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COMMENTARY

Friendly Feudalism: The Tibet Myth

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Throughout the ages there has prevailed a distressing symbiosis between religion and violence. The histories of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam are heavily laced with internecine vendettas, inquisitions, and wars. Again and again, religionists have claimed a divine mandate to terrorize and massacre heretics, infidels, and other sinners.

Some people have argued that Buddhism is different, that it stands in marked contrast to the chronic violence of other religions. But a glance at history reveals that Buddhist organizations throughout the centuries have not been free of the violent pursuits so characteristic of other religious groups.¹ In the 20th century alone, from Thailand to Burma to Korea to Japan, Buddhists have clashed with each other and with non-Buddhists. In Sri Lanka, huge battles in the name of Buddhism are part of Sinhalese history.²

Just a few years ago in South Korea, thousands of monks of the Chogye Buddhist order—reputedly devoted to a meditative search for spiritual enlightenment—fought each other with fists, rocks, fire-bombs, and clubs, in pitched battles that went on for weeks. They were vying for control of the order, the largest in South Korea, with its annual budget of \$9.2 million, its additional millions of dollars in property, and the privilege of appointing 1,700 monks to various duties. The brawls left dozens of monks injured, some seriously.³

But many present-day Buddhists in the United States would argue that none of this applies to the Dalai Lama and the Tibet he presided over before the Chinese crackdown in 1959. The Dalai Lama's Tibet, they believe, was a spiritually oriented kingdom, free from the egotistical lifestyles, empty materialism, pointless pursuits, and corrupting vices that beset modern industrialized society. Western news media, and a slew of travel books, novels, and Hollywood films have portrayed the Tibetan theocracy as a veritable Shangri-La and the Dalai Lama as a wise saint, "the greatest living human," as actor Richard Gere gushed.⁴

The Dalai Lama himself lent support to this idealized image of Tibet with

¹ Melvyn C. Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 6–16.

² Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 113.

³ Kyong-Hwa Seok, "Korean Monk Gangs Battle for Temple Turf," *San Francisco Examiner*, December 3, 1998.

⁴ Gere quoted in "Our Little Secret," *CounterPunch*, November 1–15, 1997.

statements such as: "Tibetan civilization has a long and rich history. The pervasive influence of Buddhism and the rigors of life amid the wide open spaces of an unspoiled environment resulted in a society dedicated to peace and harmony. We enjoyed freedom and contentment."⁵ In fact, Tibet's history reads a little differently. In the 13th century, Emperor Kublai Khan created the first Grand Lama, who was to preside over all the other lamas as might a pope over his bishops. Several centuries later, the Emperor of China sent an army into Tibet to support the Grand Lama, an ambitious 25-year-old man, who then gave himself the title of Dalai (Ocean) Lama, ruler of all Tibet. Here is a historical irony: the first Dalai Lama was installed by a Chinese army.

To elevate his authority beyond worldly challenge, the first Dalai Lama seized monasteries that did not belong to his sect, and is believed to have destroyed Buddhist writings that conflicted with his claim to divinity.⁶ The Dalai Lama who succeeded him pursued a sybaritic life, enjoying many mistresses, partying with friends, writing erotic poetry, and acting in other ways that might seem unfitting for an incarnate deity. For this he was "disappeared" by his priests. Within 170 years, despite their recognized status as gods, five Dalai Lamas were murdered by their enlightened nonviolent Buddhist courtiers.⁷

Shangri-La (for Lords and Lamas)

Religions have had a close relationship not only to violence but to economic exploitation. Indeed, it is often the economic exploitation that necessitates the violence. Such was the case with the Tibetan theocracy. Until 1959, when the Dalai Lama last presided over Tibet, most of the arable land was still organized into religious or secular manorial estates worked by serfs. Even a writer like Pradyumna Karan, sympathetic to the old order, admits that "a great deal of real estate belonged to the monasteries, and most of them amassed great riches ... In addition, individual monks and lamas were able to accumulate great wealth through active participation in trade, commerce, and money lending."⁸ Drepung monastery was one of the biggest landowners in the world, with its 185 manors, 25,000 serfs, 300 great pastures, and 16,000 herdsmen. The wealth of the monasteries went to the higher-ranking lamas, many of them scions of aristocratic families, while most of the lower clergy were as poor as the peasant class from which they sprang. This class-determined economic inequality within the Tibetan clergy closely parallels that of the Christian clergy in medieval Europe.

Along with the upper clergy, secular leaders did well. A notable example was the commander-in-chief of the Tibetan army, who owned 4,000 square kilometers of land and 3,500 serfs. He also was a member of the Dalai Lama's lay Cabinet.⁹ Old Tibet has been misrepresented by some of its Western admirers as "a nation that required no police force because its people voluntarily observed

⁵ Dalai Lama quoted in Donald Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 205.

⁶ Stuart Gelder and Roma Gelder, *The Timely Rain: Travels in New Tibet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), p. 119.

⁷ Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, p. 123.

⁸ Pradyumna P. Karan, *The Changing Face of Tibet: The Impact of Chinese Communist Ideology on the Landscape* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), p. 64.

⁹ Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, pp. 62, 174.

the laws of karma."¹⁰ In fact it had a professional army, albeit a small one, that served as a gendarmerie for the landlords to keep order and catch runaway serfs.¹¹

Young Tibetan boys were regularly taken from their families and brought into the monasteries to be trained as monks. Once there, they became bonded for life. Tashi-Tsering, a monk, reports that it was common practice for peasant children to be sexually mistreated in the monasteries. He himself was a victim of repeated childhood rape not long after he was taken into the monastery at age nine.¹² The monastic estates also conscripted peasant children for lifelong servitude as domestics, dance performers, and soldiers.

In Old Tibet there were small numbers of farmers who subsisted as a kind of free peasantry, and perhaps an additional 10,000 people who composed the "middle-class" families of merchants, shopkeepers, and small traders. Thousands of others were beggars. A small minority were slaves, usually domestic servants, who owned nothing. Their offspring were born into slavery.¹³

In 1953, the greater part of the rural population—some 700,000 of an estimated total population of 1,250,000—were serfs. Tied to the land, they were allotted only a small parcel to grow their own food. Serfs and other peasants generally went without schooling or medical care. They spent most of their time laboring for the monasteries and individual high-ranking lamas, or for a secular aristocracy that numbered not more than 200 wealthy families. In effect, they were owned by their masters who told them what crops to grow and what animals to raise. They could not get married without the consent of their lord or lama. A serf might easily be separated from his family should the owner send him to work in a distant location. Serfs could be sold by their masters, or subjected to torture and death.¹⁴

A Tibetan lord would often take his pick of females in the serf population, if we are to believe one 22-year-old woman, herself a runaway serf: "All pretty serf girls were usually taken by the owner as house servants and used as he wished." They "were just slaves without rights."¹⁵ Serfs needed permission to go anywhere. Landowners had legal authority to capture and forcibly bring back those who tried to flee. A 24-year-old runaway serf, interviewed by Anna Louise Strong, welcomed the Chinese intervention as a "liberation." During his time as a serf he claims he was not much different from a draft animal, subjected to incessant toil, hunger, and cold, unable to read or write, and knowing nothing at all. He tells of his attempts to flee:

The first time [the landlord's men] caught me running away, I was very small, and they only cuffed me and cursed me. The second time they beat me up. The third time I was already fifteen and they gave me fifty heavy lashes, with two men sitting on me, one on my head and one on my feet. Blood came then from my nose

¹⁰ As skeptically noted by Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, p. 9.

¹¹ See the testimony of one serf who himself had been hunted down by Tibetan soldiers and returned to his master: Anna Louise Strong, *Tibetan Interviews* (Peking: New World Press, 1929), pp. 29–30, 90.

¹² Melvyn Goldstein, William Siebensuh and Tashi-Tsering, *The Struggle for Modern Tibet: The Autobiography of Tashi-Tsering* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).

¹³ Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, p. 110.

¹⁴ Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, pp. 15, 19–21, 24.

¹⁵ Quoted in Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, p. 25.

and mouth. The overseer said: "This is only blood from the nose; maybe you take heavier sticks and bring some blood from the brain." They beat then with heavier sticks and poured alcohol and water with caustic soda on the wounds to make more pain. I passed out for two hours.¹⁶

In addition to being under a lifetime bond to work the lord's land—or the monastery's land—without pay, the serfs were obliged to repair the lord's houses, transport his crops, and collect his firewood. They were also expected to provide carrying animals and transportation on demand. "It was an efficient system of economic exploitation that guaranteed to the country's religious and secular elites a permanent and secure labor force to cultivate their land holdings without burdening them either with any direct day-to-day responsibility for the serf's subsistence and without the need to compete for labor in a market context."¹⁷

The common people labored under the twin burdens of the *corvée* (forced unpaid labor on behalf of the lord) and onerous tithes. They were taxed upon getting married, taxed for the birth of each child, and for every death in the family. They were taxed for planting a new tree in their yard, for keeping domestic or barnyard animals, for owning a flower pot, or putting a bell on an animal. There were taxes for religious festivals, for singing, dancing, drumming, and bell ringing. People were taxed for being sent to prison and upon being released. Even beggars were taxed. Those who could not find work were taxed for being unemployed, and if they traveled to another village in search of work, they paid a passage tax. When people could not pay, the monasteries lent them money at 20–50% interest. Some debts were handed down from father to son to grandson. Debtors who could not meet their obligations risked being placed into slavery for as long as the monastery demanded, sometimes for the rest of their lives.¹⁸

The theocracy's religious teachings buttressed its class order. The poor and afflicted were taught that they had brought their troubles upon themselves because of their foolish and wicked ways in previous lives. Hence they had to accept the misery of their present existence as an atonement and in anticipation that their lot would improve upon being reborn. The rich and powerful of course treated their good fortune as a reward for—and tangible evidence of—virtue in past and present lives.

Torture and Mutilation in Shangri-La

In the Dalai Lama's Tibet, torture and mutilation—including eye gouging, the pulling out of tongues, hamstringing, and amputation of arms and legs—were favored punishments inflicted upon thieves, runaway serfs, and other "criminals." Journeying through Tibet in the 1960s, Stuart and Roma Gelder interviewed a former serf, Tserah Wang Tuei, who had stolen two sheep belonging to a monastery. For this he had both his eyes gouged out and his hand

¹⁶ Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet 1913–1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 5.

¹⁸ Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, pp. 175–176; and Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, pp. 25–26.

mutilated beyond use. He explains that he no longer is a Buddhist: "When a holy lama told them to blind me I thought there was no good in religion."¹⁹ Some Western visitors to Old Tibet remarked on the number of amputees to be seen. Since it was against Buddhist teachings to take human life, some offenders were severely lashed and then "left to God" in the freezing night to die. "The parallels between Tibet and medieval Europe are striking," concludes Tom Grunfeld in his book on Tibet.²⁰ Some monasteries had their own private prisons, reports Anna Louise Strong. In 1959, she visited an exhibition of torture equipment that had been used by the Tibetan overlords. There were handcuffs of all sizes, including small ones for children, and instruments for cutting off noses and ears, and breaking off hands. For gouging out eyes, there was a special stone cap with two holes in it that was pressed down over the head so that the eyes bulged out through the holes and could be more readily torn out. There were instruments for slicing off kneecaps and heels, or hamstringing legs. There were hot brands, whips, and special implements for disembowling.²¹

The exhibition presented photographs and testimonies of victims who had been blinded or crippled or suffered amputations for thievery. There was the shepherd whose master owed him a reimbursement in yuan and wheat but refused to pay. So he took one of the master's cows; for this he had his hands severed. Another herdsman, who opposed having his wife taken from him by his lord, had his hands broken off. There were pictures of Communist activists with noses and upper lips cut off, and a woman who was raped and then had her nose sliced away.²²

Theocratic despotism had been the rule for generations. An English visitor to Tibet in 1895, Dr. A. L. Waddell, wrote that the Tibetan people were under the "intolerable tyranny of monks" and the devil superstitions they had fashioned to terrorize the people. In 1904 Perceval Landon described the Dalai Lama's rule as "an engine of oppression" and "a barrier to all human improvement." At about that time, another English traveler, Captain W. F. T. O'Connor, observed that "the great landowners and the priests ... exercise each in their own dominion a despotic power from which there is no appeal," while the people are "oppressed by the most monstrous growth of monasticism and priest-craft the world has ever seen." Tibetan rulers, like those of Europe during the Middle Ages, "forged innumerable weapons of servitude, invented degrading legends and stimulated a spirit of superstition" among the common people.²³

In 1937, another visitor, Spencer Chapman, wrote, "The Lamaist monk does not spend his time in ministering to the people or educating them, nor do laymen take part in or even attend the monastery services. The beggar beside the

¹⁹ Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, p. 113.

²⁰ A. Tom Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet*, rev. edn (Armonk, NY and London: 1996), pp. 9, 7—33, for a general discussion of feudal Tibet; see also Felix Greene, *A Curtain of Ignorance* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 241—249; Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet 1913—1951*, pp. 3—5; and Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, passim.

²¹ Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, pp. 91—92.

²² Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, pp. 92—96.

²³ Waddell, Landon and O'Connor are quoted in Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, pp. 123—125.

road is nothing to the monk. Knowledge is the jealously guarded prerogative of the monasteries and is used to increase their influence and wealth."²⁴

Occupation and Revolt

The Chinese Communists occupied Tibet in 1951, claiming suzerainty over that country. The 1951 treaty provided for ostensible self-government under the Dalai Lama's rule but gave China military control and exclusive right to conduct foreign relations. The Chinese were also granted a direct role in internal administration "to promote social reforms." At first, they moved slowly, relying mostly on persuasion in an attempt to effect change. Among the earliest reforms they wrought was to reduce usurious interest rates, and build some hospitals and roads.

Mao Zedung and his Communist cadres did not simply want to occupy Tibet. They desired the Dalai Lama's cooperation in transforming Tibet's feudal economy in accordance with socialist goals. Even Melvyn Goldstein, who is sympathetic to the Dalai Lama and the cause of Tibetan independence, allows that "contrary to popular belief in the West," the Chinese "pursued a policy of moderation." They took care to show respect for Tibetan culture and religion and "allowed the old feudal and monastic systems to continue unchanged. Between 1951 and 1959, not only was no aristocratic or monastic property confiscated, but feudal lords were permitted to exercise continued judicial authority over their hereditarily bound peasants."²⁵ As late as 1957, Mao Zedung was trying to salvage his gradualist policy. He reduced the number of Chinese cadre and troops in Tibet and promised the Dalai Lama in writing that China would not implement land reforms in Tibet for the next six years or even longer if conditions were not yet ripe.²⁶

Nevertheless, Chinese rule over Tibet greatly discomfited the lords and lamas. What bothered them most was not that the intruders were Chinese. They had seen Chinese come and go over the centuries and had enjoyed good relations with Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek and his reactionary Kuomintang rule in China.²⁷ Indeed the approval of the Kuomintang government was needed to validate the choice of the present-day Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama. When the young Dalai Lama was installed in Lhasa, it was with an armed escort of Chiang Kaishek's troops and an attending Chinese minister, in accordance with centuries-old tradition.²⁸ What really bothered the Tibetan lords and lamas was that these latest Chinese were *Communists*. It would be only a matter of time, they were sure, before the Communists started imposing their egalitarian and collectivist solutions upon the highly privileged theocracy.

In 1956–1957, armed Tibetan bands ambushed convoys of the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army (PLA). The uprising received extensive material support from the CIA, including arms, supplies, and military training for Tibetan commando units. It is a matter of public knowledge that the CIA set up support

²⁴ Quoted in Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, p. 125.

²⁵ Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon*, p. 52.

²⁶ Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon*, p. 54.

²⁷ Heinrich Harrer, *Return to Tibet* (New York: Schocken, 1985), p. 29.

²⁸ Strong, *Tibetan Interview*, p. 73.

camps in Nepal, carried out numerous airlifts, and conducted guerrilla operations inside Tibet.²⁹ Meanwhile in the United States, the American Society for a Free Asia, a CIA front, energetically publicized the cause of Tibetan resistance. The Dalai Lama's eldest brother, Thubtan Norbu, played an active role in that group.

Many of the Tibetan commandos and agents whom the CIA dropped into the country were chiefs of aristocratic clans or the sons of chiefs. Ninety percent of them were never heard from again, according to a report from the CIA itself.³⁰ The small and thinly spread PLA garrisons in Tibet could not have captured them all. The PLA must have received support from Tibetans who did not sympathize with the uprising. This suggests that the resistance had a rather narrow base within Tibet. "Many lamas and lay members of the elite and much of the Tibetan army joined the uprising, but in the main the populace did not, assuring its failure," writes Hugh Deane.³¹ In their book on Tibet, Ginsburg and Mathos reach a similar conclusion: "The Tibetan insurgents never succeeded in mustering into their ranks even a large fraction of the population at hand, to say nothing of a majority. As far as can be ascertained, the great bulk of the common people of Lhasa and of the adjoining countryside failed to join in the fighting against the Chinese both when it first began and as it progressed."³² Eventually the resistance crumbled.

The Communists Overthrow Feudalism

Whatever wrongs and new oppressions introduced by the Chinese in Tibet after 1959, they did abolish slavery and the serfdom system of unpaid labor. They eliminated the many crushing taxes, started work projects, and greatly reduced unemployment and beggary. They built the only hospitals that exist in the country, and established secular education, thereby breaking the educational monopoly of the monasteries. They constructed running water and electrical systems in Lhasa. They also put an end to floggings, mutilations, and amputations as a form of criminal punishment.³³

The Chinese also expropriated the landed estates and reorganized the peasants into hundreds of communes. Heinrich Harrer wrote a bestseller about his experiences in Tibet that was made into a popular Hollywood movie. (It was later revealed that Harrer had been a sergeant in Hitler's SS.³⁴) He proudly reports that the Tibetans who resisted the Chinese and "who gallantly defended their independence ... were predominantly nobles, semi-nobles and lamas; they were punished by being made to perform the lowliest tasks, such as laboring on

²⁹ See Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002); and William Leary, "Secret Mission to Tibet," *Air & Space*, December, 1997/January, 1998.

³⁰ Leary, "Secret Mission to Tibet."

³¹ Hugh Deane, "The Cold War in Tibet," *CovertAction Quarterly*, Winter, 1987.

³² George Ginsburg and Michael Mathos, *Communist China and Tibet* (1964), quoted in Deane, "The Cold War in Tibet." Deane notes that author Bina Roy reached a similar conclusion.

³³ See Greene, *A Curtain of Ignorance*, p. 248 and passim; and Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet*, passim.

³⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1997.

roads and bridges. They were further humiliated by being made to clean up the city before the tourists arrived." They also had to live in a camp originally reserved for beggars and vagrants.³⁵

By 1961, hundreds of thousands of acres formerly owned by the lords and lamas had been distributed to tenant farmers and landless peasants. In pastoral areas, herds that were once owned by nobility were turned over to collectives of poor shepherds. Improvements were made in the breeding of livestock, and new varieties of vegetables and new strains of wheat and barley were introduced, along with irrigation improvements, all of which led to an increase in agrarian production.³⁶

Many peasants remained as religious as ever, giving alms to the clergy. But people were no longer compelled to pay tributes or make gifts to the monasteries and lords. The many monks who had been conscripted into the religious orders as children were now free to renounce the monastic life, and thousands did, especially the younger ones. The remaining clergy lived on modest government stipends, and extra income earned by officiating at prayer services, weddings, and funerals.³⁷

The charges made by the Dalai Lama himself about Chinese mass sterilization and forced deportation of Tibetans have remained unsupported by any evidence. Both the Dalai Lama and his advisor and youngest brother, Tendzin Choegyal, claimed that "more than 1.2 million Tibetans are dead as a result of the Chinese occupation."³⁸ No matter how often stated, that figure is puzzling. The official 1953 census—six years before the Chinese crackdown—recorded the entire population of Tibet at 1,274,000. Other estimates varied from one to three million.³⁹ Other census counts put the ethnic Tibetan population within the country at about two million. If the Chinese killed 1.2 million in the early 1960s then whole cities and huge portions of the countryside, indeed almost all of Tibet, would have been depopulated, transformed into a killing field dotted with death camps and mass graves—of which we have seen no evidence. The Chinese military force in Tibet was not big enough to round up, hunt down, and exterminate that many people even if it had spent all its time doing nothing else.

Chinese authorities do admit to "mistakes" in the past, particularly during the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution when religious persecution reached a high tide in both China and Tibet. After the uprising in the late 1950s, thousands of Tibetans were incarcerated. During the Great Leap Forward, forced collectivization and grain farming was imposed on the peasantry, sometimes with disastrous effect. In the late 1970s, China began relaxing controls over Tibet "and tried to undo some of the damage wrought during the previous two decades."⁴⁰ In 1980, the Chinese government initiated reforms reportedly designed to grant Tibet a greater degree of self-rule and self-administration. Tibetans would now be allowed to cultivate private plots, sell their harvest surpluses, decide for themselves what crops to grow, and keep yaks and sheep. Communication with

³⁵ Harrer, *Return to Tibet*, p. 54.

³⁶ Karan, *The Changing Face of Tibet*, pp. 36–38, 41, 57–58; *London Times*, July, 1966, p. 4.

³⁷ Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, pp. 29, 47–48.

³⁸ Tendzin Choegyal, "The Truth about Tibet," *Imprimis* (publication of Hillsdale College, Michigan), April, 1999.

³⁹ Karan, *The Changing Face of Tibet*, pp. 52–53.

⁴⁰ Elaine Kurtenbach, Associated Press report, *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 12, 1998.

the outside world was again permitted, and frontier controls were eased to permit Tibetans to visit exiled relatives in India and Nepal.⁴¹

Elites, Émigrés, and CIA Money

For the Tibetan upper-class lamas and lords, the Communist intervention was a calamity. Most of them fled abroad, as did the Dalai Lama himself, who was assisted in his flight by the CIA. Some discovered to their horror that they would have to work for a living. Those feudal elites who remained in Tibet and decided to cooperate with the new regime faced difficult adjustments. Consider the following.

In 1959, Anna Louise Strong visited the Central Institute of National Minorities in Beijing which trained various ethnic minorities for the civil service or prepared them for entrance into agricultural and medical schools. Of the 900 Tibetan students attending, most were runaway serfs and slaves. But about 100 were from privileged Tibetan families, sent by their parents so that they might win favorable posts in the new administration. The class divide between these two groups of students was all too evident. As the institute's director noted:

Those from noble families at first consider that in all ways they are superior. They resent having to carry their own suitcases, make their own beds, look after their own room. This, they think, is the task of slaves; they are insulted because we expect them to do this. Some never accept it but go home; others accept it at last. The serfs at first fear the others and cannot sit at ease in the same room. In the next stage they have less fear but still feel separate and cannot mix. Only after some time and considerable discussion do they reach the stage in which they mix easily as fellow students, criticizing and helping each other.⁴²

The émigrés' plight received fulsome play in the West and substantial support from US agencies dedicated to making the world safe for economic inequality. Throughout the 1960s the Tibetan exile community secretly pocketed \$1.7 million a year from the CIA, according to documents released by the State Department in 1998. Once this fact was publicized, the Dalai Lama's organization itself issued a statement admitting that it had received millions of dollars from the CIA during the 1960s to send armed squads of exiles into Tibet to undermine the Maoist revolution. The Dalai Lama's annual share was \$186,000, making him a paid agent of the CIA. Indian intelligence also financed him and other Tibetan exiles.⁴³ He has refused to say whether he or his brothers worked with the CIA. The agency has also declined to comment.⁴⁴

While presenting himself as a defender of human rights, and having won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Dalai Lama continued to associate with and be advised by aristocratic émigrés and other reactionaries during his exile. In 1995, the Raleigh, NC *News & Observer* carried a frontpage color photograph of the Dalai Lama being embraced by the reactionary Republican senator Jesse Helms,

⁴¹ Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon*, pp. 47–48.

⁴² Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, pp. 15–16.

⁴³ Jim Mann, "CIA Gave Aid to Tibetan Exiles in '60s, Files Show," *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1998; and *New York Times*, October 1, 1998.

⁴⁴ Reuters report, *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 27, 1997.

under the headline "Buddhist Captivates Hero of Religious Right."⁴⁵ In April of 1999, along with Margaret Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, and the first George Bush, the Dalai Lama called upon the British government to release Augusto Pinochet, the former fascist dictator of Chile and a longtime CIA client who had been apprehended while visiting England. He urged that Pinochet be allowed to return to his homeland rather than be forced to go to Spain where he was wanted by a Spanish jurist to stand trial for crimes against humanity.

Today, mostly through the National Endowment for Democracy and other conduits that are more respectable-sounding than the CIA, the US Congress continues to allocate an annual \$2 million to Tibetans in India, with additional millions for "democracy activities" within the Tibetan exile community. The Dalai Lama also gets money from financier George Soros, who funds the CIA-created Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and other institutes.⁴⁶

The Question of Culture

We are told that when the Dalai Lama ruled Tibet, the people lived in contented symbiosis with their monastic and secular lords, in a social order sustained by a deeply spiritual, nonviolent culture. The peasantry's profound connection to the existing system of sacred belief supposedly gave them a tranquil stability, inspired by humane and pacific religious teachings. One is reminded of the idealized imagery of feudal Europe presented by latter-day conservative Catholics such as G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. For them, medieval Christendom was a world of contented peasants living in deep spiritual bond with their Church, under the protection of their lords.⁴⁷ The Shangri-La image of Tibet bears no more resemblance to historic reality than does the romanticized image of medieval Europe.

It might be said that we denizens of the modern secular world cannot grasp the equations of happiness and pain, contentment and custom that characterize more "spiritual and traditional" societies. This may be true, and it may explain why some of us idealize such societies. But still, a gouged eye is a gouged eye; a flogging is a flogging; and the grinding exploitation of serfs and slaves is still a brutal class injustice whatever its cultural embellishments. There is a difference between a spiritual bond and human bondage, even when both exist side by side.

To be sure, there is much about the Chinese intervention that is to be deplored. In the 1990s, the Han, the largest ethnic group comprising over 95% of China's vast population, began moving in substantial numbers into Tibet and various western provinces.⁴⁸ These resettlements have had an effect on the indigenous cultures of western China and Tibet. On the streets of Lhasa and Shigatse, signs of Chinese preeminence are readily visible. Chinese run the factories and many of the shops and vending stalls. Tall office buildings and

⁴⁵ *News & Observer*, September 6, 1995, cited in Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Heather Cottin, "George Soros, Imperial Wizard," *CovertAction Quarterly* 74, 2002.

⁴⁷ The Gelders draw this comparison: *The Timely Rain*, p. 64.

⁴⁸ The Han have also moved in great numbers into Xinjiang, a large northwest province about the size of Tibet, populated by Uighurs; see Peter Hessler, "The Middleman," *New Yorker*, October 14 and 21, 2002.

large shopping centers have been built with funds that might have been better spent on water treatment plants and housing.

Chinese cadres in Tibet too often adopted a supremacist attitude toward the indigenous population. Some viewed their Tibetan neighbors as backward and lazy, in need of economic development and "patriotic education." During the 1990s Tibetan government employees suspected of harboring nationalist sympathies were purged from office, and campaigns were launched to discredit the Dalai Lama. Individual Tibetans reportedly were subjected to arrest, imprisonment, and forced labor for attempting to flee the country, and for carrying out separatist activities and engaging in political "subversion." Some arrestees were held in administrative detention without adequate food, water, and blankets, subjected to threats, beatings, and other mistreatment.⁴⁹

Chinese family planning regulations that allow a three-child limit for Tibetan families have been enforced irregularly and vary by district. If a couple goes over the limit, the excess children can be denied subsidized daycare, health care, housing, and education. Meanwhile, Tibetan history, culture, and religion are slighted in schools. Teaching materials, though translated into Tibetan, focus on Chinese history and culture.⁵⁰

Still, the new order has its supporters. A 1999 story in the *Washington Post* notes that the Dalai Lama continues to be revered in Tibet, but

... few Tibetans would welcome a return of the corrupt aristocratic clans that fled with him in 1959 and that comprise the bulk of his advisers. Many Tibetan farmers, for example, have no interest in surrendering the land they gained during China's land reform to the clans. Tibet's former slaves say they, too, don't want their former masters to return to power.

"I've already lived that life once before," said Wangchuk, a 67-year-old former slave who was wearing his best clothes for his yearly pilgrimage to Shigatse, one of the holiest sites of Tibetan Buddhism. He said he worshipped the Dalai Lama, but added, "I may not be free under Chinese communism, but I am better off than when I was a slave."⁵¹

To support the Chinese overthrow of the Dalai Lama's feudal theocracy is not to applaud everything about Chinese rule in Tibet. This point is seldom understood by today's Shangri-La adherents in the West.

The converse is also true. To denounce the Chinese occupation does not mean we have to romanticize the former feudal régime. One common complaint among Buddhist proselytes in the West is that Tibet's religious culture is being destroyed by the Chinese authorities. This does seem to be the case. But what I am questioning here is the supposedly admirable and pristinely spiritual nature of that pre-invasion culture. In short, we can advocate religious freedom and independence for Tibet without having to embrace the mythology of a Paradise Lost.

Finally, it should be noted that the criticism posed herein is not intended as a personal attack on the Dalai Lama. He appears to be a nice enough individual, who speaks often of peace, love, and nonviolence. In 1994, in an interview with

⁴⁹ Report by the International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet, *A Generation in Peril* (Berkeley, CA: International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet, 2001), passim.

⁵⁰ International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet, *A Generation in Peril*, pp. 66–68, 98.

⁵¹ John Pomfret, "Tibet Caught in China's Web," *Washington Post*, July 23, 1999.

Melvyn Goldstein, he went on record as having been since his youth in favor of building schools, “machines,” and roads in his country. He claims that he thought the corvée and certain taxes imposed on the peasants “were extremely bad.” And he disliked the way people were saddled with old debts sometimes passed down from generation to generation.⁵² Furthermore, he reportedly has established “a government-in-exile” featuring a written constitution, a representative assembly, and other democratic essentials.⁵³

Like many erstwhile rulers, the Dalai Lama sounds much better out of power than in power. Keep in mind that it took a Chinese occupation and almost 40 years of exile for him to propose democracy for Tibet and to criticize the oppressive feudal autocracy of which he himself was the apotheosis. But his criticism of the old order comes far too late for ordinary Tibetans. Many of them want him back in their country, but it appears that relatively few want a return to the social order he represented.

In a book published in 1996, the Dalai Lama proffered a remarkable statement that must have sent shudders through the exile community. It reads in part as follows:

Of all the modern economic theories, the economic system of Marxism is founded on moral principles, while capitalism is concerned only with gain and profitability. Marxism is concerned with the distribution of wealth on an equal basis and the equitable utilization of the means of production. It is also concerned with the fate of the working classes—that is the majority—as well as with the fate of those who are underprivileged and in need, and Marxism cares about the victims of minority-imposed exploitation. For those reasons the system appeals to me, and it seems fair. ... The failure of the regime in the Soviet Union was, for me not the failure of Marxism but the failure of totalitarianism. For this reason I think of myself as half-Marxist, half-Buddhist.⁵⁴

And more recently in 2001, while visiting California, he remarked that “Tibet, materially, is very, very backward. Spiritually it is quite rich. But spirituality can’t fill our stomachs.”⁵⁵ Here is a message that should be heeded by the affluent well-fed Buddhist proselytes in the West who cannot be bothered with material considerations as they romanticize feudal Tibet.

Buddhism and the Dalai Lama aside, what I have tried to challenge is the Tibet myth, the Paradise Lost image of a social order that was little more than a despotic retrograde theocracy of serfdom and poverty, so damaging to the human spirit, where vast wealth was accumulated by a favored few who lived high and mighty off the blood, sweat, and tears of the many. For most of the Tibetan aristocrats in exile, that is the world to which they fervently desire to return. It is a long way from Shangri-La.

⁵² Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon*, p. 51.

⁵³ Tendzin Choegyal, “The Truth about Tibet.”

⁵⁴ The Dalai Lama in Marianne Dresser (ed.), *Beyond Dogma: Dialogues and Discourses* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1996).

⁵⁵ Quoted in *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 17, 2001.