

Faith and Freedom:
A Profile of the Religious Environment
in Mongolia's Emerging Democracy

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Chinggis Khaan for his role in introducing the world to the idea of religious tolerance.

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Abstract

Mongolia is a rapidly globalizing nation that became both democratic and capitalistic after their 1990 revolution. In its history Mongolia has always had a strong religious influence coming mainly from Buddhism, which prevailed throughout Mongolia before the 70-year long socialist period that preceded the democratic revolution. The socialist period destroyed much of the traditional religion in Mongolia and left a spiritual and political vacuum in Mongolia after 1990. Economic hardships and religious tolerance brought forth numerous Christian religious groups and social organization that have profoundly affected the new religious environment in Mongolia, while Buddhism struggled to rebuild and retain a position of dominance in the religious environment. Western beliefs and the means by which they are spread have caused Buddhist to rethink how they present the traditional religion of Mongolia to a new Mongolian society that is growing in a highly globalized world. Christianity now has a foothold in Mongolia and will not be leaving any time soon, and Buddhism must change to compete in a new religious environment born of western culture and ideals. Conflict and controversy amongst religious groups and the government have been the marker of Christianity's rise in the past 18 years, but the governments contradictory policies and the Mongolian population's rapidly changing thoughts on religion, as well as politics and social society, are evidence that Mongolia's

religious environment will never be the same as it once was and that in the future Mongolia's religious make-up will be permanently altered by Christianity.

Introduction

By the time the socialist government took power in Mongolia in the 1930's it was reported that up to 45% of Mongolia's adult male population were lamas, Buddhist holy men. More than a third of Mongolia's population at the time, around 250,000 people, were living in areas overseen by living Buddhas or administered by monasteries. The Buddhist monastery in Mongolia's annual income was a staggering 31 million tögrög, the currency of Mongolia, while the Mongol state's was 37.5 million. Many considered Mongolia to be the most religious nation on earth; the Russian scholar Baradin Banzar wrote: "There are hardly other nations in the world that cherish their religion as deeply as Mongols and Tibetans. The two believe and revere Buddhism, sacrificing everything of value for this religion." (Paffard, 2003)

Seventy years of socialism systematically destroyed Buddhism in Mongolia to the point that by the democratic revolution of 1990, only 30 Buddhist monks still practiced in the single surviving monastery in Ulaanbaatar. Though the vast majority of Mongolians today identify as Buddhist, the religious landscape of Mongolia is changing rapidly. The political environment has been touch-and-go with many new religious groups, especially Christian groups, which are growing exponentially in size. With government policies changing daily and enforcement

of these policies severely lacking, the religious environment is unstable. In addition, Buddhism's stronghold in Mongolia has been decimated and their struggle to survive in a rapidly changing political and religious environment is ever-present as new groups shift dynamics in a country that has only had democratic independence for eighteen years.

The rise of Christianity and the trials of Buddhism in Mongolia change with the newly democratic country, and in the last two decades the religious environment has been in a constant state of flux. Research on the religious environment in Mongolia is scarce, but, of the research that does exist, it appears to come in waves. The activities and struggles of the modern Buddhist monastery in Mongolia does not attract many academics; thus, most of the academic literature on Mongolian Buddhism is about pre-soviet Mongolia looking back toward Chinggis Khaan's time. The Antoon Mostaert Center in Ulaanbaatar does have a collection of essays entitled Christianity and Mongolia (2006), which provides several essays about Christian groups, and much of the other work on the subject was conducted during the initial controversy surrounding the Christian influx in the mid-1990's to the turn of the century.

Since the turn of the century, however, research appears to be dwindling to nothing in the category of Mongolia's religious environment. This paper aims to provide a wide swath of Mongolia's current religious environment by profiling some of the most active Christian religious groups and their interaction with Buddhism. A survey of prominent religious groups and religious leaders will be placed in the context of the current political and economic environment in which

these groups and individuals function.

Methodology

Primary resources were gathered through first-hand observation and interviews. Primary documents were previously published newspaper articles or website postings used in this paper for direct quotations of interviewees. Primary documents also consisted of government legal documents and statistics. Contacts were made through SIT Mongolia, initially, and then through a snowball study of individuals referred by previous interviewees. A conscious effort was made to interview a proportional amount of individuals from various religious groups based on perceived prominence in Mongolia's religious environment.

Interviews were conducted in an informal manner and were only recorded by handwritten notes. A tape recorder was not used because so many interviewees refused, and lack of a recorder appeared to put interviewees at ease allowing for more productive interviews. A standard set of questions was used for the first half of each interview, which on average lasted about an hour, and then questions were tailored to the individual interviewee or their religious affiliation for the second half of the interview. One interview was conducted via electronic mail due to the prominence of this individual and his/her being out of the country until the end of the year.

Much of the information gathered also came from question and answer sessions after public lectures given by officials from various religious groups in

Mongolia. Secondary sources come mostly from the limited scholarly work on religion in Mongolia and focus mostly on the history of religion before the modern era. Almost all primary and secondary articles were obtained electronically from government and scholarly database and from general internet searches.

Legal Context

In 1992, the new democratic constitution was ratified and the country became officially open to religious groups from the outside. Socialism had stifled all forms of religion and as a reaction to that closed policy, the Mongolians tapped their ancient roots and created an environment wholly free and tolerant of all religious groups; this idea of religious tolerance was introduced by Chinggis Khaan during his reign and is an era of Mongolian history that all citizens were willing to identify with, consciously or unconsciously, after the democratic revolution.

The Constitution of Mongolia mentions religion in three separate articles. Article 9, which, specifically, says: “1) The State shall respect the Church and the Church shall honor the State. 2) State institutions may not engage in religious activities and the Church may not pursue political activities. 3) The relationship between the State and the Church is regulated by law (National, 1992).” The constitution also mentions freedom from discrimination based on religion, among other things, in Article 14. And in Article 16, the article that essentially lists

human rights guaranteed to Mongolians, clauses 15 and 16 read, “15) Freedom of conscience and religion. 16) Freedom of thought, opinion and expression, speech, press, peaceful assembly (National, 1992).” The last clause in the aforementioned Article 9 led to the passage of the 1993 law “On the Relationship between the State and the Monastery.” This document outlined the specific legal environment that would become the foundation upon which religious groups would need to function in Mongolia.

There are several important clauses in this law, which have come to inform much of the debate and controversy in Mongolia’s religious environment. Article 3 Section 2, which reads, “One citizen may not force religion upon other citizens, and such actions including the restriction of the freedom to belief are prohibited,” and Article 7 Section 7, which says, “The Monastery and the Clergy of any religion are forbidden to force and insist, to influence financially, to misinform, to prejudice the health and morale, and to disorient non-believers of the respective religion in order to recruit them into this religion,” are the two sections that are commonly referred to as restricting proselytizing. Proselytizing has been considered an issue by many government officials mostly due to evangelical Christians who brought the relatively unknown concept to Mongolia on a large scale after the democratic revolution (On the Relationship, 1993).

The most controversial section on religion in the Mongolian law is Article 4 Section 2 because it gives special status to Buddhism in Mongolian law: “The State gives preference to Buddhism in order to respect national unity and historic tradition of the civilization of the Mongolian people. However, the present

provision shall not put obstacles for the citizens to follow other religions.” This clause does not go so far as to designate Buddhism as the state religion, which was an original suggestion, but it has allowed the government to clarify why it funds the rebuilding of several monasteries despite the separation of Church and State written in their constitution (On the Relationship, 1993).

A lesser known clause that also lays out preference not only for Buddhism but also for Mongolia’s other traditional religions is Article 7 Section 6, which says, “The cultivation, propaganda, and the education of any religion with the exception of the Buddhism, Islam, and Shamanism are prohibited in Mongolia beyond the monasteries and churches of the respective religions.” It is obvious that concern over protecting traditional aspects of Mongolian culture allowed the government to show such blatant favoritism for certain religious groups in these two sections despite the statement a few articles earlier that reads, “Activities aimed at the discrimination, humiliation, or division of persons on the ground of the religious differences and the choice of the belief are prohibited (article 3 section 3).” One could easily argue that there is an inherent contradiction in this law because government favoritism on any grounds is discrimination and division of persons on the basis of religion, but nationalism and protectionism of traditional culture continue to allow the government to keep this contradiction in place, and no one thus far has successfully challenged these government policies (On the Relationship, 1993).

In Article 9 entitled “Establishment of the Monasteries” a list of requirements is set out for how to register a place of worship, which is necessary

for religious groups to practice legally in Mongolia (On the Relationship, 1993). Registration must be renewed annually to the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs (MJHA) as well as at the aimag and local level. Only the national government has the ability to reject a religious group for registration, but state and local registration has often been used to keep religious groups from practicing in certain areas of Mongolia. The central government reportedly fined at least one local government for not registering a Christian church during 2008 (2008 Report, 2008).

The final major clause in the law on religion is Article 8 Section 2 that stipulates that dissemination of religious teachings and instruction in state schools is prohibited as per the separation of church and state (On the Relationship, 1993). However, the contradictory aspects of this law aforementioned allows Buddhist schools to receive public funding for teaching standard curriculum in addition to religious subjects, which the money cannot be used for. This push and pull between protecting religions and showing preference based on historical context has greatly influenced the legal and subsequently religious environment in Mongolia.

The Church of Latter-Day Saints

The Church of Latter-Day Saints, commonly known as Mormons, is unusually situated in Mongolia's religious environment. The Latter-Day Saints is the largest and fastest growing Christian group in Mongolia. Their mission officially began on April 15th, 1993; since then, their membership has grown to

between 7000 and 8000 Mongolians in just 15 years. The church currently has 160 missionaries, all male, from the United States who receive three months of intensive Mongolian language from native speakers before leaving on their two-year mission. With about 30 branches, several in Ulaanbaatar, and churches in major population centers like Erdenet, Choboilson, and Murun, Mongolia is one of the Church of Latter-Day Saints' largest missions with more missionaries per capita than anywhere else in the world (Elder Neilsen, 2008).

The official humanitarian arm of the church is called Deseret Charities International. Under this title the church has successfully worked with Red Cross International to donate equipment and provide training in several public health areas. During this last year the church donated \$36,000 worth of wheelchairs, \$15,000 to raise awareness about Measles and its vaccine, and \$5,000 to provide the blind with walking sticks. The Church has also collected and donated glasses and provided free optical exams, trained and provided equipment to medical professionals for neo-natal resuscitation, and dug community wells for areas that lack fresh water. Members also work with a local orphanage and have participated in community clean-up efforts that have drawn as many as a thousand people. In addition to all of these projects, the church teaches English in public schools. The church's missionaries are not registered as missionaries in Mongolia, the government refuses to give them this status, so they are registered as English teachers and required to teach twelve hours a week without religious spin (Soylamma, 2008).

The church faces the same persecution and misconceptions that Latter-Day Saints faces everywhere else in the world such as the notion that they are polygamist, which is a practice of the fundamentalist splinter groups of the original church. The church also has to combat negative media and negative messages propagated by other Christian groups, which do not consider the Church of Latter Day Saints part of Christianity. As a result the church tries but rarely succeeds in interacting with other Christian groups, and their interaction with Buddhist and Islamic groups is also limited to a few instances. The church has overcome these misperceptions and generally finds that Mongolians are receptive to the church's message. Elder Neilsen, a missionary completing the second year of his mission, notes that the church has adapted its message to the Mongolian context by focusing on the story of Jesus and their doctrine related to family strength. He also believes that there are many similarities between Buddhist doctrine and his church's doctrine; for instance, he finds that Mongolians are very attracted to the idea of resurrection versus the Buddhist rebirth because an individual would come back in their same body (Elder Neilsen, 2008).

Another major factor that drives people to the church is the widespread drinking and smoking that is characteristic of modern Mongolian society. The church's doctrine of The Law of Health prohibits ingestion of alcohol and stimulants such as caffeine, which proves a very appealing doctrine except in the case of its prohibition of drinking tea, which is traditionally and culturally the most popular drink in Mongolia linked to many social norms and taboos. Tea is a rather small obstacle for the church compared to the threats that church members

receive from angry families and other Christian groups (specifically Korean groups), and the church does report incidents of violence propagated against members. Despite hardships, the church continues to grow mostly through member referrals, the church does not proselytize as part of their contract with the government of Mongolia, and the church tries very hard to abide by all of the governments laws and regulations; their only tension with the Mongolian government recently has had to do with visa being denied for missionaries from the U.S., but this does not seem to be a big concern to the church, which is working through the conflict (Elder Neilsen, 2008). Aside from that instance, the church appears to be functioning without obstruction from the government and is growing faster than any single denomination in Mongolia now comprising nine percent of the total Christian population in Mongolia (2008 Report, 2008).

Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church in Mongolia functions under the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary diocese, which represents the Catholic Church in much of the developing world. The church has four parishes in and around Ulaanbaatar including St. Peter's Cathedral on the far east side of town. The church is slow to convert and counts their membership only of the faithful who have undergone specific Catholic ceremonies of faith that take significant preparation. The church's membership currently stands at 510 individuals with the first native Mongolian currently in Catholic seminar abroad (Patrick, 2008).

The church was invited by the government of Mongolia in 1992 to help with the low standard of living and education after the Soviet pull-out. The church currently runs five kindergartens, two middle schools and a technical school. They also have an English school and an after school program that caters to 215 students to help supplement their public education. Two soup kitchens, a school for the mentally challenged and a re-integration program for prisoners and deportees from abroad are also part of the church's social service portfolio (Patrick, 2008).

Father Serge Patrick of St. Peter's explained to me that the church seeks to understand the Mongolian people, their culture and their language. Father Patrick has shown that he can adapt to the Mongolian environment and will actually allow families to consult Buddhist and shamanistic traditions in conjunction with Catholic services. For instance, he will work with families to hold funeral services on favorable days of the week based on shamanistic traditions. He has a respect for Mongolian history and culture especially in regards to Mongolia's traditional religion Buddhism of which he says, "If you destroy Buddhism you will destroy something important in Mongolia (Patrick, 2008)."

Father Patrick is also trying to readjust his thinking on the subject of marriage in Mongolia. Frequently in Mongolia people will have children or live together for several years before holding marriage ceremonies. One Mongolian gentleman I met actually had three children with his wife and lived with her for 15 years before they were married. For the Catholic Church both of these activities before marriage are not condoned, however, Father Patrick has taken the

position that the marriage ceremony, which is traditionally the official point of union in much of the rest of the world, is not the proper paradigm for Mongolia. Instead, the signing of a marriage certificate given by the state should be the official point of union both politically and in this case religiously so that subsequent children and living arrangements fall in line with the Catholic faith (Patrick, 2008).

In addition to applying Catholic doctrine to Mongolia, the church must also work against prevailing misperceptions that are not unique to the Mongolian environment. The church's morality frequently scares off people especially the celibate lifestyle of Catholic religious officials, which makes priest and nuns less approachable. However, the church's goal is not to convert everyone to Catholicism, the church does not proselytize, but instead focuses on their social work first and foremost. Through their works, the Catholic Church appears to be on good terms with both the government of Mongolia and its people, especially those directly affected. Father Patrick also tells me that the church has a good relationship with the Gandan Monastery, the largest Buddhist temple in Ulaanbaatar. Unfortunately, he says, most other Protestant groups are anti-Buddhist, and he has heard reports of idol destruction by some of these groups. Overall, the Catholic Church is on a humanitarian mission in Mongolia, and while they play a significant social role in the Mongolia, their religious influence and specific doctrines affects the environment very little (Patrick, 2008).

Russian Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church's modern history in Mongolia begins at the turn of the twentieth century. A church was founded in Mongolia before the revolution that functioned until the socialist took power, closed the church and killed the Father who had founded the church. The Church reopened after the democratic revolution and is about to finish the construction of its first and only temple. The Church is unique in its membership, its relationships and its overall mission (Fr. Aleksei, 2008).

The Russian population in Mongolia today is approximately 5000 as compared to the more than 120,000 that were here during the socialist era. Of these 5000 Russian, about twenty percent come to the church throughout the year; the church also caters to expatriates from Eastern Europe according to Father Aleksei at the Holy Trinity Parish of Ulaanbaatar, yet very few members of the church are Mongolian because as with the Catholic Church the process of membership is slow. Father Aleksei is currently trying to start a church newsletter in Mongolian and translate Russian Orthodox holy texts because he says that Mongolians tend to lump Christian churches together and mix them up. Father Aleksei says that his church has good relations with the local Catholic parish and Gandan monastery; it appears that the church is also on good terms with the government, which allowed the church to build its new temple after President Enkhbayar gave his support for the project personally (Fr. Aleksei, 2008).

The most interesting thing about the church is that it acts first and foremost as a political representative of the Russian Federation. According to

Father Aleksei the church helps with various political functions like facilitating visa process to and from Russian. The church's secondary focus is to spread Christianity but this is not a function they appear to be spending a lot of time on given how few Mongolians are part of the church. The church itself seems to keep mostly isolated in Mongolia, segregated the way most of the Russian community is from the rest of the Mongolian community (Fr. Aleksei, 2008).

Western Protestants

I only studied Western Protestants and will only discuss Western Protestants in this section because I simply did not have enough time to profile non-Western Protestants (mostly Korean) in Mongolia. This section is meant to be an overview of several prominent groups and individuals in the Protestant community who have a significant impact on the religious environment of Mongolia and is not representative of all Protestant groups currently functioning in Mongolia.

Protestant Christian teachings appear to never have come into contact with Mongolia prior to 1990. As a result, Mongolian's perceptions of Protestants and vice versa have been influenced by less than two decades of interaction. In this brief period of time Protestants have had a tenuous relationship with the government and the people of Mongolia. There was much resistance initially to heavily funded and organized religious groups due to Mongolian's historical fear of outside influence. Protestant groups gained acceptance through their social services which Mongolians could not deny throughout the 1990's, but in 2000

backlash and lockdown by Mongolians sprang forth out of an incident where two Mongolian youths committed suicide. The boys left a note that they were “giving their lives for Jesus” which was the predominate rhetoric of Protestants, especially evangelicals. The eight years after the millennium have seen many debates and personal attacks on individuals and specific groups in the Protestant community due to these perceptions (Patrick, 2008).

The most controversial figure in Mongolia’s religious environment today is Thomas Terry the CEO of Eagle Television. Eagle TV is one of Mongolia’s few local television stations and is funded under the auspices of the AMONG Foundation, a Protestant evangelical group. The station is news-oriented, trying to model itself after many 24-hour news networks, yet the station does have blocks of programming reserved for Christian television programming. Terry is controversial because of his negative views on Buddhism, which he is very vocal about on his personal website as well as his control of an independent media that reaches most Mongolians in a country where most media is still owned and controlled by political parties, a system that is a remnant of the socialist era (Terry, 2008).

Another evangelical minister whose impact is significant is Mitch Tillman, a born-again Christian, who renounced a life of crack-cocaine addiction and was called to Mongolia for service by god. Mr. Tillman raises funds from the U.S. through Baptist churches to support Mongolian-run churches in Ulaanbaatar. His efforts allow a Protestant Baptist message to reach over 1000 people a week through the many churches and pastors with whom he works (Tillman, 2008). D.

Dashdendev, a Mongolian evangelical pastor who converted to Christianity in 1991, is another significant figure in Protestant Christianity in Mongolia.

Dashdendev has been an outspoken critic of the government's favoritism in law of the traditional Buddhist faith. He preaches and translates bibles at the Bible School which he directs, and his ministry is part of the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance, which brings together over 450 evangelical groups in Mongolia. Aside from Dashdendev's ministry's interaction with the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance, many of the independent Protestant groups do not interact with other religious groups, especially non-Christian groups (Dashdendev, 2008).

As with all other groups in Mongolia, these individuals and their ministries have significant social service projects established in Mongolia.

Terry's ministry has a program called Steppe-By-Steppe that brings goods and services to nomadic herders in various areas of the countryside (Terry, 2008).

Tillman's program runs a host of social services from a small orphanage to a ministry for street alcoholics. He also has a ministry in an Ulaanbaatar dump for the children who work there and a daycare for working parents (Tillman, 2008).

Dashdendev and the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance have Alcoholics Anonymous programs, assistance programs of female heads of household, food distribution programs and prison ministries. Prison ministries are a good example of the interplay between religious social service and the government in Mongolia (Dashdendev, 2008).

For instance, Margaret Currie runs Prison Fellowship Mongolia, the first of what are now a few dozen prison ministry programs. She was originally

brought in as a consultant in 1992 to help the government of Mongolia start a prison fellowship. At the time the prison system could not afford enough food to keep the prisoners alive due to the economic stresses left by the Soviet pull-out. Thus, Ms. Currie was placed in-charge of the program she was merely supposed to consult on; sixteen years later she is still running the program that is now funded by her personal contacts abroad. A few dozen prison fellowships now exist in the Mongolian prison system all funded from abroad, and these NGO's, which are predominantly Christian organizations, are the main support system for the prison system in Mongolia. The government has not needed to invest in the prison system because these religious organizations have now filled the capacity gap that the government originally could not fill and now does not need to fill. Government interaction with Protestant groups and individuals appears to be greater than with other religious groups because of the fast-growing nature and foreign beliefs and presentation of beliefs of Christianity (Currie, 2008).

Christian protestant values and beliefs are attractive to Mongolians for the same reasons any form of Christianity is appealing. Dashdendev reiterated that Mongolian converts, such as himself, are driven by vice and immorality in Mongolian society toward Christian faith. He also notes that the historical nomadic population breeds restless souls, and the spiritual vacuum left after socialism leaves Mongolians searching for something to believe in now that socialism no longer drives their life purpose. Terry believes that prosperity theory, the theory that “an authentic religious belief and behavior in a person will result in their material prosperity (Wikipedia, 2008),” which many protestant

religious groups integrate to various degrees into their Christian philosophy, is similar to animism. Animism not Buddhism, as Terry believes, is widespread in Mongolia and is the belief that “non-human entities can have a soul, such as animals and plants, as well as inanimate objects such as rocks. Often these entities must be placated by offerings in order to gain favor, or even worshipped (Wikipedia, 2008).” The similarities in both come from external evidence produced by the worship of respective gods or one god in Christianity.

In contrast to the majority of Christians in Mongolia, Tillman believes that Mongolians traditional beliefs are polar opposites from Christian beliefs. He believes that Christianity’s good moral ideology is in the DNA of Americans while Mongolians’ DNA is ingrained with selfish pessimistic Buddhist ideology. He believes it is hard to work with Mongolians because of this fact and even more difficult to win their souls and help them to become born-again. Despite his views, Tillman’s goal is the same as Terry or Dashdendev: they are all here to spread Christianity (Tillman, 2008). None of the men claim that their respective groups proselytize, yet Terry and Dashdendev have door-to-door and ger-to-ger evangelizing groups that function in UB and the countryside and Tillman claims that his goal is to win souls. Even though they are not proselytizing these groups appear to be breaking the law by cultivating and educating people on religion outside an official religious building.

Dashdendev does not see a problem with breaking government law, which he and his organizations do by operating out of unregistered churches or churches that are registered under the umbrella of larger churches (which is illegal),

because he and good Christians are more moral than the officials in government, and god's law supersedes the government of Mongolia's. According to him only about 20% of the evangelical churches in Mongolia are officially registered with the government, and his mentality on the government's moral corruption comes out of a number of disputes where Dashdendev protested the government's law on religion and human rights violations by favoring Buddhism over other religions (Dashdendev, 2008).

While Tillman does not claim to be more moral than the government, his organization, which is registered as Grace Baptist Church, breaks government law as well by having several unregistered ger churches in UB. UB city law prohibits the use of gers as churches, which Tillman's organization uses as children's ministries in areas around the city center. Terry's interactions with the government are much more public, having been called a terrorist against the state of Mongolian in a local paper and being called out for investigation by parliamentary speaker Nyamdorj in 2006. Terry also received a letter from the Mongolian CIA that speculated that Terry was involved in a plot to overthrow the government of Mongolia. This controversy has cooled off with Terry stepping down as General Manager of Eagle TV, though he is still the president of the station, and government officials involved being ousted from office (Wikipedia, 2008).

Terry remains very unpopular amongst many Mongolians for his very public criticism of Buddhism that appeared on his personal blog in early 2008, which is attached to the Eagle TV website. He stated, "Certainly I'm no fan of

Buddhism. The teachings of Buddhism cannot hold a candle to the life of Jesus Christ. As I've written previously, Christianity is superior to Buddhism ethically, historically, and factually (Minder, 2008)” and blamed corruption in Mongolia on the lack of ethics in Buddhism which was the historical moral guide for Mongolia until present. Terry’s comments have again brought him into the spotlight with Buddhists all over Mongolia and the world prompting numerous articles on Terry’s intolerance to Buddhism, which most likely caused him to remove his blog from the internet sometime in the last few months.

Protestants continue to be seen as a threat to many government officials and those who want to preserve traditional Mongolian spiritual culture; however, protestants are also very popular for the doctrine they preach that offers Mongolians a new alternative to fit a new Mongolia. Protestants are a mixed bag of groups who are foremost motivated by spreading god’s word, groups that are in Mongolia to do god’s works, groups that obey the law, groups that are here to spread god’s law, and many other groups that are all united in belief that Christianity has brought them to Mongolia and has something to offer to Mongolians.

Buddhism

Buddhism first gained ground in Mongolian society in the thirteenth century when Kublai Khan, the grandson of Chinggis Khan, adopted Buddhism as the official state religion. Buddhism had been allowed to function under Chinggis Khan’s empire because of a policy of religious tolerance the great

leader instituted despite remaining shamanistic throughout his lifetime. By the time Kublai made Buddhism the state religion much of Mongolia's nobility had adopted the religion. Buddhism waxed and waned for three centuries with people reverting to shamanism as the Mongol empire weakened. Buddhism as a formal religion established itself more permanently in the sixteenth century when Mongol conquests of Tibet brought Buddhist missionaries back to Mongolia and established Buddhist monasteries all over Mongolia (Paffard, 2008).

When the Mongol empire fell to control of the Manchus in the seventeenth century Buddhism flourished. Monks and lamas gained increasing power politically and socially in Mongolian culture while the nobility lost power. Mongolian monks were respected throughout Asia for their devotion and scholarly work. At the beginning of the twentieth century 45 percent of Mongolia's male population was lamas, Buddhist holy men. Unfortunately, when Mongolia transitioned to a socialist government they were subjected to purges in the 1930's that targeted Buddhism in Mongolia. Of the over 3000 Buddhist temples and 6000 other Buddhist buildings, all but one was destroyed during these purges, while 60,000 monks, nuns, and scholars were killed or imprisoned. The socialist efforts wiped Mongolia clean of Buddhism. Some practiced and held their Buddhist beliefs in secret, but much of the official teachings and originally Mongolian Buddhist culture was lost in the purges. By 1990, when the democratic revolution happened, there were only 30 practicing monks in Gandan monastery in UB, the surviving temple, left to lead Buddhism into the new Mongolia (Paffard, 2008).

Modern Mongolia's religious environment has been challenging for the religion that once had ultimate superiority over all other groups. In the early 1990's almost 90% of Mongolia's population claimed to be Buddhist, and in the mid 2000's about 80% still claimed to be Buddhist, but despite this overwhelming numbers most of the people who claim to be Buddhist do not claim to know much about their faith and retain the title merely because of historical cultural identification with Buddhism. This is a major problem for the revival of Buddhism because laypeople now wish to know why they are performing certain rituals and what certain prayers mean (the vast majority of Buddhist prayers are in Tibetan which no one in Mongolia speaks). In addition the small number of monks and lamas are focused on raising their own numbers to strengthen the Buddhist community, thus the few who can teach about Buddhism are often teaching aspiring monks (Kohn, 2008).

Buddhism's revival depends heavily on sources outside the monastery because while the monastery used to make a significant income, they began the modern era with nothing. The government's favoritism of Buddhism for cultural heritage has allowed numerous temples and monasteries to be rebuilt as well as monastic schools. Because the monastery no longer provides for communities as it did during Manchu rule, the people have little incentive and tie to giving donations to the monastery, which, in a misguided attempt to update Buddhism in a market economy, monasteries created menus of prayers with suggested offerings. These menus seem out of place and offensive to some Mongolian Buddhists, but the attempt to update the Buddhist monastery to the 21st century is

admirable and a step in the right direction. Many Mongolians including Lagvademchig, a devout Buddhist who worked on the Mongolian Monastery Project that mapped out and collected data from monasteries that existed before socialism, believes that for Buddhism to revive in Mongolia in a meaningful way the teachings of Buddhism must be made available and applicable to modern-day problems that affect Mongolians (Lagvademchig, 2008).

Christian groups do a good job of pointing out which of their doctrines can help bring families together and prevent alcoholism, two major problems in modern Mongolia, but Buddhism has failed to organize its message to be more applicable to the current social environment in Mongolia. These problems are so obvious that even foreigners pick up on them quickly. Gonchog Nochu, an American monk who has now been in Mongolia for three years, noted that Buddhist are using 19th century techniques to try to revive Buddhism and people will not be satisfied without understanding a deeper meaning to Buddhism. Well funded Christian groups can provide social services, something the Buddhist monastery is beginning to do, and other economic and educational lures in addition to doctrine that applies to people living in modern Mongolia (Nochu, 2008).

Not surprisingly, foreigners play a large role in Buddhism's revival in Mongolia. Lagvademchig's project was funded by western supporters of Buddhism and Gonchog Nochu was sent as a missionary from the U.S. to help Buddhism in its new environment. The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) is a foreign group that "is devoted to the

transmission of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and values worldwide through teaching, meditation, and community service (Mission, 2008).” The Foundation is trying to help with the revival by offering classes on Buddhism and English (a service provided by many Christian groups) and social services such as soup kitchens. The FPMT and other groups like the Tibet Foundation, a similar organization, are vital to Buddhism in the modern era because they bring knowledge and tools such as funding and social work to Mongolian Buddhism, which has never needed such things before.

Conclusions

The rise in Christian groups and the decline in Buddhism during the modern era of Mongolia can be traced to numerous factors that reoccurred in all person interviews that were conducted. Every Christian group believes that the best way to spread their message is through good works. Mongolia is and has been a place where social services are necessary for people to survive; the dire situation left after the revolution allowed almost endless opportunity for foreign Christian groups to provide good works (i.e. social services), and in some cases, the government even invited these religious groups because the need for help was so dire. Through their social services Christian groups have become more visible to the people of Mongolia and impacted individuals’ lives in a mostly positive way that can only support the lifestyle they preach and follow.

In addition to good works, foreign Christian groups have both money and knowledge that Mongolia continues to lack but hungers for greatly. The ability to

teach English and send Mongolians to study abroad make Christian groups even more appealing despite not being for the most religious of reasons. Most of those I interviewed did not deny that greater resources and opportunity initially attract people to their churches, but those who stay with a church do so out of belief and faith in the system to which they have been introduced. It is in this process that Christians have an advantage in Mongolia: their resources get people in the door of their respective churches allowing individuals to be exposed to a new religious message. In fact one of the most common threads amongst Christian groups is the acknowledgement that their buildings, which are often larger and newer than much of the structures surround them, attract people. The very sight of a cathedral or a polished granite church of Latter-Day Saints peaks Mongolians curiosity and often people will just leisurely walk into a temple to see that this religious organization is about.

In contrast, Buddhism faces obstacles at every turn. Buddhism first had to recover itself as a faith in Mongolia with only support from the already struggling government of Mongolia, which was in similar financial and physical ruin. Only in the last two to three years has the monastery been established and stable enough to expand out and provide social services for the people once again. Lagging 15 years behind well organized and heavily financed Christian churches from abroad, Buddhism was damaged by these newcomers winning over people through good works while the monastery floundered to find its footing in modern Mongolia. Now many Mongolians no longer favor one religion over another necessarily because they have been shown both the good and bad sides of many

religions, which dissolves much of the justification for Buddhism to be favored over other religions.

Elder Nielsen said it best when told me that Mongolians used form their opinions and presumptions about religious groups without any information about said religious groups because socialism had insulated them from this type of knowledge (Elder Nielsen, 2008). Now however, Mongolians have so much information and such a diversity of information religiously that all their opinions are now influenced by what they see and hear from religious groups themselves. And because Mongolians can now see the work that different religious organization do, Mongolians can make their own decisions and formulate their own opinions, which is working against Buddhism which benefited from the initial resistance to foreign influence after the revolution as well as the mistrust of outside organizations and religious groups.

Disgust by Mongolians with certain aspect of Mongolian culture, such as drinking and smoking, that have become part of the monastic culture have helped drive people away from Mongolia's traditional religion and towards newer less tainted religious groups that reflect democratic times, capitalism and a newer globalized society. The situation is not so one-sided that people are not also upset with Christians. Even though these groups are growing faster and Buddhism is declining, many Mongolians find the Christian influence to have very negative consequences as well. Aside from mistrust, many Mongolians are offended by Christian proselytizing, which is anti-proselytizing rhetoric was codified in 1993.

Also Christian doctrine and preaching has caused violence in Mongolia on several different occasions.

In addition to the suicides in the name of Jesus, reports from most of my interviewees, including Christians, noted that Mongolian converts to Christianity have shown instances of violence in the form of destroying Buddhist stupas, structures containing idols, and shamanistic ovoos, sacred rock piles. The 2008 U.S. Department of State Religious Freedom Report finds on instances of religiously motivated violence in Mongolia, but most Mongolians would disagree including one lama from the Khintii aimag, a Mongolian province, who witnesses first-hand the destruction of Buddhist elements in his town by faithful Christian converts. It appears that most religious violence happens in the country where there is no reporting and even less enforcement of the law. There are also reports of some Christian converts perpetrating attacks on Christians such as the Mormons. Because Mormons are not considered Christian by other Christian groups, they are targets for attack and have had a few instances of members being attacked (Elder Neilsen, 2008).

At the moment, controversy, violence and proselytizing have died down or are at least shielded from the public eye. The future of Mongolia's religious environment is uncertain but based on how groups function now there are many conclusions we could draw about the potential future. For example, the church of Latter-Day Saints, the largest Christian denomination in Mongolia, is planning on a rapid increase in membership in the next five to ten years. The increase that they are planning on is so large that they think membership could triple in five

years prompting them to build a temple in Mongolia, which given their traditional temples, would trump any religious building in the entire country and could only work to attract more Mongolians to be members of their church (Elder Neilsen, 2008).

Buddhism on the other hand has begun to change, perhaps adapting to the times now that they have reestablished themselves across Mongolia. However, this means that traditional Buddhism is altering itself to be like the Christian groups in Mongolia, but teaching English and providing social services like soup kitchens. In fact, the FPMT and other non-native Buddhist groups are becoming the model of successful Buddhism in Mongolia and the only ones affiliated with the religious who can claim to a growing membership and expanded work. It appears that despite politicians' hopes to tie Buddhism to nationalism and history in an effort to help the religion flourish, the monastery is feeling the need to adapt and move away from its older incarnations in Mongolian history to once again reign in Mongolia. As an example of this change, the Gandan Monastery began a program to work with prisoners in the last six months; it is the first group of Buddhist to work within the prison alongside the many Christian groups that already work within the prison system (Currie, 2008).

The prison system brings up one last thing to mention about the government's role in the religious environment and vice versa. The prison system is a perfect example of where the government abdicated responsibly of the prisoners over to social service organization and NGO's to supervise their health and welfare. When the government has the resource to take back that

responsibility, the transition may be difficult because the government will have other issues to focus their resources on and may not seek to alter their current system of aid from outside organizations. In addition, the government's policies toward religious groups and the laws that govern these groups may be up for alteration in the future. Christians are now in all sectors of Mongolia, for instance two federal judges and the chief of police are part of the church of Latter-Day Saints, and they have become such an undeniable part of Mongolian society that the President wished all the Christians of Mongolia a happy new year alongside other religious groups in his nationwide new year's speech. Controversy and opposition to Christians has died down amongst government officials in the last two years and the president's speech may be an indicator that Christians are becoming accepted as an inevitable piece of the environment of a new Mongolia.

Glossary*

Animism- It is generally accepted that "animism" refers to the belief that non-human entities can have a soul, such as animals and plants, as well as inanimate objects such as rocks. Often these entities must be placated by offerings in order to gain favor, or even worshipped. Animism in this sense contrasts with polytheism (the worship of various gods), in that animistic worship is of minor, local deities, whereas polytheism is the worship of major deities

Christianity- (from the word Χριστός "Christ") is a monotheistic religion centered on the life and teachings of Jesus as presented in the New Testament. Its followers, known as Christians, believe that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God and the Messiah (Christ) prophesied in the Hebrew Bible (the part of scripture common to Christianity and Judaism). To Christians, Jesus Christ is a teacher, the model of a virtuous life, the revealer of God, as well as an incarnation of God, and most importantly the savior of humanity who suffered, died, and was resurrected to bring about salvation from sin. Christians maintain that Jesus ascended into heaven, and most denominations teach that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, granting everlasting life to his followers. Christians call the message of Jesus Christ the Gospel ("good news") and hence label the written accounts of his ministry as gospels.

Evangelism- is the Christian practice of proselytisation. The intention of most evangelism is to convert those who do not follow the Christian God to Christianity, ostensibly for the purpose of effecting eternal salvation; others believe it is to inform others about the Kingdom of God. Evangelism is done in obedience to the Great Commission, a command from Jesus to his disciples to proselytize, according to accounts in the New Testament. Christians who specialize in evangelism are known as evangelists, whether in they are in their home communities or acting as missionaries in the field. Some Christian traditions consider evangelists to be in a leadership position, and they may be found preaching to large meetings, and in governance roles. Christian groups who actively encourage evangelism are sometimes known as evangelistic or evangelist.

Proselytizing- is the practice of attempting to convert people to another opinion and, particularly, another religion.

Prosperity Gospel- is the teaching that an authentic religious belief and behavior in a person will result in their material prosperity. That is, the doctrine holds that material prosperity, particularly financial prosperity and success in business and personal life, is to be expected as external evidence of God's favor. This favor may be preordained, or granted in return for efficacious prayer, merit-making and/or appropriate faith

Protestant- Protestantism is a religious faith and practice "founded on the principles of the Reformation, especially in the acceptance of the Bible as the sole source of revelation, in justification by faith alone, and in the universal priesthood of all the believers." Originating in the 16th century Protestant Reformation, protestant doctrine--also known in continental European traditions as Evangelical doctrine, in opposition to that of Roman Catholicism--typically holds that Scripture (rather than tradition or ecclesiastic interpretation of Scripture) is the source of revealed truth.

*All glossary terms' definitions come from <http://en.wikipedia.org/> (2008).

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