolia's history. It has only been fourteen years since Mongolia experienced a political transition from totalitarianism to democracy, and the country now finds itself in a kind of "Limbo" with respect to not only the political state of the nation, but also the spiritual state of its individuals. The result is a religious climate filled with uncertainty and speculation, but also with passion and love. I attempt to explore this current setting in this paper.

I traveled to Tsetserleg in Arkhangai aimag and lived there with a lama then a pastor for a total of approximately two weeks. My goal during this period was to experience firsthand the current religious climate as it relates to both Buddhists and Christians. Having a strong Christian background myself, and identifying myself as a Christian still learning and searching for a more "complete" personal spirituality, I nonetheless feel satisfied that I have provided as unbiased a view of religion as possible in this project. I faced great emotional and intellectual difficulties attempting to reconcile the assumptions and expectations I held with the observations I made in Tsetserleg. Eventually I found myself "stripped" of explanations and having to rediscover what I found to be "good" or "bad" in religion, evangelism, and spirituality. I experienced great confusion and frustration as I was forced to realize the extreme limits of my understanding and perspective, and reconcile that fact with my view of religion and the spirituality of others. This is the conflict that most significantly shapes this paper and the course it takes.

The paper opens with two distinct images, or “snapshots”—one image from within a monastery and the other from within a church. These images are devoid of analysis and are purely descriptive. The paper will eventually lead back to these two images, but will have provided the reader with a more complete understanding of them before their reintroduction. I have composed a paper that is strongly academic at first—reliant upon research and stripped of emotion and not explicitly experiential—as it follows the course of history. As the paper progresses, however, history becomes the present, and my personal experiences become more significant and influential. In the conclusion I analyze the conflicts that face religion in Mongolia today, while offering my own findings and suggestions as a limited observer.

A constant theme within this paper is the continuous and cyclical nature of history. Indeed, it is partially for this reason that I have decided not to separate the paper into sections but to present it as a connected whole—just as it is impossible to understand or analyze a point in history without taking into account the influences or ideologies that led up to that point, it is inadvisable that the reader attempt to understand this paper without considering it in its entirety.

“Can I bring back the words? Will thought of transcription haze my mental open
eye?
The kindly search for growth, the gracious desire to exist of the flowers, my near
ecstasy at existing among them
The privilege to witness my existence—you too must seek the sun...”¹

-Allen Ginsberg

“We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”²

-T.S. Eliot

“I came to study culture but I discovered history instead.”³

-Renato Rosaldo, anthropologist

¹ Allen Ginsberg. “Transcription of Organ Music.” *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959.

² T.S. Eliot. “Four Quartets.” *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962. pp. 145. Quoted in Craig Storti. “The End of All Our Suffering.” *The Art of Crossing Cultures*. USA: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1989.

³ Renato Rosaldo. *Ilongot Headhunting, 1883-1974, A Study in Society and History*. Quoted in Louis A. Sass. “Anthropology’s Native Problem: Revisionism in the field.” *Harper’s*. May, 1986.

The small, yellow temple, perched halfway up the largest of the mountains that surround Tsetserleg, is visible from almost any point in the town. No one enters or exits the temple, and no sound comes through its walls. It is inactive, but constantly exhibits the prominent, silver Tibetan letters posted along its roof and facing the town. To the right of the monastery sits a calm, solitary ger with a pipe protruding from its ceiling and emitting smoke. At the rear of the temple are large, dramatic rocks and a small trail winding through them. The short trail leads less than twenty meters behind the temple, to a large *ovoo*—a religious site displaying tall sticks, new, bright blue scarves, animal bones, and broken bottles. Broken glass covers the ground surrounding the *ovoo* and the temple. The trail circles and returns to the temple's front, which overlooks the entire town. The temple constantly watches the small valley, tucked in by prominent mountains. Small houses and gers rest side-by-side and blanket the entire area, as does an ever-present layer of fog born from tall chimneys emitting the effects of the constant burning of coal. Closer, at the base of the mountain, rest several elaborate but destroyed and abandoned monastic buildings—a reminder of both Tsetserleg's history as a once-thriving religious community and the communist purges of the twentieth century. Farther down, as the ground begins to level, sits another beautifully decorated, square structure—one of only two monasteries in the town still active.

The chanting penetrates through the wall and reaches one's ears before the monastery's closed door creaks open. The room inside is large, square, and dimly-lit. At its center stand four wide red columns that seem to entirely bear the

weight of a ceiling composed of blue tiles, each containing an image of a gold dragon. Large, colorful paintings of deities hang from the ceiling and seem to reach from the heavens to the humans below. The bottoms of the images hang only feet above fifteen shaved heads belonging to lamas draped in robes of vivid reds and yellows. The lamas, all males ranging from adolescence to mid-adulthood, sit along two benches that face each other. As they sit, they turn pages of fragile texts and rhythmically pronounce the Tibetan syllables in low voices. Sometimes a lama looks up from the text in his hand to see who entered; to take a sip of tea; to toss a small handful of small grains into the air; to look at another lama and smile. The chanting occasionally reaches a climax as certain lamas reach for their respective instruments—conch shells, drums, cymbals—and engage in a brief, beautiful cacophony.

Visitors surround the seated lamas on all sides. Some fall to their knees in front of an intricate painting or precious statue depicting a seated deity. Some pause briefly toward the back of the room in order to place a small amount of offerings in a large bowl surrounded by burning incense. Some offer money to various objects including statues, paintings, pictures of the Dalai Lama, and prayers wrapped in silk—a practice which results in a thin layer of notes lying along the wall and on the floor. Others walk along the room's border and rotate metallic prayer wheels of varying sizes that line the walls. Some visitors sit in chairs and observe; some sit and talk to each other; some answer their ringing phones.

Some have just entered the room and immediately walk to their left and enter a line that leads to an odd, blue, wooden cage-like structure that houses an older lama who looks through a square opening. The visitors speak briefly with the man and hand him money, at which point he makes a note on a piece of paper. Upon speaking with the lama in the wooden structure, the visitor walks clockwise to a small table at which another solitary lama sits. This lama reads the visitor's "receipt" and proceeds to recite a Tibetan prayer from several pieces of unbound rectangular paper. In front of one lama sits a man and a younger boy. As he chants, they kneel and glance around them—at the lama; at the text in his hand; at each other; at the floor; at the person who just entered the monastery; at the lama again. Their eyes, although wandering, are serious and somewhat sad. A lama at another table recites a prayer to a woman who sits with her hands clasped and her head bowed. A stick of incense burns between them.

At another edge of town sits a large, plain theater, most frequently used by local residents for dramas and musical performances. Today, however, approximately one-hundred people trickle into the large main hall for another reason—to hear the teachings of Jesus Christ. The large crowd consists primarily of those between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, but some older individuals are present, and several children roam among the seats playing games. On stage, two young men lead worship—one sings while the other plays a keyboard. They display their passion by lifting their hands and closing their eyes at certain moments. Sometimes the audience, like a mirror, reflects this passion as individuals stand and sing and raise their open hands. Although some close their

eyes, others prefer to read the lyrics that are projected onto a large screen on the stage. During worship, two church leaders, including the pastor, pace back and forth in front of the stage, apparently in prayer. Eventually the music stops and the pastor, a large Mongolian man, steps onto the stage while individuals in the audience turn and greet each other with large smiles.

The pastor's voice and gestures are powerful and accentuated by his large frame. As he speaks about Jesus, the people occasionally respond to his words by shouting "Amen!" The pastor holds the audience's attention well throughout his one-hour sermon and finishes with a prayer. He walks off-stage as another, smaller pastor advances to the front with six teenage Mongolians. They stand along the front of the stage as the pastor introduces them. They will be baptized. The pastor asks them each several questions, including, "Do you love Jesus? Will you always love Jesus?" to which they each respond, "Amen." The pastor dips his hand in a shallow pail of water carried by an assistant, and places it on the head of each individual while reciting a brief prayer. Upon completing the final baptism, the audience applauds, and the individuals return to their seats.

The larger pastor returns to the stage and asks the audience if it has any requests for specific prayers. Several individuals raise their hands—one woman's husband recently broke his arm. A woman in a wheelchair moves down the central aisle toward the stage. At the stage, the pastor declares she was stabbed in the back of her neck, resulting in complete paralysis. Today, however, she has the ability to move everything except her legs. He attributes the improvement to God and calls those individuals with prayer requests to the stage to join him and the

woman in the wheelchair. Situated in a circle in front of the audience, the pastor and those who voiced their requests bow their heads as the pastor prays. In response, those in the audience also bow their heads and raise their open hands toward the circle.

The prayer concludes as those in the audience raise their heads and again face the stage, where a skinny man of about thirty years speaks on the importance of donating money to the church. As he speaks, he raises a blue bucket and places it at the front of the stage. Immediately a multitude of people in the audience stand, walk up the center aisle, and place varying amounts of cash in the bucket. The enthusiasm and involvement of the audience has easily survived the three-hour service, which concludes with announcements and a song that declares, “The love of Jesus is in my heart.”

Fourteen years after Mongolia adopted an open, free democracy, Mongolians today enjoy the ability to explore and personally define their spirituality and religious identity. In light of these new freedoms, the most prominent examples of post-1990 religious changes are the rise of Christianity and revival of Buddhism. These two forces, sometimes merging and oftentimes conflicting, shed valuable light on various issues concerning the definition and evolution of religions, the role of government in preserving a “traditional” religion, and the true meaning and survival of culture and tradition. The effects have not simply been internal as various foreign organizations have interpreted the political transition as an opportunity to spread their ideologies and faith to the Mongolian nation. The effects that have ensued—both positive and negative—

find their roots in past centuries, revealing the cyclical nature of history.

Mongolia today finds itself in possession of a unique religious climate influenced and formed by centuries of interactions between religions, cultures, and ideals—a climate that raises questions of tradition, preservation, evolution, and evangelism and makes clear the present state of Mongolia as not simply a “new start,” but as a continuation of history.

Many modern scholars agree that Buddhism first entered Mongolia during the fourth century, a period when the influence of Tibet significantly grew and its Buddhist ideology spread to those independent nomadic Mongolian tribes to the north and east of the region.⁴ The presence of the religion was not permanent, however, and would take several centuries to take root in Mongolia and displace the prevalent shamanism and worship of nature that dominated the nation’s spirituality. Indeed, Mongolians’ early worship of nature appears to be entirely consistent with the people’s nomadic lifestyle, which was completely influenced by the apparent whims of weather, landscape, and other natural forces.

Mongolian historian Batbayar Bat-Erdene, or Baabar, writes that the nomads communicated “only with nature....Since pastoral nomads were at the mercy of nature and were forced to keep peace with it, human interdependence was relatively low.”⁵ However, such a state would not survive growing international influences, and as Central Asia became a prominent political and economic center

⁴ "Mongolia." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2004. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 24 Nov. 2004 <<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=27424>> and Khirghis, Munkh-Ochir Dorjjugder. Lecture on “The Great Khaans.” School for International Training Mongolia. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. 27 August 2004 agree and further elaborate upon this fact.

⁵ Bat-Erdene, Batbayar. *History of Mongolia*. Ed. C. Kaplonski. Trans. D. Suhjargalmaa, S. Burenbayar, H. Hulan, and N.Tuya. Cambridge, UK: The White Horse Press, 1999. Pg. 7.

during the era of the Huns—especially due to the significant effects of Turkish trade roads connecting China, India, Persia, and Constantinople—influences from across the globe, and especially the West, penetrated Mongolia and affected the course the people’s spirituality would take throughout its future.⁶

Baabar writes that trade brought not only a new calendar and alphabet to Central Asia, but also the influences and ideologies of Islam, Manichaeism,⁷ Nestorian Christianity, and Buddhism.⁸ Nestorian Christianity, a sect of Christianity that holds the belief that Christ was composed of one human and one divine person “loosely joined by a moral union,” and thus “denies the reality of the incarnation and represents Christ as a God-inspired man rather than as God-made-man,” became the most influential, prominent form of Christianity in Central Asia throughout the seventh and eighth centuries due largely to missionary activities.⁹ The effects of these missionary efforts were apparent throughout the following centuries, as various tribes and regions of Mongolia adopted the religion.

The nomadic Mongolians were indeed ideal targets for the spread of various ideologies not only due to their ability and tendency to travel great distances, and thus experience regions and individuals of differing ideas, but also

⁶ Baabar, 10, 18-19. On pg. 10 Baabar goes so far as to declare that Mongolian nomads “never borrowed their world outlook from the Chinese but from the West,” thus further emphasizing the prominent, early influence of Western ideologies on the Mongolian people.

⁷ “Manichaeism.” Encyclopædia Britannica. 2004. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 22 Nov. 2004 <<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=9050539>>. The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes Manichaeism as a Gnostic, dualistic religion. The religion was founded in Persia in the third century AD by Mani, but spread quickly due to its focus on evangelism and translation of scriptures and emphasis on its ability to fit into various cultures.

⁸ Baabar, 18.

⁹ “Nestorius.” Encyclopædia Britannica. 2004. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 23 Nov. 2004 <<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=5191>>. More information on Nestorianism and Nestorius can be found at Baabar, 21, and “Nestorianism.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. 22 November 2004 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nestorianism>>.

due to their tendency to be exceptionally tolerant of such varying ideologies. The influence the arrival of various religions and ideologies had on the Mongolian people was significant, but, as Baabar notes, was not sufficient to separate the Mongolian from his innate reliance upon and respect for nature:

[Nomads] religiously believed that all was in the hands of the Eternal Heaven and they worshiped the sun, the moon and nature as a whole. Being utterly dependent on nature, they never attempted to master it, believing it to be the ultimate, perfect product of Heaven. From this belief had grown their love of nature and they held it in awe.¹⁰

The majority of Mongolians from this period through the reign of Chinggis Khaan predominantly identified themselves as followers of shamanism.¹¹ A recent lecture given by Sh. Bira at the Royal Asiatic Society illuminates this early, “fundamental concept of shamanism” that existed among Mongolians. This religion focused upon the worship of a single God of “universal power” by the name *Tenggeri*. Chinggis Khaan and other Great Khaans succeeded in using this religion to portray rulers as originating from and being descendants of *Tenggeri*. Thus the vast militaristic expansion of the Mongolian empire under the Great Khaans was largely inspired by a fervent religious belief—largely perpetuated by the Khaans as a political ideology—that “the power of Mongolian khans had to be expanded wherever Blue Heaven extended over the world; and it had to be as eternal as the Eternal Heaven.”¹² This belief coincided with religious tolerance among both the Mongolian people and their leaders. Baabar recalls Chinggis Khaan’s tendency to surround himself with various counselors including “many

¹⁰ Baabar, 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹² Sh. Bira. “Mongolian Tenggerism and Modern Globalism: A retrospective outlook on globalisation.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Lecture at the Royal Asiatic Society, 10 October 2002.

Muslim astronomers, Chinese men of letters and Buddhist lamas of various standing.”¹³

Gradually, and especially over the course of the reign of Chinggis Khaan, the various philosophies in Mongolia, and especially the most prominent religions of Islam, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity, began to compete for followers as the prevalence of the religions grew. Interestingly, as Baabar notes, the period immediately following the reign of Chinggis Khaan was dominated by Nestorian Christianity. Perhaps the most famous—and subtle—evidence of the presence of Christianity during this period is, as Baabar speculates, the *Secret History of the Mongols*, which, he claims, “was authored by a person knowledgeable of the New Testament” due to its “composition and logic of the narration.”¹⁴ Nestorian Christianity penetrated the mentalities of Mongolia’s leaders as various high-ranking women who married and eventually gave birth to khans followed the Nestorian faith.¹⁵

Perhaps the most notable example of a high-ranking Christian woman in Mongolian history is that of Sorgagtani Beki, the mother of Monk and Khubilai Khaan who, although Christian, remained highly sympathetic to various religions in Mongolia. Although Khubilai would never officially convert to his mother’s faith, her influence on him would be apparent throughout his reign, which would become among the most significant periods of Mongolian history. Baabar

¹³ Baabar, 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., 41, 42.

¹⁵ On pages 41 and 42, Baabar specifically notes that the “Hereid and Naiman women whom Chinggis brought as wives for his sons were all of Christian faith.” He also notes the wife of Ogoodei Khaan, Toregene-Hatan, as being a Nestorian woman who had a significant influence on her husband and son, Guyug Khaan. According to Baabar, Guyug Khaan’s wife, Queen Oghul, was also a Christian.

specifically notes Khubilai's request to the Roman Pope for "hundreds of missionaries" to be sent to Mongolia, his founding of the first Catholic church in China, and his later requests that Catholic missionaries "teach him and his subjects the Christian faith" as direct results of his mother's sympathetic Christian influence.¹⁶ Interestingly, in spite of such welcoming actions toward Christianity, the "second introduction of Buddhism" in Mongolia took place during the reign of Khubilai Khaan. Thus, coinciding with this growth in Nestorian Christianity was an emphasis on Buddhism that significantly took hold during the reign of Khubilai Khaan.

The expansion of the Mongolian empire brought Mongolians into direct contact with various foreign ideologies that produced various results and, as Sh. Bira argues, created an early form of "globalization." Bira notes the conflict between Mongolia's Tenggerism and Islam as a significant reason Mongolia encouraged Christian ideology and relatively close relations with Christendom during the 13th and 14th centuries. Not only was this a strategic move in order to overcome Islam, but it also "freed the local Christians from the centuries-old persecution of Muslims," which encouraged Christians to greatly respect the Mongolian empire. Bira emphasizes the global effect of Mongolia's unification of various religions and ideologies under its vast empire: "...peoples, ideas, information and commerce between different countries flowed freely. Relations between East and West had, thus, never been so close and productive as they were during the period of Mongol rule." In addition, Bira notes, "the more that communications, technology and trade [multiplied] interactions among

¹⁶ Baabar, 45.

civilizations, the more people increasingly [accorded] greater relevance to their own national and cultural identity and differences.” Bira highlights the cyclical nature of history and the tendency of history to repeat itself through his comparison of this era in Mongolian history with modern globalization: “The Mongolian experience shows that globalization as a worldwide historical phenomenon was not quite such a new process in world history.”¹⁷ Ironically, although Mongolia played a large role in early globalization, the same issue would become a controversial force concerning the preservation of Mongolia’s cultures and traditions centuries later, after the eventual fall of communism.

There is evidence that as early as Chinggis Khaan’s rule, leaders recognized the potentially enormous influence religion could hold over the Mongolian people for political purposes. Indeed, this fact is emphasized by Sh. Bira’s analysis of the manipulation of Tenggerism during Mongolia’s vast expansion. Baabar writes that during the reign of Guyug Khaan, Mongols needed “a monolithic religion to help them consolidate their power.” It was under the influence of Guyug’s brother, military commander Godon, that Buddhism became emphasized due to its “teaching on the union between the religion and state.”¹⁸ This mentality toward the role of religion in state unification would play a significant role generations later, following the deterioration of the vast Mongolian empire. However, and perhaps more importantly concerning the present focus, is the effect Godon’s encouragement of Buddhism had concerning the arrival of various sects of Buddhism into Mongolia during his reign, and the

¹⁷ Bira’s ideas are greatly elaborated upon in Sh. Bira. “Mongolian Tenggerism and Modern Globalism.”

¹⁸ Baabar, 66.

competition for the favor of the Mongolian rulers that resulted among them. Succeeding ruler Monk Khaan favored the Karma-pa sect of Tibetan Buddhism; however it was not until the later reign of Khubilai Khaan that Buddhism, as it had for the first time in the fourth century, was once again officially introduced to Mongolia.¹⁹

Khubilai Khaan personally converted to Buddhism in the year 1242 and henceforth gave his Buddhist advisers more influence than those of other religions through more heavily relying upon their advice. As a result, the Buddhists found ways to reinforce their positions with respect to rival ideologies.²⁰ In later years, Khubilai Khaan decided to adopt the Sa-skyia sect of Tibetan Buddhism—a form of the religion that was not only relatively simpler than other denominations and, thus, easier for the nomad to adopt, but also emphasized ideas of the unification of government and religion—as the official state religion.²¹

Thus the “second introduction of Buddhism” in Mongolia took place during the tolerant reign of Khubilai Khaan, when a majority of Mongolians did not identify with the Buddhist religion, and at a time of significant growth in Nestorian Christianity.²² Although the reintroduction resulted in the script that is still in use today, it did not spread outside Beijing.²³ Interestingly, this “second introduction” was not largely a result of cultural interactions or intellectual exploration among the Mongolian people, but was the effect of the

¹⁹ Baabar, 66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²² Munkh-Ochir Dorjjugder Khirghis. Lecture on “The Great Khaans.” School for International Training Mongolia. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. 27 August 2004.

²³ Baabar, 66-67.

aforementioned “political considerations” among Mongolia’s leaders.²⁴ These political considerations played a role during the reigns of the Great Khaans, but it was after the collapse of the Mongolian empire that they permeated the ideologies of Mongolia’s leaders and entered into the lives of its people.

The centuries following the reigns of the Great Khaans saw the deterioration of the largest empire in the world, partially due to the rise of the firearm coupled with the relatively primitive nature of the Mongolians’ nomadic style of warfare.²⁵ The result, as Baabar writes, was the deterioration of Mongolian traditional practices at a foundational level, which had been vastly altered under the influence of the Great Khaans:

The Mongols of the post-Yuan era no longer engaged in game hunting, their major activity was now free-range herding and the accompanying nomadism. Commerce petered out, craftsmen forgot their trades and the settlements gradually turned into ruins. The levels of culture and education achieved in the great empire accordingly worsened....Mongols once again were moving their belongings on the backs of animals. The skills which this nation had developed during their hundred and fifty years of waging wars and consuming goods from others’ cultures disappeared when it was on its own.²⁶

The changes that occurred throughout this period and during the reign of the Yuan dynasty—Mongolia’s reign in China—also included a great decrease in the number of missionaries in the region due to difficulties in tracking the nomads and the relative international importance of the Mongolian people after the fall of the empire.²⁷ The Mongolian people, now relatively unaffected by the influences of foreign missionaries, religions, and ideologies largely returned to their previous shamanistic practices.²⁸ Thus, although various religions had entered the country

²⁴ "Mongolia." Encyclopædia Britannica.

²⁵ Baabar describes the role of the firearm with relation to the Mongolian empire’s fall on page 52.

²⁶ Baabar, 55-56.

²⁷ Ibid., 69.

²⁸ Baabar, 69.

in previous centuries, none had ultimately succeeded in separating the Mongolian from his respect for and reliance upon nature. Religions before this period won a significant number of converts, but Mongolian political leaders seem to have been the most significantly affected while the majority of common Mongolians adapted these ideologies according to their pragmatism.

Politically, the land that was previously protected by powerful, worshipped khans was now controlled by various feudal lords and princes, who, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Baabar writes, “needed a single religion for the purpose of uniting their country.”²⁹ The Encyclopaedia Britannica further states that not only did Mongolia’s various princes want “a religious ethos higher than that of shamanism,” but they also desired “a literate class to provide a bureaucracy.”³⁰ Baabar claims that it was a “confluence of circumstances”—the fact that the lords were interested in the religion Khubilai Khaan adopted under the “glorious” Yuan dynasty, coupled with the fact that the modern Yellow sect was in need of foreign support due to its lack of popularity in Tibet— that resulted in the feudal lords adopting Yellow sect Buddhism as the religion to unite Mongolia.³¹ This explanation seems largely speculative and perhaps too simplistic, but it does emphasize several important points that are difficult to dispute and important to note: the arrival of Yellow sect Buddhism in Mongolia was largely orchestrated by Mongolian leaders for political reasons; and its arrival was not caused by or even aligned with the spirituality of the Mongolian people, which had largely returned to shamanism and nature-worship.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Mongolia." Encyclopædia Britannica.

³¹ Baabar, 69.

It was in this environment at the end of the sixteenth century that the third major introduction of Buddhism into Mongolia took place, largely achieved through the efforts of Altan Khan, a prince of the Imperial House.³²

Altan Khan invited Sodnomjamts, then head of the Yellow sect in Tibet, to Mongolia, giving him the title 'Dalai Lama.' As Baabar recounts, in return for his visit, Sodnomjamts received the military support of Mongolia in restraining the various rival Buddhist sects he faced in Tibet. The incoming influence of the Yellow sect ideology coupled with the militaristic involvement of Mongolia in the Yellow sect's interests resulted in the general acceptance of and adherence to the ideology among Mongolia's people. Through the eyes of the common Mongolian, the Buddhist revival, used as a "unifying principle in a new nationalism" by political leaders, became clear through the mass availability of scriptures translated from Tibetan and Sanskrit into Mongolian.³³ Multitudes of Buddhist monks also arrived from Tibet, not only belonging to the Yellow sect, but also to rival sects. It was largely for this reason that the still-existent Red sect entered Mongolia.³⁴ Buddhist ideology and teachings permeated throughout the population. As a result, Mongolian leaders strived to attain titles from the Tibetan leaders in order to attain greater respect from both religious leaders and common people. Furthermore, the practice of reincarnation served to draw the interest and devotion of the Mongolian people. Sodnomjamts promised to be reincarnated in Mongolia, and he apparently fulfilled this promise. In later years, and as common interest in the Yellow sect grew, the Dalai Lama was reincarnated in various

³² Munkh-Ochir, lecture on "The Great Khaans," and Baabar, 69.

³³ "Mongolia." Encyclopædia Britannica.

³⁴ Baabar, 71, 73-74.

tribes, thus encouraging the involvement and devotion of Mongolians from around the country into the Yellow sect religion.³⁵ In addition, and equally important, the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama into politically significant families successfully linked the church to the state.³⁶

The rise of Buddhism in Mongolia was not only internally supported, but was also encouraged by the Manchu dynasty in China. Baabar writes, “The Manchu had been quick to understand that the savage and warlike Mongols could be rendered meek through the inherent passivity of the Yellow religion and they facilitated its spread in Mongolia in every way possible.”³⁷ Some Chinese rulers attempted to affirm their power and influence among the Mongolians by taking advantage of the belief in reincarnations and declaring themselves reincarnated gods. Chinese support for the spread of Buddhism among Mongolians would continue for several centuries, through the Qing dynasty.³⁸ As Baabar describes, the effects of both internal and external forces on Mongolia’s religious climate were apparent during this period:

The Mongols had thus turned into a devout lamaist nation with a religious leader at the head of state, a capital city, and monasteries. The seventeenth century saw the rise of Lamaism to power in both Tibet and Mongolia, the religious unification of Mongolia, and the creation of the religious center of Mongolia.

These changes would influence the nation’s course over the next centuries, during the communist regime, and today.

Consistent with previous responses of Mongolians toward “foreign” ideologies, the significant influence of the new religion could not entirely separate

³⁵ Ibid., 70.

³⁶ "Mongolia." Encyclopædia Britannica.

³⁷ Baabar, 71-72.

³⁸ Ibid., 72.

the Mongolian from his worship of nature. This realization became clear to Mongolia's political leaders only after they attempted to eliminate shamanism from the country by rewarding those who followed Buddhism and imposing fines and "legal persecution" on those who performed and maintained traditional shamanistic practices. Attempting to legally eradicate shamanistic practices that emphasized nature proved extremely unsuccessful. Mongolia's leaders instead blended these traditional practices into the incoming teachings and practices of the Yellow sect.³⁹ This blending would have a lasting effect on Buddhism in Mongolia, and is still apparent even today.

The perhaps more evident political and social effects of the entrance of Buddhism into the country and the resultant blending of the religion with traditional nature-worship are described by Baabar: "The penetration of the Yellow religion helped do away with the primitive rites of shamanism and open up for Mongolia prospects for sharing in the cultural wealth of India and Tibet. In this way, the coming of Buddhism marked a breakthrough for the Mongolian society of that period."⁴⁰ Thus the effects of the drastic shift in Mongolia's spirituality, although changing and sometimes destroying more traditional practices, also improved Mongolia's condition in various respects by opening the country to other cultures and allowing Mongolia to evolve in a direction that was, in many ways, culturally, economically, and socially beneficial.

The following centuries witnessed repeated attempts by Mongolian leaders to exert power over their people through the use of Buddhism. The original plan

³⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 72-73.

to support the Yellow sect in Tibet through militaristic means was remembered as several bloody military struggles resulted at various times in that region. When China's Qing dynasty exerted its influence on Mongolia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it limited the frequency and location of reincarnations of religious leaders outside of Mongolia to Tibet. Thus China could influence the choosing of the Bogd, who served as the religious leader of the country and worked with "local khans, hundreds of princes and noblemen, and the higher clergy."⁴¹ China also introduced an economic component to Mongolia's monasteries in order to eliminate the desire and need for Mongolians to raise conflict with China for the attainment of certain products. The Chinese established "either a small branch of a Chinese trading company or a commercial agent which would collect raw materials from Mongols in exchange for tea, tobacco, chinaware, fabrics and the like" within or near monasteries, thus transforming the religious centers also into "centers of commerce." As a result, settlements were concentrated to these areas and monasteries began owning significant amounts of land and livestock, which would become a significant fact during the communist purges of the twentieth century.⁴²

Baabar argues that this period of rule under the Qing dynasty resulted in the significant decline of traditional Mongolian culture. He declares the Chinese "used religion to keep [Mongolians] busy. Starting from *ovoo* holidays staged at every rock pile in the land, up to the Bogd's great ceremony of worship, festivals continued uninterrupted from spring to fall." Beyond these political influences of

⁴¹ "Mongolia." Encyclopædia Britannica.

⁴² Baabar, 96.

the Chinese, Baabar also laments the direct detrimental effects of Lamaism in Mongolia. He writes, “Mongols were cut off from the developed world by Lamaism which, although a school of Buddhism, a reputedly undogmatic religion, had turned into perhaps the most dogmatic teaching of all.” Baabar further laments the spiritual effects of Lamaism on the Mongolians:

When this religion was brought to Mongolia in the period from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the rich body of Mongolian myths, legends and magic tales was inevitably added to it, further enhancing its ritualistic aspect. This teaching whose lofty intellectual and philosophical essence was open only to the elite few, reached the people only as a form of superstitious worship and hindered their development. As prayers and services were conducted in Tibetan, only top-ranking lamas understood what was being preached while the ordinary people perceived the sermons only as magic incantations.⁴³

Baabar emphasizes his argument by citing the deterioration of Mongolian script and the practice among lamas of writing primarily in Tibetan as opposed to the Mongolian language as a direct result of Lamaism. Baabar summarizes his interpretation of the situation: “The more superstitious people were, the more powerful the church was, and the more temples and monasteries were set up, the more people flocked to become lamas.” The results of such “flocking” were clear, as one-seventh of Mongolia’s population were male monks who were affiliated with the almost eight-hundred monasteries in the country. Baabar continues describing the effects of the rise of Buddhism on Mongolia:

Alienated from the developed world, this nation was increasingly unable to feed this huge army of monks that had no part in the production of social wealth. Mongols gave away all their property in money and in kind as contributions to these monasteries, and channeled their wealth towards Tibet. From the thirteenth century Mongols had supported Tibet not only in military terms, but also financially...As an ultimately conservative doctrine, Lamaism not only shuts off every sphere of society from progress, but also fiercely fights anything new. The society in such a state was faced with the real threat of destruction. So Mongolia ended the eighteenth century, oppressed by Manchu China and weakened by the influence of Tibetan Buddhism.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 99-100.

Baabar's criticisms of Mongolia at the end of the eighteenth century—under conditions that would largely continue until the start of the twentieth century—seem somewhat applicable even today, when various practices similar to the ones described by Baabar survive and are being revived. However, although Baabar finds fault in these effects and conditions, the true negativity of them and the ability of an outside observer to criticize such practices, even from a historical perspective, must be further analyzed and will be discussed later in this paper.

The atmosphere described by Baabar, whether positive or negative, in fact remained in existence through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with relatively insignificant change. Through these centuries, Mongolia's experiences and changes were largely shaped by its two neighbors, China and Russia. Both these countries had interests in Mongolia during this period—a period of great international expansion by various countries across the globe. The pressures exerted on both China and Russia due to this international imperialism and growing global “community”—and, as a result, the pressure these countries exerted on Mongolia, a country that could offer opportunities for increased capital, transport, and protection to either China or Russia—caused great changes concerning Mongolia's educational, economic, political, and cultural arenas. Baabar refers to the period at the start of the twentieth century as a kind of “renaissance” when students studied in other nations, Western medicine entered, national intellectuals arose, improvements were made in transportation and communications, and, generally, “the influence of Russian and European culture

grew markedly.”⁴⁵ Perhaps surprisingly, however, few of these changes extended to the religious realm.⁴⁶

One result of this “renaissance” was the rebirth of Christian missionary activity in Mongolia in the middle of the nineteenth century. This rebirth did not nearly compare in magnitude to earlier Nestorian Christian missionary activities and influences centuries earlier, but it does represent rekindled efforts to bring Christianity to Mongolia at a time when Buddhism clearly dominated. By 1846, both the Old and New Testaments had been translated into Mongolian.⁴⁷ Some areas of Mongolia, such as the eastern, agricultural region, represented relatively easier regions to inhabit and teach since they allowed for preaching through the establishment of schools and hospitals. In other regions, however, missionaries were forced to adopt a semi-nomadic lifestyle simply in order to achieve contact with the Mongolians and share their teachings. Some missionaries seem to have been drawn to the country due to the challenge its geography, climate, relative isolation, and lack of Christians represented. Unfortunately, many of these missionaries were overcome by the challenges, most frequently resulting in poor physical and mental health. James Gilmour, perhaps the most famous missionary in Mongolia at the time, tells a story of horrifying experiences and disheartening achievements. Not only did Gilmour endure the loss of his wife—an event which many attribute to natural conditions in Mongolia—but in the eighteen years he

⁴⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁴⁶ Baabar describes the various changes Mongolia experienced during this period on page 129.

⁴⁷ Tom Shelley. “Mongolia: A background history of the mission presence.” University of Bristol Department of Historical Studies. [Online: web]. URL: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/History/Projects/Missions/Mongolia>.

In spite of this fact, the organization that succeeded in translating the Bible, the British and Foreign Bible Society, did not have the means to distribute the new translations.

evangelized in Mongolia, Gilmour created a church of only sixteen Mongolian converts. In addition to pressures from the Mongolian environment, missionaries also faced the challenge of convincing the larger “missionary community” of the spiritual importance of Mongolia, which many viewed as an isolated, non-influential, “backwards” nation that needed the Gospel less than some other, more populated countries.⁴⁸

Although the relative failures of Christian missionary activities coupled with the country’s “renaissance” left the religious state in Mongolia relatively untouched, disputes with China resulted in what Mongolia claimed was persecution of various Mongolians, including lamas.⁴⁹ Indeed, this claim echoed larger beliefs of the time concerning the suppressive influence of China especially over Mongolia’s ability to attain independence. In response to such disputes, Mongolia initially turned to Tsarist Russia. It was not until the transformation of Tsarist Russia into Soviet Russia and the massacre—especially of Chinese—in Mongolia by Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg and his White Guards that Russia eventually took drastic action in the relatively docile country.⁵⁰

The influence of the Soviets, which largely began during this period and continued until 1990, would result in the most drastic, catastrophic changes in Mongolia’s history, especially concerning the nation’s relationship with and mentality toward religion. In a letter to Lenin, Boris Shumyatskii, an influential

⁴⁸This and more information on missionary activities in Mongolia throughout history can be found at Tom Shelley, <http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/History/Projects/Missions/Mongolia>.

⁴⁹ The incident referred to here is the Bavuujav Affair, upon which Baabar elaborates on pages 172-173 of his text.

⁵⁰ Baabar greatly elaborates on these general descriptions specifically on pages 173, 178, 207, and 215 of his text.

revolutionary in Mongolia, provided a description of Mongolia that would become unrecognizable over the following decades:

...in [Mongolia] which, compared to our country is underdeveloped by almost two hundred years, forty-four percent of all the male population are lamas, and among the uneducated and uncivilized there are many people who worship the Bogd. All the lamas support and follow the Bogd, and in a country like this a bourgeois revolution would be a major revolutionary success...Mongolia is making drastic changes and there are signs that the Mongols are looking to Soviet Russia for direction.⁵¹

Indeed, as was implied in this message, the Soviets planned to eliminate the existence of lamas and Buddhism in Mongolia as “counter-revolutionary,” while ushering in a new era of “modern civilian society.”⁵² In doing so, they also expelled all Christian missionaries.⁵³ Perhaps, as Baabar argues, Mongolia’s history verified the necessity of replacing Mongolia’s basic political and religious structures in order to achieve significant reform.⁵⁴ The Soviets certainly believed this, at least ideologically, and their later, horrific actions toward religion in Mongolia would prove their adherence to such a belief.

Mongolia’s treatment of religion during a majority of the twentieth century was overwhelmingly shaped and directly linked to Soviet mentalities and practices toward it. As Rensselaer W. Lee III describes in his article, “General Aspects of Chinese Communist Religious Policy, with Soviet Comparisons,” Soviet Russia showed “uncompromised hostility” toward religion, especially during the 1920s and 1930s. Such hostility was tied to the belief that mass

⁵¹ Shumyatskii, Boris. *Central archives of foreign relations*, F-117, H/N-01. Quoted in Bat-Erdene, Batbayar “Baabar”. *History of Mongolia*. Ed. C. Kaplonski. Trans. D. Suhjargalmaa, S. Burenbayar, H. Hulan, and N.Tuya. Cambridge, UK: The White Horse Press, 1999. Pg. 222.

⁵² Baabar, 228, 239.

⁵³ Chris Lawrence. “Mongolia: Political and Economic Freedom Opened a Door for Belief.” *Worldwide Challenge Magazine*. [Online: web]. URL: <http://www.wwc magazine.org/2004/marapr045.html>.

⁵⁴ Baabar, 239.

support of religion resulted in “economic backwardness, lag of consciousness behind reality, and lack of understanding concerning the forces which control nature.” Although this interpretation of religion can be found in various communist societies throughout history, the Soviets, unlike the Chinese communists, for example, did not believe that religion would inevitably die due to the evolution of man’s knowledge and understanding of his world. Instead, the Soviets adopted the idea that the end of religion had to be worked toward by the communists, largely through propaganda and hostility. As a result, religion became, in the Soviet mind, distinctly incompatible with and hostile to communism, to the extent that its “elimination” became “a prerequisite for the successful creation of a Communist society.”⁵⁵ This Soviet ideology is made apparent in various contemporary Soviet articles on the issue, including the following in *Pravda*:

Communist indoctrination of the workers presupposes a ruthless struggle against every sort of survival of the old society in the minds of people, including religious prejudice...the struggle against religion is the struggle for the indoctrination of the new man, the citizen of the Communist society.⁵⁶

In addition, *Nauka I Religia*, what Lee calls “the official organ of the Soviet anti-religious campaign,” declares:

Religion is incompatible with Communism by its very essence, by its very anti-scientific and exploiting nature...No matter how religion is adapted to new conditions, no matter how its teachings are expounded, it remains a faith in God and a life beyond the grave.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Rensselaer W. Lee III. “General Aspects of Chinese Communist Religious Policy, with Soviet Comparisons.” *The China Quarterly*, No. 19. (Jul. - Sep., 1964), pp. 161-173.

⁵⁶ “Against Religious Prejudices,” *Pravda*, August 21, 1959. Quoted in Rensselaer W. Lee III. “General Aspects of Chinese Communist Religious Policy, with Soviet Comparisons.” *The China Quarterly*, No. 19. (Jul. - Sep., 1964), pp. 167.

⁵⁷ “For Leninist Implacability Toward Religion,” *Nauka I Religia*, April 1961. Quoted in Rensselaer W. Lee III. “General Aspects of Chinese Communist Religious Policy, with Soviet Comparisons.” *The China Quarterly*, No. 19. (Jul. - Sep., 1964), pp. 171.

Lee explains the relatively aggressive Soviet policy toward religion, as compared to China's policy, as being a result of each country's historical experiences with religion. Whereas China historically never dealt with institutionalized religion in the way Russia did concerning the Russian Orthodox Church, China viewed religion as primarily targeted toward and consisting of ethical concerns. Russia, however, had to combat a "deeply entrenched," competing, institutional religious ideology, which, Lee argues, likely had hugely significant effects in the country's future dealings with religion under communism.⁵⁸

This hostile mentality toward religion would result in decades of suffering, specifically targeted toward Mongolia's lamas. The Soviets began their gradual elimination of religion in Mongolia by stripping the Bogd Khan of most political power, thus leaving him in control of only religious matters and essentially serving as a "constitutional monarch" left only with the power to sign documents served to him by the communist regime.⁵⁹ Lamas and clergy eventually lost the ability to vote and, as a result, lost various human rights.⁶⁰ In order to encourage industrialization and protect against the accumulation of capital, the monasteries and lamas were robbed of the land, livestock, money, and religious items they had accumulated over the centuries.⁶¹ Various Mongolians in religious positions were arrested.⁶² It must be noted that, although lamas were specifically targeted for persecution, nobles and the rich were also attacked as "counter-revolutionary." In

⁵⁸ Lee, "General Aspects of Chinese Communist Religious Policy..." The ideas described in this paragraph, as well as further ideas and analysis cleverly linking communism in both China and Soviet Russia can be found in Lee's article.

⁵⁹ Baabar, 239 and "Mongolia." Encyclopædia Britannica.

⁶⁰ Baabar, 269 and 294.

⁶¹ Ibid., 291, 304, 305.

⁶² Ibid., 298.

addition, it is important to note that these hostile actions, although finding an ideological root in Soviet leadership, were actually undertaken by Mongolians in high leadership positions strategically reinforced and influenced by the Soviets.⁶³

In response to such harsh treatment, lamas staged uprisings at various points during this period.⁶⁴ One of the largest of these uprisings occurred in 1932, when various lamas, who were later joined by other Mongolians, robbed, destroyed, and murdered as they rose near Arkhangai and swept through Mongolia. Not only were many of those who took part in the uprisings killed as punishment, but harsher measures were taken on a larger scale to rid the country of its religious members.⁶⁵ However, after the large rebellion in 1932, Mongolia experienced a period of relative religious freedom resulting from Stalin's plan to acquire stability and greater trust from the Mongolian people, coupled with then leader Peljidiin Genden's sympathetic treatment of Buddhism. This brief period resulted in over 27,000 Mongolians becoming lamas.⁶⁶ Following this time of tolerance was one of the most brutal periods in Mongolia's history—the Great Purge.

The Great Purge began in 1937 as a result of aggressive Soviet ideology converging with the ruthless leadership of Choibalsan.⁶⁷ During this approximately two-year period, lamas and clergy were killed or imprisoned on an enormous scale, and religious structures were utterly destroyed, resulting in what

⁶³ Both these points are general observations that arise throughout especially Book Three of Baabar's history.

⁶⁴ Baabar, 310 elaborates upon such rebellious actions, including the "Togsbuyant rebellion."

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 359, 363.

Baabar terms Mongolia's "liberation from religion." At the end of the Purge, 760 out of 771 monasteries had been obliterated, and their treasures either destroyed or confiscated by the government.⁶⁸ Choibalsan's personal notes reveal that 20,356 lamas were killed and 17,335 arrested during the Purge.⁶⁹ Describing the destruction on a larger scale of time, the Encyclopaedia Britannica states that the communist regime reduced the number of monks from 100,000 in 1924 to 110 in 1990.⁷⁰

In addition to physical persecution of religion, the totalitarian regime also encouraged various ideological shifts that moved the general Mongolian mentality from one traditionally in line with Buddhism to one focused upon progress and development. Dr. Peter Marsh effectively highlights various cultural aspects of this ideological readjustment in his lecture on ethnomusicology at Mongolia's National University in Ulaanbaatar.⁷¹ Whereas prior to the twentieth century Mongolians viewed time as circular or cyclical—a perception consistent with Buddhism—communism introduced the perception of time as linear, thus emphasizing terms such as "progressive." Additionally, communism provoked a shift in aesthetics by affecting what the Mongolian viewed as attractive. This shift resulted in the birth and growth of arts performed on stage, for example, and allowed the totalitarian government to more easily and effectively control the ideas that reached the people. It also encouraged the perception of Mongolian tradition as outdated, extinct, and largely symbolic by bringing it onto the stage as

⁶⁸ Ibid., 370.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 369

⁷⁰ "Mongolia." Encyclopædia Britannica.

⁷¹ Peter Marsh. Lecture on ethnomusicology in Mongolia. National University, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. 26 October 2004. The ideas contained in this paragraph can be found in this lecture.

something performed—not lived. Additionally, Dr. Marsh describes, the process of bringing the arts onto the stage drew them out of the ger, thus further making extinct various aspects of Mongolian tradition. What education traditionally occurred within the ger was drawn to the school, where the totalitarian government could more effectively regulate the teachings that reached Mongolia's youth and more easily encourage philosophical—not religious—ideas. Ulziijargal Sanjaasuren, or Ulzii, a Mongolian woman who lived during and was involved in the communist regime, remembers that under the regime the spiritual was often combined with the administrative—the business leader was often seen as a “moral director;” Lenin, Marx, and Engels were worshipped and “seen as gods;” Sundays were “newspaper reading days,” when the people read the doctrines of Lenin, Marx, and Engels.⁷² Under the communist reign, Mongolia's national hero, Chinggis Khaan, became nothing more than a forbidden myth.⁷³ In some ways, Dr. Marsh notes, these vast shifts did not end with the fall of the communist regime, but continue today.⁷⁴

Although these physical and ideological changes greatly depleted the number of religious in Mongolia, it did not entirely eradicate the religion from the people. Buddhism took a different form as the number of Buddhist teachers fell and Mongolians lost the freedom to practice. Although some Buddhists voluntarily destroyed their religious items and rejected the religious beliefs they held prior to the purges, many others internalized their religion, thus lessening the

⁷² Ulziijargal Sanjaasuren. Lecture on Mongolia's transition from totalitarianism to democracy. School for International Training. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. 17 September 2004.

⁷³ Munkh-Ochir, Lecture on “The Great Khaans.”

⁷⁴ Peter Marsh. Lecture on ethnomusicology in Mongolia.

need of tangible items that could attract suspicion and persecution. Nichjav, an eighty-four year old Buddhist woman who maintained her faith through the totalitarian reign, refers to this process and practice of internalizing Buddhism as “reading the textbook on the inside.” She remembers the suppression of religion and fear of persecution that would continue largely until the fall of the communist regime in 1990. As a result, she recalls, especially the older generation of Buddhists chose to hide their statues and texts, memorize teachings, and perform secret offerings during the years of persecution. Generally, the younger generation, she remembers, seemed to less frequently refer to Buddhist ideologies and practices, thus revealing the gradual effect of the ban of such practices and emphasis on philosophically-focused communist ideals. The lack of Buddhist teachers and tendency to rely upon memorized, internalized ideas resulted in the gradual transformation of certain beliefs that strayed from traditional Buddhist teachings. This became clear through Nichjav’s belief that Buddha created the world and mankind, a belief inconsistent with Buddhist teachings in Mongolia and elsewhere, which emphasize the role of karma in “creation” and Buddha as primarily a teacher.⁷⁵

Although it seems almost impossible for any positive contributions to have come from the communist administration in light of these harrowing actions, the communist era did in fact cause various developments in Mongolian society. These developments are also important to note due to their cultural significance and effect on a larger historical scale. Under communism, Mongolia found its economy, society, and culture, entirely transformed. Baabar writes, “It cannot be

⁷⁵ Nichjav. Interview with author. Delgerkhaan, Khentii aimag. 6 September 2004.

denied that socialism introduced the nomadic backward countries like Mongolia to the twentieth century. Very little change had been made in the social structure, lifestyle, and cultural level of Mongolia over thousands of years, while world civilization made great advances.”⁷⁶ Under communism, advancements were made especially in the areas of education, which found secular philosophies and subjects taught where religious education in monasteries had previously dominated; healthcare, which found Western medicine replacing traditional and Tibetan medicine; literacy, which resulted in newspapers, improvements in communications, and the growth of literature; music and the growth of performing arts; and improved transportation through primarily roads and railways, which greatly facilitated Mongolia’s growing industries and economy.⁷⁷

As is clear through these examples, the communist era resulted in a complete readjustment of the Mongolian culture, lifestyle, and mentality. These shifts did not end with the fall of the communist regime, but would remain an integral part of the Mongolian mentality even after the vast changes that occurred in 1990.

Various public demonstrations in December, 1989 prompted what would become Mongolia’s split from approximately seven decades of totalitarian, communist rule.⁷⁸ Ulzii remembers this transition and describes her own experiences and emotions: “Overnight Mongolians were told the doctrine they believed and sacrificed everything for was false. There was an overwhelming feeling of emptiness.” Thus for many Mongolians the transition was one filled with confusion, fear, and overwhelming sadness. These emotions considerably

⁷⁶ Baabar, 301.

⁷⁷ Baabar elaborates upon these improvements and others in Baabar, 301-303.

⁷⁸ "Mongolia." Encyclopædia Britannica.

affected the spirituality of those who grasped for some religion or ideology to fill the hole left by the fall of communism. Ulzii alludes to this fact by noting the strength of the surge of religion in Mongolia just after communism's fall—and the fervency with which many sought such incoming ideologies.⁷⁹

Mongolia was not starting this political transition from an ideal status, and was, along with Albania, listed as having the lowest standard of living among any communist country. In addition, Professor M. Steven Fish notes “The duration and extent of sovietization was greater in Mongolia than in any other country in the Soviet bloc outside the USSR itself....It is one of the world's most isolated countries, far from the Western influence that many observers regard as crucial to democratization in post communist Eastern Europe.”⁸⁰ These negative traits, however, would not have an overwhelming effect on the rise of democracy: “The combination of institutional stimulus and capable leadership produced one of the post communist region's most mature political party systems.” Through this party system, the aims and values of Mongolia's people are becoming better recognized. For example, one such party, the Mongolian Traditional United Party (MTUP) specifically aims to “elevate the status of Mongolian culture and to revive Buddhism and other national traditions.”⁸¹

The fall of the communist regime did not result in an entire reversal of the ideological and social shifts that gradually occurred throughout the twentieth century. The aesthetic perception of the people remained constant, and the cities

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ M. Steven Fish. “Mongolia: Democracy without Prerequisites.” *Journal of Democracy* 9.3 (1998) 127-141.

⁸¹ Ibid.

retained an industrial, developed image that greatly contrasted the civilization only a century earlier. In spite of this, a great transformation concerning perceptions of Mongolian nationalism took place. After the collapse of communism, Mongolians were eager to regain their national heritage. This phenomenon was evident through the attribution of Chinggis Khaan's name to various companies, the reintroduction of traditional Mongolian script in schools, and a move to reacquire Mongolia's history.

It did not take long after the political transition for religion to find its way back into the country that found itself isolated from it for seven decades. For Nichjav and some other Buddhists who had internally maintained their faith, the transition consisted of calmly placing previously hidden religious items in plain view and praying without fear: "I never left these things, though, during the communist period," Nichjav states.⁸² The form of Buddhism that would emerge, however, would be significantly different from that which was known prior to the Soviet influence. In addition, it has taken some time for Mongolians to personally adopt the religion instead of blindly identifying themselves with it as an assumedly innate part of Mongolian tradition. Mongolian Buddhism had lost an enormous, invaluable portion of its recorded history and teachings. Buddhists also largely adopted a mentality based largely on superstition and not philosophical understanding—a shift that seems to be a direct reflex action to the oppressive philosophical ideology enforced by the communist regime.

Bulganchimeg, a middle-aged Buddhist woman living in Tsetserleg, echoes these observations concerning the roles of philosophy and superstition in

⁸² Nichjav, Interview with author.

Mongolia's modern Buddhism. She possesses a perception of Buddhism that is significantly unlike that of many Buddhists in that she emphasizes a philosophic, scientific view of the religion. Today, she practices Buddhism and visits the monastery primarily in order to invite good into her life and ensure a good, long life for her daughter. But in addition to practicing in the monastery, she prays in her home. In an interview with the author, she voiced her disapproval of the way in which many Mongolians go to the monastery without knowing Buddhist philosophy. She speculates that communism caused a philosophical aspect to become important, and that now, after its collapse, the philosophical emphasis is gone, even from religion. Bulganchimeg does, however, support the modern practice of reading prayers in Tibetan—a language not understood by the common Buddhist. Bulganchimeg believes that if the prayers were translated, they would be misunderstood and simplified by the people, who do not have the intense education the lamas must endure.⁸³ She does not object to paying for prayers, either, as she enjoys supporting the lamas and their monastery.

In addition to changes in the role of Buddhist history and philosophy in modern Buddhism, after the purges Buddhism was left with almost no older teachers. As a result, Mongolia's younger generation was left to fill leadership roles. Lama Bat-Gerel is one such member of Mongolia's younger generation who fulfilled the role of a Buddhist teacher after the adoption of democracy. The twenty-four year old lama lives and practices in Tsetserleg, and is also in the process of training younger lamas. He explains the current level of education of lamas as generally being much lower than that of lamas before the communist

⁸³ Bulganchimeg. Interview with author. Tsetserleg, Arkhangai aimag. 9 November 2004.

purges, when frequent trips to India and Tibet occurred and older, better educated teachers were available. Bat-Gerel remembers following Buddhism since the age of nine—the same age he entered a monastery to begin training as a lama and studying Tibetan. Although he admits he did not choose the lifestyle he leads, he does not hesitate to add that he would not want to fulfill another role or lead another lifestyle. Bat-Gerel's role as a lama consists of reading Tibetan prayers and talking with and giving advice to those who are unfortunate or experiencing troubles. In fulfilling his role, he will not only frequently visit the monastery, where he reads Tibetan prayers for periods of usually one hour, but he also visits Buddhists in their own gers, sometimes forty kilometers away, and allows Buddhists to visit his house, where he will pray even late at night. These actions are not generally free of charge, however, and the visitor typically pays an amount decided by the individual. The money, Bat-Gerel says, goes to the lamas and the upkeep of the monasteries. Indeed, it does not seem that the lamas make a significant profit from their services—Bat-Gerel lives in a relatively average home with his young son and wife, who has a separate job to help support the family. Bat-Gerel describes his own motivation as the desire to have a good second and third life and generally live better than now, and he works to help other people “do good” and achieve this same goal. However, when asked why people usually visit the monastery, Bat-Gerel reveals a more pragmatic reason for people's visits: “Since 1990, people are experiencing poverty. As a result, the people believe the religion that will bring them money and a good life.”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Lama Bat-Gerel. Interview with author. Tsetserleg, Arkhangai aimag. 6 and 9 November 2004.

The information and insight provided by Mongolia's intricate religious history and current followers such as Bulganchimeg and Lama Bat-Gerel allow a new perception and interpretation of the image provided at the start of this paper. The reason for the location of an *ovoo* and monastery side-by-side as revealing the historical blending of shamanism and Buddhism; the reason for the destroyed and abandoned monastic buildings at the base of the mountain as a result of the communist purges—these observations attain new meaning and significance. The seemingly hectic atmosphere within the town's most popular monastery situated at the bottom of the mountain now reveals centuries of influences and decades of destruction converging to produce a unique form of modern Buddhism.

Mongolia today possesses various individuals and groups, such as the previously mentioned MTUP, that aim to further spread and “revive” the presence and influence of Buddhism in Mongolia. This process currently occurs in varying degrees, largely depending on the organization, and reveals various issues concerning the reintroduction of a religion as part of “tradition” in a democratic society that encourages religious freedom. There are some who encourage the government to play an active role in reviving Buddhism as a necessary part of Mongolian tradition. Some, such as Bat-Gerel, propose that the government do this through specifically funding monasteries.⁸⁵ This idea, although promoted by good intentions, is incompatible with the free democratic government Mongolia now possesses.

The idea that the Mongolian government should support Buddhism raises various problems due to the fact that it is a democracy that allows freedom of

⁸⁵ Lama Bat-Gerel. Interview with author. Tsetserleg, Arkhangai aimag. 6 and 9 November 2004.

religious choice and equal opportunity to various religions. Government support of a specific religion is not fair to those Mongolians who choose to follow another religion that is at a relative disadvantage because it does not receive funding from the government. Additionally, the idea that Buddhism should be specifically assisted is primarily supported by the argument that it is Mongolia's "traditional" religion. However, as the nation's history reveals, the country also has close historical ties to other religions, especially Christianity. If tradition is determined by the amount of time an ideology survives in a country, Mongolia's truly traditional religion would then not be Buddhism or Christianity, but nature worship. Thus granting Buddhism the position of Mongolia's "traditional" religion is somewhat difficult to support. Finally, the government would be aligning itself with a certain religious ideology, which raises various problems in a free democracy. It is perhaps helpful to draw a parallel between the issue in Mongolia to a hypothetical one in the United States: it can be imagined what lack of success and controversy a group would meet if it proposed that the United States government financially support Christianity as the nation's traditional religion. In spite of these ideological challenges, the process of reviving Buddhism in Mongolia is further hindered by another effect of the adoption of a free democracy—the introduction of other religions and philosophies into the country.

Indeed, Buddhism was not the only religion in Mongolia that experienced a significant change after the fall of communism—other religions quickly flooded the country. Most notably, Christianity reentered Mongolia largely through the

efforts of churches based in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and South Korea. *Christianity Today* estimates that although fewer than fifty Christian churches existed in Mongolia in 1991, in 2000 the country's population consisted of nearly 10,000 Christians, and in 2004 the number is said to have reached approximately 20,000.⁸⁶ Followers of various Christian denominations operate in Mongolia, including Protestants, Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, and Mormons. Each organization's methods of operation and evangelism differ to varying degrees. Most organizations claim to assist Mongolia through social improvement through such activities as teaching English language classes and operating job assistance programs.

Father Patrick, a leader at a large, ger-shaped Catholic church in Ulaanbaatar, states his church first targeted child care as its primary aim. Father Patrick, who speaks Mongolian, explained the Catholic church's goal of sending missionaries to Mongolia only after they speak the country's language and understand its culture. He says proselytizing is not the primary goal, a claim that is further emphasized by the fact that the church baptizes a person only after he or she has been a member of the church a total of four years.⁸⁷

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints adopts a more aggressive approach to proselytizing, but emphasizes the same aim of social improvement.

The church emphasizes its "Articles of Faith" throughout its activities, including

⁸⁶ Statistics in 1991 and 2000 found at: Brittany Jarvis. "Eager Christians snatch up 10,000 Mongolian Bibles." 28 September 2000. [Online: web]. URL: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/139/45.0.html>. 2004 statistics found at: Lawrence, "Mongolia: Political and economic freedom opened a door for belief."

⁸⁷ Father Serge Patrick . Lecture on the Catholic church's role in Ulaanbaatar. School for International Training, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. 14 September 2004.

the belief that “through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.” This belief is realized, however, while emphasizing the organization’s subordination to the law: “We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.”⁸⁸ Mormon church missionaries, who adopt the well-known practice of visiting people ‘door-to-door’ in order to proliferate their teachings, describe that as early as 1995 church membership in Ulaanbaatar was rapidly growing, and had reached 315 members. At this period, the church’s leader, Elder Gary E. Cox, “released all American missionaries from their positions in the branch and [called] Mongolian brothers and sisters.” The church also established a “work-study program” with Brigham Young University in Hawaii at this time, which still exists and allows Mongolians the opportunity to study at a prominent Mormon university in the United States.⁸⁹ Even today, one may find at the church’s reception desk an information sheet that lists the requirements for a Mongolian to qualify to study at Brigham Young University in Hawaii—the small sheet includes such items as “Attend seminary or institute” and “Commit to return to your country upon graduation.” Today, the Mormon church in Ulaanbaatar contains over 6,000 members, 3,000 of which live in the city. The organization also has 101 missionaries active throughout Mongolia, sixty-five of which are Mongolian.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Joseph Smith. “The Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.” *History of the Church*, Vol. 4, pp. 535-541.

⁸⁹ Elder Gary E. Cox. “History of the Ulaanbaatar Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day-Saints from April 1994 to May 1995.” Essay. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Ulaanbaatar branch.

⁹⁰ Kh. Batzaya. Interview with author. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. 25 October 2004.

Compared to these Christian churches, which largely focus on either social improvement or proselytizing, perhaps the one that most closely resembled a church one may find in the United States was that operated by Pastor Bayraa in Tsetserleg—the church described at the start of this paper. Pastor Bayraa has been a Christian for approximately twelve years, and he remembers how the religion significantly changed his life at a point when he “stole, fought, cheated, and drank.” Interestingly, before becoming a Christian he also painted the beautiful Buddhist images such as the kinds one may find in Mongolia’s monasteries. A group of Canadian missionaries who taught Russian were responsible for sharing the Gospel with Bayraa. The Pastor sees Christianity as something Mongolians absolutely need in order to achieve salvation and “improve” their lives. As a result, his goal is to establish a church in each of Arkhangai’s *soums*. On a more individual level, the Pastor engages in various activities to spread the Gospel to individuals. At the most basic level, he notes, he frequently prays for “people’s hearts to be open to Jesus,” which sometimes results in increased interest in Christianity, and eventually baptism. Although Pastor Bayraa remembers baptizing “many people,” he admits he does not keep count.

In achieving his goals, Pastor Bayraa engages with his community on a very personal level that reveals the interest and care that not only the Pastor puts into his work, but also that the community returns to him. This author had the opportunity to join Pastor Bayraa on various mornings when the Pastor walked through snowy and cold Tsetserleg, greeting those he passed on the sidewalk and

occasionally pausing to share stories about events in the church. He gradually made his way to the meat market, where he stopped at approximately five counters, greeting those behind the counters and inviting them to upcoming events. Afterward, he visited several individuals in their homes, inviting them to the church. They, along with everyone else the Pastor addressed, greeted him with a smile and welcoming attitude. On one occasion the Pastor visited the ger of a young man who was working on small model gers that he hoped to sell to provide his family with money. The Pastor helped the man make models for approximately three hours—a practice at which the Pastor was skilled due to years of creating beautiful paintings for Buddhist monasteries. Within the church the effects of Pastor Bayraa’s efforts are evident. Although visitors to the church are most frequently teenagers, they display an impressive level of knowledge and passion toward Christianity. These effects are the product of the efforts of Mongolians—this author did not meet a single foreigner in or affiliated with the church.

Pastor Bayraa believes that the teachings of Buddha, who he believes was a demon, stand in direct opposition to Christianity. In spite of this, Pastor Bayraa claims to maintain a very open, inviting attitude toward lamas, who he believes “need salvation too.” The Pastor emphasizes the importance of Mongolian tradition—a fact that is evident through the frequent *Shagai* games in his office—but he argues that Buddhism is not Mongolia’s tradition, but India’s: “In the future, traditions will change,” he says, “but Jesus will decide what stays and

goes.” He interprets Mongolia’s tradition as having been “roped and tied” in the past, but finally free now, with the adoption of democracy.⁹¹

The entrance of non-Buddhist religious organizations into Mongolia not only served to introduce their respective ideologies, but also influenced the way in which Buddhist organizations planned to reintroduce their own ideologies. Some Buddhists viewed the arrival of non-Buddhist religions as a direct attack on Mongolia’s tradition and thus adopted a hostile attitude toward it. Alexander Berzin, an American Buddhist and research fellow at Columbia University, argues such a perspective, claiming the “very large influx of American Christian missionaries to Mongolia from various denominations” are “exerting tremendous pressure on the population—particularly the young people—to convert to Christianity. This is extremely disruptive to the process of trying to re-establish Mongolia’s traditional culture and religion.” He criticizes such missionary activities as teaching English, printing free Christian literature translated into Mongolian, and contributing money and computers to universities and students: “They buy their way in,” he says, “The Buddhists can’t compete.” Berzin’s plans to recruit Buddhist teachers from India and proliferate Buddhist literature—practices that do not stray far from the practices he criticizes when undertaken by Christian organizations—add a sense of humor to his own mission when he declares, “as an American, my presence sends another message; that not every American has this missionary zeal, that there are many other religions in the United States and that we draw out strength from many factors besides Christianity.” Unfortunately, Berzin does not recognize the obvious “missionary

⁹¹ Pastor Bayraa. Interview with author. Tsetserleg, Arkhangai aimag. 13 November 2004.

zeal” in his own actions, which seem to aim to rob the Mongolian of religious freedom and instead perpetuate a single ideology.⁹²

This mentality toward the revival of Buddhism in Mongolia—that it is something hampered by Christian missionary activities but that should employ these same criticized activities in its own aims—is shared to some extent by the Mahayana Center—a Buddhist organization active in Ulaanbaatar. Fortunately, the Mahayana Center does not openly adopt such a hostile attitude as Berzin, although it does criticize various missionary activities—such as concerts—that it seems to itself adopt.⁹³ The Mahayana Center, which carries the motto, “Helping to restore Buddhism in Mongolia,” engages in various positive activities such as weekly, free *Pujas*--religious chanting sessions—and meditation sessions. The Mahayana Center also focuses upon teaching English classes, translating and distributing free copies of Buddhist teachings, and building a coffee shop on its first floor. Perhaps explaining these significantly “Western” methods is the fact that the organization is operated by an overwhelming percentage of Westerners and hardly any Mongolians. One Westerner and prominent member of the organization, Venerable Chantal, offered a questionable explanation as to Mongolian involvement in the organization. She explained the absence as being due to a decision made by the Mongolian people who fear that holding a position in the organization would result in pressures from friends and family who desire economic assistance. Venerable Chantal and the Mahayana Center do find

⁹² George Wehrfritz. “Disrupting the Faith? An Interview with Alexander Berzin.” *Newsweek*. 13 January 1997. [Online: web]. URL: <http://www.hvk.org/hvk/articles/0297/0190.html>.

⁹³ Venerable Chantal. Interview with author. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. 11 October 2004.

encouragement in the fact that many Mongolians are willing to identify themselves as Buddhists, in spite of their lack of knowledge of the religion.⁹⁴

Some have adopted a notably “democratic” approach to reviving Buddhism in Mongolia by working through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that seek to reeducate Mongolians concerning Buddhism and Buddhist methods. Professor Chulunbaatar, a Mongolian man who works closely with such an NGO, finds his motivation through recognizing the close ties between Mongolian tradition and Buddhism—a tie so close that the two can be thought to be “braided” together. Thus Chulunbaatar views the preservation of Buddhism as the preservation of invaluable aspects of Mongolia’s culture. Chulunbaatar works to educate the people primarily through weekly radio broadcasts on Buddhism that air throughout the country. Chulunbaatar emphasizes the role of NGOs—not the government—in the revival of Buddhism. He states, “The government will honor religion, and religion will honor government. The government will not support one religion over another.”⁹⁵ Thus Chulunbaatar has arrived at what is the best option for reviving Buddhism in Mongolia: leaving the effort to NGOs and avoiding government involvement, which should be nonpartisan.⁹⁶ Chulunbaatar has also arrived at what seems to be an essential aspect of the future of religion in democratic Mongolia—an emphasis on education in the revival of religion. The process of democratization—making ideas available to people and giving them the freedom to choose—coupled with

⁹⁴ Venerable Chantal. Interview with author. Venerable Chantal kindly provided a considerable amount of information concerning her personal religious views and also those of her organization.

⁹⁵ Professor Chulunbaatar. Interview with author. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. 1 November 2004.

⁹⁶ This opinion is not only the author’s, but is shared by others, including Professor Munkh-Ochir in Munkh-Ochir Dorjjugder Khirghis. Interview with author. 3 November 2004.

efforts of various religious organizations to make their teachings and beliefs available to the people—will result in religion gradually becoming increasingly intellectualized and personally chosen by the individual. This stands in contrast to the process centuries earlier, and, to some extent, even today, when Mongolians primarily identify with the religion they see as most closely tied to their tradition and heritage.

Indeed, many Mongolians living in today's modern, internationally-influenced society are greatly concerned about the future and possible extinction of Mongolia's culture. In view of Mongolia's history, however, this concern does not seem entirely founded. Throughout time Mongolia's traditions have been in flux and, during the most drastic changes in its culture, subject to foreign influences. Mongolia's traditions interact with and are the result of history. Borrowing the words from Louis A. Sass, this author argues one must be "critical of the classical image of cultures as internally cohesive and isolated organisms, since...this image stems from a deeply conservative desire for stability and discourages awareness of conflict within and between cultures."⁹⁷ The invaluable form of Buddhism many seek to protect today is a direct result of the converging and interaction between Mongolia's traditions and influences from external sources. One cannot speculate as to what new and perhaps equally invaluable forms of Mongolian culture will form out of modern interactions between

⁹⁷ Louis A. Sass. "Anthropology's Native Problem: Revisionism in the field." *Harper's*. May, 1986. It must be noted that Sass's descriptions here quoted are not necessarily representative of his personal views, but were written by him to describe the perspective of a new movement of "modern anthropology." The author of this paper, however, has adopted these descriptions as applicable to his own personal views and experiences.

“traditional” Buddhism and the modern influx of foreign ideologies and cultures. Perhaps the greatest evidence of the strength of the perseverance of Mongolia’s traditions is the current existence and revival of them in light of one of the most culturally destructive periods in world history that occurred during the twentieth century. Mongolian culture and tradition has survived a regime that purposefully sought to extinguish it. The future of Mongolia’s culture—like all cultures—does not lie in extinction, but in evolution. And this is not a negative occurrence—indeed, the culture and tradition many so eagerly seek to protect today is a result of it.

The present state of religion in Mongolia and the competing attitudes between various religious groups reveal several innate human difficulties in observing and analyzing a culture. It is somewhat easy and natural for foreign observers to witness religion in Mongolia and attempt to judge it as either “good” or “bad,” but this action is much more difficult and detrimental than it may initially seem. Even this author struggled with feelings of anger and disapproval toward both Buddhism and Christianity while studying both religions with their respective followers. Any judgment of the Mongolian religious climate as either “positive” or “negative” inevitably brings into play personal biases, and is formed through an extremely limited perspective. This fact is especially true when discussing religion, which involves a highly personal spiritual quest that cannot possibly be understood by an outside observer. Perhaps Louis A. Sass describes this opinion best in his description of a new strand in modern anthropology: this inability for an individual to accurately or sufficiently analyze a foreign religion is

“a refusal to explain away the irreducible complexity and ambiguity of human social life” coupled with the fact that “the knowledge [the observer] acquires is built on the sands of interpretation.”⁹⁸

Concerning Buddhism, it is easy to criticize the apparent superstition and lack of education of modern Buddhists. Followers pay more for a prayer that they believe will be read with more emphasis by the lama. In addition, the fact that these prayers are not understood by the follower closely resembles practices in pre-Reformation Europe, a period strongly criticized as encouraging ignorance among Christians.⁹⁹ An outside observer, however, cannot understand the extent to which a follower relies upon these practices in his or her own personal spiritual growth. As Bulganchimeg revealed through her support of such practices, to a certain extent, they can frequently have value that the outside observer simply does not or cannot see due to his or her own experiences and biases. It cannot be denied that Mongolia’s Buddhism contains much passion among its followers—the existence of lamas after the horrific purges; the amount of work and time a lama puts into his studies; children learning Tibetan and memorizing texts at a young age; the frequency with which a Buddhist visits the monastery; the amount of money he or she is willing to donate to the monastery; the time he or she is willing to spend in prayer. Perhaps for this author the most moving image occurred at midnight on November 8th, when, as the author lay in his sleeping bag attempting to sleep, a deep voice and the sound of a ringing bell floated through the wall. Upon emerging from the sleeping bag and walking into the living room,

⁹⁸ Sass, “Anthropology’s Native Problem.”

⁹⁹ Munkh-Ochir Dorjjugder Khirghis. Interview with author.

the author found the image of young Lama Bat-Gerel sitting on a small mat in his living room, praying for and in front of his wife and young son. There was no money involved, and no concern about them not understanding the chanting. There was only love and faith present. No ideological arguments from an external perspective can counter these observations.

It is also easy for the outside observer to find fault with Christian activities in Mongolia. Many, such as Alexander Berzin, find fault concerning the tendency of Christian organizations to reach Mongolians through offering education and aid. However these contributions have real, positive effects, such as offering Mongolians assistance and an education they perhaps cannot receive any other way for a comparable price. It must be remembered that these organizations are operating in a democratic country where individuals have the option to leave an organization or reject an ideology at all times. The individual also has the freedom to find and adhere to opposing doctrines the individual sees fit. The effects of discouraging some of these groups from taking part in their activities is committing a disservice to those who find benefits in them. For example, those members of Pastor Bayraa's church who happily exclaim their love for Jesus while having a firm understanding of their religion would likely not approve of specific support for the revival of Buddhism and limitation of Christianity. In other words, those Mongolians who chose and love Christianity are specifically ignored by observers who only find fault in the missionary activities of Christian groups in Mongolia.

In conclusion, it must be noted that both Buddhist and Christian activities in Mongolia, however different or, perhaps, similar they may seem, bring positive contributions to society—the most positive contributions occurring within individuals who finally have the democratic freedom to choose their beliefs. In order to evaluate religious activities as either “positive” or “negative,” one must focus upon real, tangible effects. These do not include an apparent lack of understanding, but physical harm or oppression against one’s will, for example. During this author’s research, such observable, tangible negative effects were not observed. Thus any argument for or against such religious activities must be an ideological one, and one proposed from a limited individual perspective that cannot fully understand how an individual’s personal spiritual growth is assisted by either “traditional” Buddhism or missionary activities.

Thus Mongolians and, it would seem, especially outside observers, must accept the natural course Mongolia’s free and democratic society will take as various influences—both internal and external—take advantage of the newfound freedom Mongolia suffered so long to achieve. This natural course is not something individuals are now learning to cope with for the first time—indeed, it is a force that has influenced Mongolia throughout time and has produced the traditions so eagerly revived and preserved today. Now is not the time to distrust such an evolutionary force, but to embrace the freedom and diversity Mongolia’s people now—finally—possess.

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