

BUDDHISM and the Gospel Among the Peoples of China

*Inviting Buddhists to faith in Jesus Christ
should be high on the mission agenda of the Church today.
This challenge is not a new one. For more than 1300 years missionaries
have sought to penetrate Buddhist barriers in and around
China with little success.*

BY RALPH COVELL

The Buddhist faith probably entered China a century or two before the Christian era, but it did not root itself deeply or spread widely until about 150 A.D. Its greatest growth came after the fall of the later Han dynasty (25-200 A.D.) and reached its ascendancy and glory during the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.). Ultimately, Buddhism became very popular both among the masses and the official gentry classes and was accepted as an indigenous Chinese faith.¹ The Buddhism which entered China was predominantly Mahayana, although the first books translated into Chinese by monks from India followed the original Pali tradition (Hinayana) espoused by Gautama Buddha.

Mahayana Buddhism, usually called the Greater Vehicle, seeks the salvation of all human beings. It includes the concept of saviors (Bodhisattvas) and a more concrete future existence, filled with heavens and hells. Hinayana Buddhism, the Lesser Vehicle, stresses good works for salvation and follows in the steps of Gautama's early disciples in urging adherents to attain the status of Arhat.

Hinayana Buddhism is found today in China largely along the border between Yunnan Province and Myanmar (formerly Burma) and Thailand, particularly among the Dai minority nationality. Mahayana Buddhism is found throughout the remainder of China proper and has expressed itself in several

different schools.

The Jing Tu (Pure Land), or the Lotus School, became the most popular of the Chinese Buddhist sects and was the one to which the Christian faith related the best. It advocated that salvation is through faith in Amitabha (O-mi-to-fu), one of the many Buddhas found in Mahayana teaching. Trust in Amitabha, shown by endless repetition of his name, leads to future blessedness in the Western Paradise. A savior or bodhisattva assisting in this process is Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy.

The Buddhism found in Tibet and Mongolia, although broadly Mahayana, is referred to as Lamaism or Tantric Buddhism. In Tibet it represents a mixture of belief in spirits (the pre-Buddhism *bon* religion) and Buddhism brought in from Nepal. In the early 1400's it was transformed into its present, dominant Yellow Sect form by Tsonk Kaba, the Martin Luther of Tibetan Buddhism.

Lamaism, introduced to Mongolia by Kublai Khan, then emperor of China, in the latter part of the 13th century, replaced the earlier shamanistic faith. It, like its sister faith in Tibet, has been very resistant to the Christian faith.

Nestorian Christianity Enters China: The Cross and The Lotus

Arriving in China in 635 A.D. from their home base in present day Iran, Nestorian missionaries were prob-

ably the first representatives of the Christian faith in the middle kingdom. Welcomed and favored by a tolerant Chinese emperor and his successors, the Nestorian faith prospered. At the time of its demise in China proper, under a severe persecution in 845 A.D., it had hundreds of monasteries, two thousand religious workers, monks, and teachers, and tens of thousands of adherents. The Nestorian tablet, a kind of time-capsule describing the Nestorian work for later generations and now preserved in the Provincial Museum in Xian, speaks about Christian salvation in terms that would have appealed to both a Buddhist and a Confucian audience. As a result of what Jesus has done, there is a "purging away the dust from human nature and perfecting a character of truth." It is further explained that "he brought life to light and abolished death" by opening the "three constant gates," possibly a Buddhist phrase alluding to the eye, ear, and nose. In other words, believers were totally opened up to God's life and light.

When Jesus had "taken an oar in the vessel of mercy and ascended to the palaces of light above," referring probably to the ascension, "those who have souls were then completely saved." Here again the figure of speech is the Buddhist concept of humankind hopelessly lost in a sea of suffering and sin and headed for shipwreck. The compassionate Savior, filled with mercy, provides a vessel for salvation. In a sense, then, Jesus is presented as a Buddhist bodhisattva

descended from God to save humanity.

In his teaching Jesus “laid down the rule of the eight conditions—cleansing from the defilement of sense and perfecting truth.” This probably refers to the beatitudes in Matthew’s Gospel, but it may also allude to the eight-fold path of Buddhism.

Jesus’ work on the cross is couched in the Buddhist phrase, “to hang up the sun.” Therefore, Jesus “hung up a brilliant sun to take by storm the halls of darkness; the wiles of the devil were then all destroyed.” At this early period and continuing to the present, the term *jing* has been used for Christian scripture and the word *si* (temple) to translate “monastery.” Also, the name for Sakyamuni, *shi zun*, literally meaning the “world revered one,” was used by the Nestorian missionaries for the incarnate Lord.

Ricci and Buddhism

The missionaries did not hesitate to preach against the substance of Buddhism. When they talked about the “365 sects” that had arisen to corrupt the true faith, they singled out the idea of “being and non-being” that had been introduced by Satan. In the Sutra of Jesus the Messiah, the writers stressed the importance of filial piety, a doctrine that was not very important to the Buddhists until a later date.

This initial contact of Christianity with Buddhism has raised two important questions. Did Nestorian Christianity contribute to some of the unusual “Christianlike” emphases of Mahayana Buddhism, and, if so, to what extent? Scholars do not agree in their answers, although most would accept the fact that the Nestorian practice of saying Masses for the dead indirectly led both Chinese and Japanese Buddhism to develop a reverence for departed souls. On the role of Amitabha Buddha, the idea of saviors, and “salvation by grace,” there is much less agreement.

Was Nestorian Christianity a syncretistic mix with Buddhism which compromised its purity and vitality? This may have been the case by the time of the 9th century, but we know too little of the precise historical situation to give a definitive answer. As Samuel Moffett observes, “The line between distortion and adapta-

tion or contextualization is difficult to define.”² One person’s syncretism is another person’s contextualization. In either case the Nestorian emissaries deserve a high mark for this initial bold and creative attempt to relate their message to the Buddhist context.

Late Ming and Early Jing China

Roman Catholic missionaries who came to China in the 13th century did not have any significant contact with Buddhism. Most of their efforts seem to have been directed toward the Mongol court and its leaders. This undoubtedly led them to relate in some way to Lamaism, but there is no specific record of this. Referred to by the name *Ye li ko wen*, a Mongol term, the Christianity of this period established no ongoing church among either the Han Chinese or the Mongols and the other tribal groups in the north that they dominated. Nestorian Christianity gained great success among the Uighur, Ongut, and Kerait tribes, but the original faith of these groups was probably a folk religion and not Buddhism.

Matteo Ricci and the Early Jesuits

When Matteo Ricci and his companion Michele Ruggieri first arrived in Zhaoqing, a few miles north of Canton, in 1582, they assumed that Buddhist monks and their faith were highly respected by the local populace. Adopting the life style of these religious figures, they wore long, tattered gray gowns, shaved their faces clean, and had their hair close cropped. They lived wherever they could find space in a variety of temples and adopted a life style of poverty. This was a true immersion, but in the wrong pool! Buddhism and its leaders were not respected, but despised. So Ricci and Ruggieri did a total about face and identified themselves with the Confucian scholars.

Among other things, this meant that they learned to despise Buddhism, even as the scholars did. They did not, however, totally neglect Buddhist leaders. For example, Ricci was invited to debate with a man who had forsaken his position with the *litterati* and was now in charge of the idols in a temple. Ricci

engaged him in a long discussion on the subject of pantheism and tried to show him how he had mistakenly identified God with the material world.

Ricci noted external ways in which Buddhism resembled Catholicism: the masses, pious images, chants, almsgiving, celibacy, paradise, and hell. To the missionaries these were but “traps set by the devil” to delude people.³ Some converts from Buddhism to Catholicism reflected that their former faith was really a degenerate form of Christianity.

Even though the Jesuits’ intended audience was the Confucian elite, ethical works based on natural philosophy, such as Ricci’s *Twenty-five Utterances*, was received with favor also by Buddhist leaders.⁴ The same could not be said about Ricci’s *Teaching of the Heavenly Lord* (Tianzhu Shiyi). He affirms that the “emptiness” of Buddhism and the “nothingness” of Daoism have been the major obstacles to keep people from knowing the true God. He devoted one entire section of his work to refuting the doctrine of transmigration and the Buddhist prohibition of killing animals.

Although many Catholic missionaries felt a thorough study of Buddhism to be a useless task, they did gain enough understanding to enable them and their Buddhist counterparts to engage in periodic dialogue—either personally or through their writings—to sharpen some of the philosophical points of difference between the two faiths. The major stumbling blocks were the Christian idea of a personal God, the incarnation, the nature of the world as illusory or real, the compassion of the Buddha as compared with the seeming intolerance of the God of Heaven, and the Buddhist doctrine of transmigration.⁵

As converts were won, they often found simple functional substitutes for some pre-Christian practices. Michael Yang gave ointment to cure sick people in the temple, praying to the gods for healing at the same time. After his conversion he continued the same practice, only in a Christian meeting place and with a picture of Jesus replacing the gods.⁶

Jesuit Missionaries in Tibet

Catholic missionaries had entered

China in the 13th and 14th centuries under the Mongol leaders and once again in the 16th century. However, they made no effort to enter Tibet until the 1620's, near the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.). The first Jesuit missionaries came to Tsaparang in the far south-western corner of Tibet and were permitted to build a chapel. They entered into serious discussions with Buddhist lamas on such weighty topics as the nature of God and reincarnation. This promising beginning fell victim very soon to a local civil war.

During this early period, other Jesuit missionaries reached Xigaze from their base in Bhutan. Again, chaotic local conditions hindered the work, although Christian believers numbered in the hundreds. On March 18, 1716, an Italian Jesuit, Ippolito Desideri, reached Lhasa, even then the ultimate goal of all missionaries. After only a few months of diligent study, combined with intensive discussions with Tibetan lamas on their faith, he prepared an apologetic work. He presented this book to the king and discussed with him all aspects of the Christian faith. The king and his advisers, although disagreeing with Desideri, did not interfere with him, even providing him with a small chapel in which he held daily mass.

In 1717, he moved two miles away from Lhasa itself to continue his studies at a famous monastery, plunging ever more deeply into the complex mysteries of Tibetan Buddhism. Much to his despair, he learned that the most learned of the lamas were not able to answer his questions. Again, political realities took over! The Mongols captured Lhasa, murdering the king and his ministers. The next thrust into Tibet was made by the Capuchin friars about 1740. They opened a small dispensary in Lhasa, translated catechisms, distributed literature, and commenced chapel services. By 1742 they counted 27 baptized adult converts and double that number of interested inquirers. Over 2500 children, most near death, were baptized to gain eternal salvation. Lack of cultural sensitivity resulted in some unwise action by a

number of converts, such as refusing to revere the Dalai Lama by bowing and not performing some expected activities. In the vicious persecution that followed, the mission closed down and the fathers took a hasty retreat to Nepal.⁷

No further Catholic efforts were made in Tibet until 1846 when Abbe Huc and Father Gabet, both of the Vincentian Order and living in Beijing, undertook a long exploratory trip that

missionaries, and they were forced to leave Lhasa.

Roman Catholic efforts from the mid-19th century until 1949 waxed and waned, with alternate periods of revitalization and persecution. The single status of the missionaries enabled them to penetrate further into frontier areas that were more difficult for the family-oriented Protestants. In their several stations of work, some from bases in India and

others from bases in China, the missionaries started schools for young people, held catechism classes for adults, and engaged in many ministries of compassion that attracted people to the Christian faith. Initial evangelistic outreach was usually done through catechists, enabling the foreign priests to remain in the background.

Whenever feasible, the missionaries sought to stimulate "people movements to Christ." Although sometimes

jump-started by promise of French protection to converts, the catechetical process was quite thorough. An important ingredient in this effort was to help people forsake the devil. For six sorcerers who came to the missionaries near the small village of Bonga, they had a ready-made formula: "Be loosed by Jesus and Mary! Embrace the crucifix. Make the sign of the cross. Dismiss them (the demons) in peace." The sorcerers then brought their drums used in exorcism, and these, along with many fetishes used in their worship, were thrown into the river. Three hundred and twenty-three people were baptized in this area.

As the missionaries visited pagan homes, they noted many indications of unbelief: ancestral tablets, idols, and holders for incense sticks. As people believed, the missionaries urged them to use "functional" substitutes--images of Mary, statues of St. Joseph and angels, and a crucifix--to replace these pagan symbols and to help them focus their faith visually.

The most effective Catholic work in the 1930s and 1940s was done in and around Yerkalo, along the Yunnan borders of Tibet. Depending on local circumstances at a particular time, this

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took them through Manchuria, Mongolia, and Tibet. As they travelled toward Lhasa, the two missionaries had specific missionary goals which they did not seek to conceal. One was to translate a short account from the time when the world was created to the period of the apostles. They put this in the form of a dialogue between a lama of the Lord of Heaven and a Buddha. This detailed record of people, places, and dates contrasted markedly with the lamas' quasi mythical records.

When they reached Lhasa, Huc and Gabet found the Tibetan regent very friendly. He allowed them to set up a little chapel in their home for worship and to explain to those who came the meaning of the large pictures of the crucifixion hanging on the wall. He was very open to this new teaching:

Your religion is not the same as ours. It is important we should ascertain which is the true one. Let us, then, examine both carefully and sincerely. If yours is right, we will adopt it. How could we refuse to do so? If, on the contrary, ours is the true religion, I believe you will have the good sense to follow it.⁸

Unfortunately, the Chinese ambassador was extremely antagonistic to the

village was either in Chinese Tibet or independent Tibet. Father Maurice Tournay, a St. Bernard missionary to Tibet, had innovative ways in which to communicate Christian truth. He wrote plays for his students that resembled the medieval mystery plays, with their drama of the confrontation between angels and devils. These dramas had practical themes: how to overcome avarice, how to defeat an opium-smoking habit. Not strictly religious in nature, but touching critical issues of local society, they attracted both Christian and pagan audiences.⁹

In all their years in Tibet, Catholic missionaries lived a simple life among Tibetan nomads and learned well the life and culture of the people. They were prepared to dialogue philosophically with the lamas or to deal directly with village people on their fears of the spirit world. Seeking whenever possible to promote people movements, they were able to establish Christian communities to which then they ministered through hospitals, schools, seminaries, and institutions of compassion. Their work on both sides of the China-Tibet border has proved to have more lasting quality than any of the many ministries engaged in by Protestant missionaries in the same areas.

The Colony Approach in Mongolia

We have already noted that Kublai Khan, influenced by an imperial tutor from Tibet during his reign as emperor of China, introduced the lamaistic form of Buddhism to his people in the 14th century. However, when the Mongols lost their power in China in 1368 A.D., Buddhism also lost its influence among the peoples of Mongolia. It was reintroduced to the country in the latter part of the 15th century by the grandson of Dayan Khan, who once again unified the many Mongol sub-groups.

As was the case when Buddhism began to prosper in late Han China, a key to its success was its response to widespread suffering. One author has commented:

Shamanism gave neither security for the struggle of life nor consolation in the hour of death, but Buddhism offered both with an emphasis on compassion, hope for

the future life, benevolence, peace, and institutions for a more sophisticated culture. Consequently, Lamaism was accepted by both the elite of society and the masses.¹⁰

When the Mongol dynasty was overthrown in 1368, there were about 30,000 Roman Catholic Christians, many of whom were Mongols. With the advent of the Ming dynasty in 1368, Christianity in China virtually disappeared, and this appears to have been the fate also of these Mongol Christians. When the Jesuit missionaries reached north China in the 17th century, they found mostly Chinese Christians, who had fled for refuge into Mongolia because of periodic persecution by the Jing dynasty rulers.

When Lazarist missionaries penetrated what is now Inner Mongolia late in the 18th century, it was with high hopes of establishing Mongol churches. But this hope for "Missions in Mongolia" quickly became "Missions amongst the Chinese in Mongolia."¹¹

The only large response among the Mongol peoples came out of the suffering wreaked on their villages when Muslims from Shaanxi and Gansu provinces burned their temples and lamaseries and killed a large number of people. Missionaries were able to form a group of converts in this area which formed the foundation for what came to be known as the Mongol Christian community at Poro Balgeson. This became the only enduring work which either Catholics or Protestants had among the Mongols. Poro-Balgeson was one example of the "reductions" developed by the Catholics from land which they had received from the government, often as reparation for lives lost and property damaged by persecution, particularly at the time of the Boxer rebellion in 1900.

Each family admitted to the community for living had to attest in writing to its willingness to convert to Catholicism, to promise to study the catechism and to observe the regulations of the village and of the church, and to obey the commandments of God. Catholic priests and the catechists led in the instruction of new tenants, a process that might extend from several months to two years before baptism was administered. All in the community were expected to

observe adoration, praise, the service of God, obedience to the divine commandments and to ecclesiastical discipline; to receive the sacraments; to recite prayers; and to practice works of charity.

Catholic scholars have often been critical of this economic motivation, but most have concluded that it has been a starting point for a faith that has persevered under severe trials. The Christian community was persecuted by the Boxers in 1900, but it was rebuilt following this disaster and soon attained a population of about 1000 Christians. It continued until the advent of the People's Republic of China, when, along with other reductions, most of its activities were closed down.¹²

Protestant Efforts Among Buddhists in Tibet via India and China

The first Protestant effort to penetrate Tibetan Buddhism came from Moravian missionaries working in Ladak and Leh in the Kashmir area of India. They hoped eventually to get into Tibet proper but were happy for the many opportunities to reach Tibetans living in India and those who travelled as traders back and forth between Tibet and India. From the beginning, the Moravians appointed mission personnel to the vital task of Bible translation into Tibetan. With this task in process, they were able to find the proper terms to use in preparing catechisms, tracts, and scripture portions.

Missionaries learned early from their Tibetan colleagues that a one-to-one witness repeated to someone with an educational background was far better than a public sermon. People were not used to listening to long discourses. Even more difficult, their background with the lamas led them to expect that religious messages were not really understandable, only ritual, to which they need not pay much attention.

Framing Christian truth in stories, particularly those that paralleled some of the parables of Jesus and were interspersed with the pithy, wise sayings used by Tibetan story tellers, was essential if the message was not to be viewed as foreign. Raising up a corps of several well-trained evangelists who would take an increasing leadership role after the first

twenty or thirty years was also central to their strategy.

Tibetans were always attracted by a "Tanka," a cloth banner or scroll on which were painted in the center the head of Christ, and around it in a circular fashion eight scenes from the life of Christ with a parable in each of the four corners. Creative evangelists, imitating Tibetan religious practices, made use of "wayside pulpits," rocks on which they had chiselled or painted scripture portions.

A.H. Francke developed the novel idea of a monthly Tibetan newspaper for limited distribution. His aim was to "disseminate Christian truth, and to educate the Tibetans as regards the advance of knowledge and to give him a wider understanding of the great world in which he lives." The Gospel Inn, a hostel to provide hospitality for travellers and pilgrims, was an important place of contact for discussion and the distribution of literature.

Gospel portions were bound like Tibetan books in loose-leaf covers between either two red or yellow cover boards, wrapped in linen and tied with a string. Scripture was printed on a rough fibrous paper and not with fine English paper, so that it might be much more similar to local books. Evangelists warned the people carefully that gospel portions should not be put on an altar and worshipped.

The Moravians established several churches in this area with hundreds of largely Tibetan Christians, much better than the record of other Protestant groups, whether in China or India.

Most Protestant mission agencies desiring to evangelize Tibetans worked from the China side. These included the China Inland Mission, The Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Assembly of God, and the Foreign Christian Mission Society. The big question all these groups faced was, "Where is Tibet?" Was it that area under Lhasa's jurisdiction, or in the territory controlled by China but still largely populated by Tibetans? Often the boundary was a floating one, which meant that the extent and nature of the difficulties faced by the missionaries escalated wildly. Generally speaking, most of the work was conducted in Chinese Tibet. A leading method in missionary

work was widespread itineration, accompanied by mass distribution of literature and by market preaching. Each mission group had a base somewhere in the northern, central, or southern area of the China-Tibet border frontier, but a large amount of time was spent in disseminating the message widely. People became accustomed to measuring their success and satisfaction by the number of kilometers covered, the number of tracts distributed, the sermons preached, and the contacts made. Was this of value? Undoubtedly, but insufficient effort was given to solidifying the center with a variety of ministries and to following up the most promising contacts. Missionary infatuation with Roland Allen's *Missionary Methods St. Paul's or Ours?* led them to be anti-institutional and to give too much credence to the effectiveness of short-term witness in many widely-separated sites. The extent of ongoing contact needed between the source and receptor of the Christian faith before a solid conversion could result was minimized.

Some missionaries used tents and worked out "travelling agreements" of friendship with local leaders, permitting them to go along with nomads for two- and three-month periods as they worked from place to place. As missionaries moved from place to place, they sought to make friends with lamas in the innumerable lamaseries. Often it was possible to distribute literature and to engage in systematic teaching for several days. Unfortunately, it was difficult to discern between real interest in the gospel and polite hospitality. Very few results came from these visits to lamaseries, the center of Tibetan Buddhist life. Many "loner" missionaries were obsessed more with myth than reality as getting to Lhasa. One brother claimed a victory for the Gospel when he got close enough to Lhasa to see the reflection of the sun off the Potala Palace!¹³ Much promotional hype substituted for the hard task of learning more about Tibetan Buddhism and of finding more appropriate ways to witness in that specific context.

Voices of warning were heard occasionally. D.E. Hoste, General Director of the China Inland Mission, commented on these lone missionary forays into Tibet's interior:

The opinion of some, well qualified by years of experience to judge, is that probably the regions under consideration will be best evangelized by Chinese and Tibetan Christians. . .¹⁴

Wise words for 1907 that are not heeded very well even in 1993!

Susie Rijnhart, a medical doctor with the Foreign Christian Missionary Society, was deeply disturbed by the missionary penchant to despise the Buddhist faith:

There is something pathetic in this spectacle of heathen worship, and it is not, in my opinion, the part of the Christian missionary to assume an air of ridicule and contempt for the religious ideas and practices of peoples less enlightened than his own; for in every religious service, however absurd or degraded from the Christian viewpoint, there is some feeble acknowledgement of and groping after the one great God to whom all men and nations are alike dear.¹⁵

These words, also, need to be heard ninety years later. Few examples can be found of specific ways in which the faith was contextualized to the Tibetan world view.

Demon oppression was rampant in this part of the world. Several missionaries testified of the ways in which God used them to exorcize demons that were holding people in bondage. Faith healing was also a method widely used, particularly among the Christian and Missionary Alliance, to bring people to faith.

We might ask, of the small churches established along the China-Tibet border, how many of the converts were Tibetans? Whatever that number may have been, and statistical tables do not make this clear, few persevered in their faith over a long period of time

North of the Border in Mongolia

Missionaries from the London Missionary Society, who entered Siberia in 1818, were the first Protestant missionaries to work with the Mongol peoples. From their center in Selenginsk, just to the east of the famed Lake Baykal, they ministered to the Buryat Mongols. Their missionary approach followed the

usual pattern: learning the language, translating the Bible, writing and distributing tracts, evangelizing, starting churches, establishing general schools and seminaries.¹⁶

The complexity of the people's belief system led one of the missionaries to question whether it was the "internally verifying truths of Christianity" that would lead people to belief or whether it had to be miraculous gifts of power.¹⁷ No missionary, at least one deserving of the name, would pretend to possess the latter, he believed, and so there was really no choice.

The missionaries did better than they knew in accommodating to the Buddhist context. When the Synod of the Greek Church, under whose general permission they had been allowed to work, withdrew their favor, it was because the missionaries allegedly allowed potential converts to "remain in their former heathendom" and propagated the "errors of infidelity."¹⁸

The best known of the early missionaries to the Mongols was James Gilmour. During his first term on the field, he concentrated on winning Mongols to Christ. Later in his ministry, while still living in Mongolia, he concentrated more on responsive Chinese in Mongolia. Gilmour was not afraid to converse with Mongols on difficult theological issues: What about three gods? What happened to those who died before the coming of Jesus? What about those who never heard the gospel? How is the future state to be reconciled with transmigration? How did a good God allow sin to enter the world? Is not *karma* a more reasonable approach than an easy doctrine of grace and no need for good works? How can you be sure that Christian Scriptures have more truth than the Buddhist canon?

Gilmour questioned some of his own earlier methods and those of his colleagues. He wondered at the value of long itineration, although this had been basic to his initial ministry in Mongolia. Was it not better to reach Mongolians from a Chinese base and to train Chinese to do it? He saw the value of being able from the first to have a community of faith. He claimed that "it is very doubtful if a consistent native Christian could subsist on the plain among his Buddhist

countrymen."¹⁹

Gilmour also concluded that the Bible ought not to be the first literature given to inquiring Mongols. Because Holy Scripture included too many unfamiliar proper names and doctrines that were strange even to an educated Mongol, he felt it far better to use gaudy, multi-colored books that were very short and could give a brief introduction to the Christian faith. The nature of Gilmour's critique reveals something of the discouragement he felt in seeking to penetrate the barrier of Buddhism. This was true of all those who followed Gilmour. Like the Catholics, they worked in Mongolia and saw churches established, but the members were Chinese, not Mongols.

Barriers of Buddhism Among Han Chinese

Early Protestant missionaries among the Han Chinese followed the lead of the 17th century Jesuits in despising Buddhism as a religion. To their supporters at home, they spoke of pagan idols, silly ceremonies, immoral monks, decrepit temples, and systems of thought that were dead. Their hope, epitomized by one missionary speaker at the General Conference in 1877 in Shanghai, was that they might "destroy this fortress of Buddhism." Many, in varying degrees and by differing methods, were prepared to accommodate the Christian message to Confucianism--again in the model of the Jesuits--but not to Buddhism.

Early Protestant literature on Buddhism (usually just called "idolatry") was heavily judgmental. From 1912 to 1949, a period dominated by the New Culture Movement, the Anti-Christian movements, the rise of communism and war with Japan, no books were published which dealt with Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism. Apparently no one thought it important to treat China's religions seriously.²⁰

The more perceptive missionaries knew that some accommodation had already taken place. Robert Morrison and early translators of the Bible into Chinese had already incorporated into their translations some of the Buddhist vocabulary found in Catholic Scripture portions and literature. Terms such as

sin, heaven, hell, devil, soul, life to come, new birth, repentance, retribution, and many others were all Buddhist in origin. How would anyone communicate without using local expressions familiar to the people, filling them with new content, and consecrating them to new use?

As scholars translated some of the Buddhist classics and made them more available to the general public in the latter half of the 19th century, a few missionaries developed more open attitudes to Buddhism in China. At the more moderate end of the continuum was W.A.P. Martin who believed that the Christian faith could be considered as a "successor to Buddhism." Buddhism was the trunk of a tree to which the "vine of Christ" could be grafted. He argued that the belief of the Mahayana faith in a divine being, the immortality of the soul, and the future life was a far better preparation for the Christian faith than the materialism of *Daoism* or the agnosticism of Confucianism.²¹ Joseph Edkins felt that the presence of Buddhism in Chinese life led the people to view Christianity with "much less strangeness" than would otherwise have been the case.²²

At the other extreme of the continuum was Timothy Richard, an English Baptist missionary who came to China in 1869. To him the sutra *The Awakening of the Faith of the Pure Land School* was the Gospel in Chinese for the Buddhist peoples of China. In this small book, which he discovered in 1884, he claimed to find a God who is both transcendent and immanent, salvation by faith, a deep sense of compassion for the world, comparable to the Kingdom of God, and a Messiah who had come to bless all humanity. How could this have occurred? Richard claimed that Ashvagosha, the composer of this sutra, had been taught the truth of the gospel in India by the Apostle Thomas. This led him to help in transforming the original Hinayana form to the Mahayana and in bringing it into China as a higher type of Buddhism. Missionary colleagues dismissed this view as preposterous and secular critics gave it no credence. They claimed it was irresponsible to invest the key terms of the sutra with the Christian meanings that Richard alleged were there.

Not as moderate as Martin nor as radical as Richard, Karl Reichelt was a visionary pioneer in charting a new²³ course of approaching Chinese Buddhists. Affiliated initially with the Norwegian Missionary Society, Reichelt focused his effort almost entirely on reaching seekers, or "friends of the Dao," from among Buddhist leaders and laypeople. To this end, he established a program that welcomed wandering monks and pilgrims to visit for religious conversation, trained those who made a commitment to Christ, and held retreats and conferences for seekers. He started with a conference center in Nanjing, but in 1927, under the name of The Christian Mission to Buddhists, he built a new site near Shatin in the New Territories, Hong Kong, and called it Tao Fong Shan. The center continues to today, but with a different emphasis from what Reichelt had.

The Dao Became Flesh

What made Tao Fong Shan unique to those who came to inquire there? Located on a scenic hill top, with many surrounding mountains, its facilities and style of worship created no immediate external obstacles to studying the Christian faith. Most prominent was an octagonal temple, with its roof curved in the familiar lines of Chinese architecture. Within the temple was an "altar in beautiful Chinese style, with a red lacquer finish... the swastika of cosmic unity and perfect peace, the fish of Eastern and Western sanctity, and the Greek monogram for Christ."²⁴ Above the gate through which people entered the complex of buildings was a cross rising out of a lotus to show that the best of Buddhism was fulfilled in Christ. Above the inner entrance to the *sheng dian* (holy temple) was the phrase, "The Dao Became Flesh," and along the two sides of the door were the phrases "The Dao Was with God" and "The Wind Blows Where it Wills."

Candles, incense, and meditation were a part of the worship service. Buddhist monks in their temple services chanted the "Three Refuges" -- "I take

refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma (law) and in the Sangha (the order/community)." For this central Buddhist affirmation, Reichelt substituted a full liturgy which amplified the basic, "I take refuge in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

While holding firmly to faith in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the need explicitly to "name the Name" of Christ for salvation, Reichelt believed that Jesus,

to find serious religious seekers. He made significant friendships with important national Buddhist leaders, chief of whom was Tai Hsu, who sought to renew Chinese Buddhism. In 1923, he attended a world conference of Buddhists at Gulin, a summer retreat center, and lectured on John 1 and the identification of Jesus the Logos with the Dao.

Reichelt himself travelled widely to temples and monasteries to find serious religious seekers.

God's Eternal Logos, was working to lead people toward Christ within every religious faith. He based his convictions on what he called "the Johannine Approach." This gave special emphasis to the "light that lights every person was coming into the world" (John 1:9) and to the Logos who was in the world and was both resisted and received by different people (John 1:10-13). When the Logos entered human society and completed his work of salvation, He led these "seekers" to recognize Him in His fullness (John 1:14ff). In this approach Reichelt followed in the path of early Christian leaders like Justyn Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine who promoted the work of what they called the *logos spermatikos*. Reichelt could not claim great results, but, sparse as they were, they far exceeded what other missionaries reaped from the same kind of people.

Including the pre-Hong Kong ministries and the period in Hong Kong from 1930 to 1950, over two hundred people were baptized, and nearly 1500 came to the center to study the Christian faith seriously. Reichelt's influence spread far beyond statistics. Those who were converted had extensive correspondence with their former associates, they wrote testimonial letters in the Chinese press, and they had significant ministries in many places.²⁵ Reichelt himself travelled widely to temples and monasteries

The Message in the Receptor Culture

Reichelt did more than equate Jesus with the Dao of the Chinese religious scene. He probed deeply into Buddhism, seeking to relate God's revelation to such doctrines as the bodhisattvas, salvation as identification with the ultimate, *karma*, *nirvana*, and meditation. This was no "proof text" approach and was not argumentative in style. He truly tried to understand Buddhist thinking and relate to sincere seekers wherever he could find them. An outgoing and warm personality, he made friends with people in such a way as to draw them to Christ.²⁶

Reichelt's approach, with modifications to fit the current world scene, is continued partially by the Tao Fong Shan Christian Center. Its periodical, *Areopagus*, stimulates people to understand, dialogue with, and witness to the religions of Asia, particularly Buddhism. Various articles in the journal, for example, have tried to relate Zen (Chan in Chinese) to the Christian-Buddhist encounter.²⁷

Christians concerned for China continue to interact with Buddhism. The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, with a focus on evangelizing the unreached peoples, published a booklet on Christian witness to Buddhists reflecting insights from its world gathering at Pattaya, Thailand, 1980. The Sunrise Center for Buddhist Studies in Sierra Madre, California does research, offers courses on Buddhism, and provides practical outlets for Christian witness.

On a more dialogical note, John P. Keenan, an Episcopal priest with experience in Japan, has followed somewhat in Reichelt's footsteps in his significant

work *The Meaning of Christ A Mahayana Theology* (Orbis, 1989). The author draws upon the Old Testament, the New Testament, and church tradition to show how Christ, the Wisdom of God, is at the heart of traditional Christian mystical thinking. With this as a foundation, he then explains in detail how the Mahayana worldview provides the perspective and language to give new insights, mostly mystical, into the meaning of Christ. Keenan asserts repeatedly his commitment to the classic Christian faith, even as he explores how key Christian doctrines can be expressed within a Mahayana worldview. Is this basically any different than the early church developing its faith within a neo-Platonic worldview?²⁸ Do we need to continue to concretize it in this form?

The Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies has carried on Buddhist-Christian dialogue on a high intellectual and philosophical level since the 1980s. Although the clarification of differences and commonalities has little practical implication for direct Christian witness, the materials are useful to give a better understanding of the intricacies of the Buddhist faith.²⁹

Concluding Reflections

Can we generalize from the many experiences of God's servants as they have sought for several centuries to carry his message to the Buddhist world in China? Let us look at the more obvious of these in outline form.

1. *The message and messenger must be incarnate* in the receptor culture. This includes personal life-style, an attitude of empathy and sensitivity to people whose faith is as devout and sincere as their own, and an outgoing, friendly spirit that accepts people (not all their belief systems) as they are. A key missionary term is "go." This is only a movement across geographic boundaries. More important, it means that witnesses "go" to where people are, conceptually and linguistically. They do not insist initially that people "come" intellectually to where they are.

2. In order to be incarnate, *witnesses must adopt the role of learner*. This does not mean necessarily that they earn high degrees in Western universities, although

this is not precluded. Too many young, earnest missionaries are going to the field with only a smattering of what they need in theology, philosophy, history, culture, and sociology. A compulsive urgency to meet some supposed deadline by which time the task must be completed can only put them into the loop of failure that has characterized most ministries to Buddhists in the past.

As important as pre-field formal education is, the in-depth learning from people and institutions within the receptor culture is also very significant. Buddhism in China is very much alive today.³⁰ Those who wish to witness in this context will do well to spend several years learning, not merely the language but all the ins and outs of this complex faith. Where are those who will follow in the train of the missionary scholar-evangelists from China's past Catholic and Protestant mission history?

3. Witnesses need to recognize that *God reached the land of their potential service long before they did!* They will seek out those in whose hearts Jesus the Eternal Logos has been showing His light. They do not begin from scratch, from a tabula rasa. They follow up what God has been doing. This means they need to identify with these "seekers" to let them know that they too are spiritual and have the authority of Christ to lead them farther in their pilgrimage. Phil Parshall from his ministry among Muslims, some of whom he found to be true inquirers after truth, was appalled to find that even his best friends thought him to be more of a wheeler-dealer Western entrepreneur than a man of God. Western missionaries working among Buddhists with their mystical faith must be men of faith which is much more than gadgets, technique, technology, money, and supporting friends from the West who want a part in the action.

4. As the message and messenger are incarnate within the receptor culture, *a "people movement" to Christ becomes a real possibility*. Sometimes these develop spontaneously--at other times the missionary may need to use specific methods not familiar to him from his Western background and with his Western expectations.

5. In limited-access areas of the world

among resistant people groups, *a unified witness, even among lone individuals from various mission groups, will have much more impact than that made by a number of isolated witnesses*. Such a unified approach will also make it possible to utilize the spiritual gifts of many people and thus provide a far wider range of services for the developing community.

6. *The witness for Christ among Buddhists will include philosophical discussions as well as "power encounters" with the demonic world*. Where confrontation occurs it is not with people, but with ideas and attitudes.

7. The best witness, even that aimed at a people movement, *will be personal "people contact"* and not merely be "points-of-contact." The witness will need to be more visual and less verbal.

8. If possible, *the missionary needs to develop a team* that includes non-Western converts from Buddhism. This will enable the white, Western missionary to stay in the background.

9. Although political stability is not under human control, *mission organizations need to plan for a full range of Christian ministries* over a long time contact with the people and not be satisfied with just a fleeting short term outreach.

10. What do the above principles mean negatively? *The witnesses must not despise Buddhism or the Buddha*; stereotype Buddhism, its leaders, nor its teachings;³¹ nor confuse their assertions of the supremacy of Christ with their own sense of superiority, assuming that their grasp of the truth (not the truth itself) is absolute, nor assume that they have all the answers. In the apt phrase of Daniel Niles they are merely beggars telling other beggars where to find bread.

11. Finally, on a more positive note, *the message is Christ*, not Christianity or a religion as such. This will deliver the witnesses from argumentation and from a religious debate or beauty contest in determining whether Buddhism or Christianity is superior.

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Endnotes

1. For a detailed examination of this

process, see Ralph Covell, *Confucius, The Buddha, and Christ*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), pp. 133-150.

2. Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Volume I, Beginnings to 1500, (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 311. Most of the other material in this section on Nestorian Christianity comes from my book *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ*, Chapter 2, "Jesus and the Lotus — The Nestorian Faith," pp. 20-35.

3. Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 74-75.

4. Gernet, *Ibid.*, p. 143.

5. Some examples of these disputes are given in Gernet. Also, N. Standaert in *Yang Tingyun Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), notes that "anti-Christian writings from the end of the Ming Dynasty are numerous and have been studied extensively. Most of these anti-Christian texts are directed against the Jesuits, particularly, against M. Ricci and his most famous successors, N. Longobardo and G. Aleni," p. 162.

6. Standaert, *Ibid.*, p. 89.

7. The material of these initial Roman Catholic efforts in Tibet come from several sources: C. Wessels, S.J., *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia 1603-1721*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1924); M. L'Abbe Huc, *Christianity in China, Tartary, and Thibet*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857), Volume II, 249-271; Fillipo de Fillipi, *An Account of Tibet: The Travels of Ippolito Desideri of Pistola, S.J. 1712-1727*, (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1931).

8. Huc and Gabet, *Travels in Tartary, Thibet and China 1844-1846*, (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1928), Volume II, p. 79.

9. For Catholic work in Tibet since 1850 several sources are useful: Adrian Launay, *Histoire Tibet; Les Missions Catholiques*, published by Propagation de la Foi et de Saint-Pierre Apotre; Adrian Launay, *Memorial de la Societe Missions-Estrangeres; Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*; various issues of Catholic Missions published by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in New York, beginning

in 1907. Gaston Gratuze, *Un Pionnier de la Mission Tibetaine Le Pere Auguste Desgodins 1826-1913*, (Paris: Apostolat des Editions, 1968). For more detail on Catholic work in Tibet see my unpublished manuscript, *Yes and No to Jesus the Liberator: The Christian Faith Among China's Minority Peoples*.

10. Sechin Jacchid and Paul Hyer, *Mongolia's Culture and Society*, (Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1979), p. 182. Natsagdorji, "The Introduction of Buddhism into Mongolia," *The Mongolia Society Bulletin*, Vol. 7, 1968, (Bloomington, IN: The Mongolia Society, 1968), stresses that neither force nor the majesty of Tibetan Buddhism led to Buddhism's success in Mongolia. He notes that "the Yellow Faith, in contrast to shamanism, prohibits the shedding of blood and teaches quiet patience. This helped the people believe they could eradicate the basis of suffering, find rebirth in the future life, and possess happiness in that life. This appealed to people who were exhausted by war and were seeking freedom from strife," p. 11.

11. J. Leyssen, *The Cross Over China's Wall*, (Peking: The Lazarist Press, 1941), p. 39.

12. For a full discussion of the Poro Balgeson community see Catholic Missions Annals of the Propagation of the Faith, April-May issue, 1944, pp. 8-9, 16-17, 22-23. The following material has also been useful: *Joseph Van Oost Au Pays des Ortos (Mongolie)*, (Paris: Editions Dillen et cie., 1932); Carlo va Melckebeke, C.I.C.M., *Service Social de L'Eglise en Mongolie*, (Bruxelles: Editions de Scheut, 1968); Joseph Van Hecken, C.I.C.M., *Les Reductions Catholiques des Pays des Ordos Une Methode d'Apostolat des Missionnaires de Scheut*, (Schoneck/Beckenried, Suisse: Administration der Neuen Zeitschrift fur Missionswissenschaft, 1957).

13. David Plymire, *High Adventure in Tibet*, (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1959), pp. 113-114.

14. *China's Millions*, April, 1907, p.57

15. Susie Carson Rijnhart, *With the Tibetans in Tent and Temple: A Narrative of Four Year's Residence on the Tibetan Border, and of a Journey into the Far Interior*, (New York: Revell, 1904), p.

111.

16. *The Alliance Weekly*, February 9, 1918, p. 297.

17. William Swan, *Letters on Missions*, (Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1831), 179.

18. See Archives for World Mission Record Group No. 59, H-2118, Russia Box 3, 1838/40, No. 41 and 1840/42, No. 42. These are found in the Mott Archive Room, Day Mission Library, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CN.

19. James Gilmour, *Among the Mongols*, (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1882), p. 226.

20. For the early period see Alexander Wylie, *Memorials of Protestant Missionaries to the Chinese*, (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Press, 1867). For the later period see Herbert Hoi-Lap Ho, *Protestant Missionary Publications in Modern China 1912-1949*, (Hong Kong: Chinese Church Research Center, 1988), p. 152. One exception to Ho's generally true statement is Clifford H. Plopper's book *Chinese Religion Seen Through the Proverb*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Modern Publishing House, 1935). Although not specifically a religious book, the author gives 125 proverbs relating specifically to Buddhism which enables the learner not only to enter into some of the deeper mysteries of its teaching, but also to communicate in a relevant fashion with its adherents, pp. 143-163. Many other chapters, not labelled with the term "Buddhism," also relate to this religion.

21. W. A. P. Martin, *The Lore of Cathay or The Intellect of China*, (Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Publishing Company, Reprint, 1971), Chapter 14, "Buddhism, a Preparation for Christianity," pp. 249-263.

22. Joseph Edkins. *Chinese Buddhism*, (London: K. Paul, Tranch, Trubner and Co., 1893), p. 370.

23. Reichelt's method was new in the sense that he explicitly sought "seekers." Sensitive missionaries in Shandong in the late 19th century learned that many of their converts had come from sectarian religious backgrounds. Some of these sect groups were popular Buddhist cults. Their literature stressed personal spiritual cultivation, morality, and devotion. They were most likely to respond to Christian literature which emphasized some of the same themes. See Daniel H. Bays, "Chris-

tianity and Chinese Sects: Religious Tracts in the Late Nineteenth Century," pp. 122-134 in Suzanne Barnett and John King Fairbank (eds.), *Christianity in China Early Protestant Missionary Writings*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

24. Loren Noren, "The Life and Work of Karl Ludvig Reichelt," *Cing Feng*, No. 3 (1967), p. 14.

25. The stories of two of these interesting pilgrims who found faith in Christ and ministered in his name may be found in *Areopagus*, published by the Tao Fong Shan Christian Center. See Spring-Summer, 1988, for the story of Liang Tao Wei, who served many years at the Center; and Advent, 1988, (Volume 2, No. 1) for the pilgrimage of Tsai Tao Tong, who was pastor for many years at Tao Fong Shan. Another inspiring account is Reichelt's book entitled *The Transformed Abbot*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1954).

26. To investigate Reichelt further see the following works: Eric J. Sharpe, *Karl Ludvig Reichelt Missionary, Scholar and Pilgrim*, (Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Center, 1984; Hakan Eilert, *Boundlessness Studies in Karl Ludvig Reichelt's Missionary Thinking with Special Regard to Buddhist-Christian Encounter*, (Forlaget Aros, 1974); Ralph Covell, *Confucius, The Buddha, and Christ*, Chapter 6 "The Dao and The Logos," pp. 122-132. Numerous articles by Reichelt in English may be found in several issues of *The Chinese Recorder*. For his theological method see Karl Ludvig Reichelt, "The Johannine Approach," pp. 90-101, found in *The Authority of the Faith*, Tamaram Madras Series, Volume I, (London: Oxford University Press, 1939). Chinese Christian leaders show an ongoing interest today in Jesus the Dao. See Luo Zhenfang, "The Logos Discourse in St. John's Gospel," *Chinese Theological Review*, 1985, pp. 79-91.

27. See *Areopagus*, Trinity, 1989, Volume 2, No. 4, pp. 31-34.

28. Christian missionaries could well examine the classic book by Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity*, (NY: Harper, 1957. Reprint from 1888). See also "The Old and New Torah: Christ the Wisdom of God," in W.D. Davis, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), pp. 147-176.

sents his Buddhist friends in complaining bitterly about the ways in which Christian missionaries stereotyped, distorted, and generalized about Buddhism in China, pp. 222-253. Christ within every religious faith.

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