DEMOCRATIC CHANGES AND THE CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

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This paper suggests reasons why some modern Mongols become Christians, through an analysis of the oral histories often Christian Mongols. What I am arguing here is that the Christian Church has become an alternative to "the mini-socialist state."

H. Kemp cited Van Hecken's notes about the late-19th and early-20th-century attempt of Catholic missionaries to convert the Mongols, who seemed to them more "primitive" than the Chinese.' Hecken wrote, "However, very soon the true situation made the missionaries aware that the Mongols were not free to embrace any other religion but Lamaism, and certainly not Christianity. They were often strongly attached to Buddhism through family ties, since most families counted a member among the lamas. Add to this their moral corruption and satisfaction of their passions, which they would have had to curtail in the Christian religion." Nonetheless, Mongolia in the late twentieth century gives the opposite scenario. After the religious repression and seventy-year rule of a Revolutionary government, the majority of Mongols had become non-religious. But more remarkably, with the democratic changes of the country, many of them have become converts to Christianity. Why have such pivotal changes taken place within such a relatively short period?

I briefly introduce social and value changes before I attempt to explain the Mongols' conversions to Christianity. For pastoral nomads, the chief source of livelihood was their herds, whose growth depended on weather, water, and pasture rather than on management. Logically, they valued the land highly, and their religious beliefs were closely connected with this value and their day-to-day practices. Buddhism developed in Mongolia because it adapted its teaching to the main value, namely land, and attached itself to pre-existing beliefs. The lamas, who were the only educated people among the Mongols, were involved in almost all the activities of the populace: they performed the duties of teachers, doctors, healers, psychologists, astrologers, and sorcerers in their own ways.

The Revolutionary government and the Party eliminated the lamas and introduced new education and ideology to the Mongols. Cities and towns had been growing and pulled in rural people because of their advantages, so that rural-urban migration accelerated. People found jobs and advanced their education in cities, and their children learned science and communist ideology. A new key value emerged: communes, or collectives. Discipline and morals were imposed on employees through collectives and by political activists. As an extension of the neighborhood, "collectives" eventually played a major role in Mongols' lives. However, in the 1990s, this ideology and its values collapsed with the socialist world and the introduction of the free market economic system, with its more democratic and liberal ideology.

A new constitution, which came into force in January 1992, provides for freedom of conscience and religion, and explicitly recognises the separation of monastery/church and state. Citizens are granted the right both to worship and not to worship. These days, Mongols tend to go to religious institutions more often than previously, as often happens when people regain their freedom after it has been extremely limited. Data from the mid-1980s shows around 80 percent of the people identifying as non-religious. Within a ten-year period, the figures were reversed, with more than 70 percent of respondents involved in sociological surveys conducted in 1994 stating that they practiced some form of religion.

Despite the flourishing of democracy and political and religious freedom, “poverty most certainly increased dramatically in the early years of transition as national income plummeted, unemployment increased, price inflation soared and social spending fell.” During the early years of transition, inflation skyrocketed to more than 300 percent and government revenues dwindled.

The changes that took place in Mongolian society caused great concern. Enkhtsetseg, a highly educated woman born in 1957, said, “Everything has been exposed and anything can be shown on television. I have started to worry about my children’s future... I was worried about those people who did not know how to live in the free market system. I was anxious about the increasing alcoholism of Mongol men, heads of Mongolian households. I worried more about how to keep my children humane than how to have them educated.”

This interview illustrates some of the challenges experienced by people during the years of democratic change. Alcoholism and crime have increased. The problem of street children has become a hot issue. School dropouts have gone up. Privatisation of socialist property has been proceeding. Many factories have been shut down and social services and benefits downsized. The free market economy put an end to the “guaranteed” jobs that socialism provided for college and university graduates. Faced with poverty, inflation, and unemployment, people search out ways to accumulate profit at any price. As a result, crime and social turbulence have risen, and ethics and morality have diminished.

People have become less communal, more individualistic, and more competitive. Under socialism, for instance, distinguished or good pupils were encouraged to help those who lagged behind. Now many schoolchildren prefer not to share their knowledge, but to rise to the top of the class. Collectives in the workplace have become less concerned about alcoholism and deviance among their members. If an employee does perform his or her job satisfactorily, then he or she is more likely to be fired than to be “fostered” by the collective. In other words, “the state” has reduced its support, leaving individuals likely to be dismissed as a result of poor performance. Socialist entities have been privatised. New private companies have emerged, based mainly on kinship ties. Those who cannot manoeuvre or who failed to arrange their lives in this pivotally changing society are taken care of by family members or relatives. Accordingly, the family has come to be valued more highly than ever before. The younger generation, which has become psychologically geared up for the competitive world, has become more independent and individualistic by comparison with older generations. In sum, social psychology and values have changed with the transition of the country from a socialist to a capitalist society.

I interviewed ten Christian informants. I cannot claim that they represent most Christians in Mongolia. They were self-selected and their number is small. However, they happened to be either young people, retired, or independent entrepreneurs. Their main reasons for coming to the churches were to find ways to ensure their own and their family members’ stable mental states and the continuity of social order and arrangements, which had become problematic after the fall of the socialist state. In other words, they needed reassurance of ontological security, to borrow Giddens’ term.

Four of these ten informants who had been converted had been interested in or practised Buddhism during an earlier period. The main reason for their conversion to Christianity did not represent a loss of faith in Buddhist teachings. They tolerated Buddhism as a decent system of thought and traditional religion, although they criticised its believers for worshipping statues and pictures of gods but not God, the creator. What they lost was their faith in Buddhist institutions, notably in the lamas, who, according to them, were “materialistic, immoral, and unresponsive.” In fact, these informants had been interested in or practised Buddhism, but they had not fully adopted it. Hence they had low levels of religious human capital and the cost of switching religions was presumably minimal.

How about the rest then? Why did they choose the Christian church rather than the Buddhist? The answers are complex, but four possible reasons are suggested here. First, sexual morality and the sacredness of marriage have always been among the tenets of Christianity, which differentiates it from Buddhism. Although Buddhism advocates abstention from sexual misconduct, "there is the practical necessity for the ongoing compromise of the precepts." In addition, the kindness and high morality of the Christian pastors and missionaries working in the country are praised, whereas the reputation of the Buddhist lamas has been declining.

Second, Buddhist doctrine pronounces that humans suffer because of their bad karma and moral insensibility, such as greediness, strong desire, and wrong ideas. Thus, the solution to suffering should be sought "within ourselves" rather than "from outside," and suffering can be avoided by practising Buddhist teachings. The analogy of four stages of curing an illness was used by Maitreya to explain how realisations based on the Four Noble Truths can be attained: "Just as the disease needs to be diagnosed, its cause eliminated, a healthy state achieved, and the remedy implemented, so also should suffering, its causes, its cessation, and the path be known, removed, attained and undertaken." In other words, there is practically no remedy for alcoholics and deviants, if they do not try to overcome their problems themselves.

On the contrary, Christianity teaches that "Because humanity's fall from grace has been so devastating, not even the smallest amount of goodness within can save us. That is why there must be a rescue "from outside," namely through the merits of Christ. In addition, Christians believe that Satan bewitches people and leads them to alcoholism, crimes, violence, and other evil actions. Thus, the religious pray to God for salvation from Satan's evil for their beloved ones, relatives, and friends. Their belief in the existence of an almighty God and in Satan as a generator of vice allow the religious to receive assurance of their capability to help others and secure their children's future. What is more, they do it collectively, with the support of other members of the Church. In this way, those who have been separated from their "collectives" regain a togetherness.

This is the third possible reason for conversion to Christianity. Under the free market economy, members of a former egalitarian society have been polarising, not only according to their political and economic status, but also their social positions. The unemployed and petty traders tend to be regarded as "insignificant" people by some, mainly because they have no "contacts" or "important circles," not because they have little to contribute to society. Highly placed and wealthy people have created their own spheres and formed local clubs, such as Rotary and Lions Club. They organise events, celebrate fiestas within their circles, and have become new-era celebrities, replacing the industrious socialist workers, herders, and intellectuals of "the past." In contrast to these circles, as Garmaa remarked, God does not discriminate among his children.

Moreover, Bible studies in the native language, and testimonies, which can be analogous to psychological therapies, prevent churchgoers from feeling lonely and desperate. Their lost confidence and hopes are regained through the realisation that their troubles are the "tests of God," will not be everlasting, and may be overcome through earnest devotion to Jesus Christ. The Christian churches provide of social, spiritual, psychological, and even physical benefits, as well as an intimate group atmosphere.

Consequently, it is not hard to understand why Mongol women are becoming converts to western religions such as Mormonism, and have been proselytising among their relatives. Alcoholism, a source of family disaster, has spread in the country so widely during the years of transition that it has become a "social epidemic," which families themselves are hardly able to control. In addition, cases of extramarital sex, which was disapproved of by collectives, have also been rising. Thus, Mongolian women are introducing western religions to their family members as an available vaccine against the social epidemics. According to recent unofficial statistics, the Church of Latter Day Saints has about 5,000 members in Ulaanbaatar.

The findings of this study can be compared with those of similar studies elsewhere. Jarvis investigated why Mormonism has successfully developed in France, a former Catholic-Christian and modern "lay" country. He expected that a religious movement which proposed "to ask the French to give up their wine, coffee, and cigarettes; to abstain from extramarital sex; and to hand over ten percent of their income to a foreign church" would speedily fail. But from his research findings, Jarvis reached the conclusion that the successful development of Mormonism in France stemmed from family and social crisis.

Furthermore, under democracy, the Christian Church has become an alternative to "the mini-socialist state," whose members collectively decided who to send to colleges and universities (education was free) and who should receive accommodations and other benefits. The Christian churches provide free medical assistance to their members; social services to street children, the disabled, and women-headed households; and send youth abroad. Apart from regular religious classes, English, music, and dance classes take place at the churches. Comprehensive Christian texts and precepts in Mongolian language, social activities, and the good morality and manners of missionaries and church members attract Mongolians, particularly youth, to Christian churches.

According to both Christian and non-Christian informants, many young Mongolians were curious about Christianity when missionaries launched their activities in the country. There were various reasons for churchgoing among young Mongols. Girls tended to be exploratory; they were interested in language lessons or were just been following their parents' example, mostly their mothers. Boys have generally been more enterprising. They went to churches out of curiosity, to get free lunches and clothes, to travel with church people around the country, and to meet girls. The parents or grandparents of these young people prefer the traditional religion to the western, but do not forcefully prescribe it for their children.

Fourth, being highly experienced in evangelical and other activities in many countries, Christian churches have been adaptable to the changing ideology and values of the Mongolian population. For example, after the collapse of the socialist world, there was a revival of nationalism among Mongolians. As a result, Chinggis Khan was again regarded as the founder of the Mongolian Empire, a skillful martial commander, but not a warrior or destroyer, as was once taught. Restaurants, hotels, vodkas, and beer have been named after him. His portrait appears on coins, on the covers of notebooks, carpets, and a new national currency. C. Humphrey observed that in the early 1990s, Chinggis Khan even became an object of private worship, and a representation of the great emperor was placed on an altar at home. She noted that ". . .the terrifying and implacable warrior aspect of Chinggis is quite absent from these representations. He is peaceably seated on a pile of flat cushions just like a great lama, and the outline and three dimensional form of the ceramic statue are similar to the image of the Buddhist saint."

Based on the revival of nationalism, the idea that Chinggis Khan was a believer in God since he venerated the Eternal Sky, has been propagated by Christians. This is reminiscent of the tactics used by Comintern propagandists, who had made Russia consonant with Shambala, the heavenly kingdom for religious Mongols.' The results have apparently been fruitful; during their interviews, several Mongolian Christians stressed a belief in the Christian God of Chinggis Khan.

In addition to these factors, I would like to note that there are a variety of cultural choices in the era of globalisation. These choices have expanded enormously with the development of science, technology, and international migration, not to mention the collapse of the socialist world. The religious world is a product of multicultural encounters and this characteristic has become even more evident with globalisation. Durkheim stated that the emerging world system has two opposite trends of growing unity and diversity.' Diversity is increasing within societies and religions, but simultaneously society is unified globally. Mongolia is an obvious

case. When political and social organisations underwent democratic transformation, “new” religions and ideas were established in the country, and society became divided into several political parties and numerous religions and religious cults. These parties, which have extensive relationships with respective overseas organisations through modern communications and technology.

NOTES

1 This work documents the mission history of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (known as the Scheut Fathers) in the territory of Inner Mongolia.

2 H. P. Kemp, Steppe by Step: Mongolia ‘s Christians-from Ancient Roots to Vibrant Young Church (London: Monarch Books, 2000), p. 355.

3 S. Tsedendamba, “Ulamjlalt ba ulamjlalt bus shahsnii hariltsaanii asuudal” (Issues on the Relationship between Traditional and Non-traditional Religion) in Ter sum hiidiin hariltsaa: orchin ue (Ulaanbaatar: Bembi-San, 1998), p. 83.

4 Mongolian Government and UNDP (2003) Goal I. “Reduce Extreme Poverty and Hunger,” in Millennium Development Goals Report. Mongolia (Draft).

5 A. Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999. Giddens, A. (1991) Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age, Cambridge: Polity Press.

6 L.R. Iannoccone, “Religious Participation: A Human Capital Approach,” Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion 29:3(1990)301.

7 The X The Dalai Lama XIV Bstan-’dzin-rgya-mtsho, A Simple Path (London: Thorsons, 2002), p.28.

8 Kemp, Steppe by Step, p. 205.

9 See, for instance, R. Finke, “The Consequence of Religious Competition,” in L.A.Young (ed.) Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment, New York: Routledge 1997 and, R. J. Taylor, “Church Members as a Source of Informed Social Support,” Review of Religious Research 30:2(1988).

10 J. Jarvis, “Mormonism in France: The Family as a Universal Value in a Globalising Religion,” Family, Religion, and Social Change in Diverse Societies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

11 C. Humphrey, “The Moral Authority of the Past in Post-socialist Mongolia,” in Religion, State and Society 20:3 and 4(1992)38 1.

12 L. M. Moses, The Political Role of Mongol Buddhism (Bloomington: Indiana University, Uralic Altaic Series, vol. 133, 1977), p. 81.

13 E. Durkheim, trans. G.Simpson, The Division of Labour in Society (New York: Free Press, 1933).