The Changing Place of Religion and the Question of Secularization in the 'Modernization' of Tibet

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Abstract

The paper discusses the changing place of religion in the 'modernization' of Tibet and the applicability of the secularization thesis in interpreting the changes. Attempts by China to take Tibet into the era of 'modernity' had considerable implications for Tibetan traditional society, which was predominantly founded on religious institutions. While secularization, at least to some extent, seems to have occurred at the institutional level, religion appears to have maintained its importance in the lives of individual Tibetans. Interview data collected among Tibetans in the Qinghai province of China suggests that religion is used in defending and maintaining the 'traditional' Tibetan culture, and that the transitions of modernization are negotiated to fit the old belief systems. It is argued that the conflict between China and Tibet is largely a cultural conflict that can be traced back to the two parties' contradictory views on the relationship between religion and modernity.

Introduction

This paper discusses the changing meaning and form of religion in the 'modernization' of Tibet[2] and the usability of the secularization thesis in interpreting these changes. Tibet, by which I refer to the three ethnically Tibetan areas of Ü-Tsang, Amdo and Kham, was annexed to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 1950s. The occupation of Tibet was largely justified by China's intention to 'modernize' Tibetan political, economic and cultural spheres of life, which were mainly dominated by religious institutions – monasteries and religious figures.

Societal changes introduced by China in the name of 'modernization' have changed Tibetan traditional society considerably. Previously influential monasteries and religious figures have been replaced by secular ideologies and authorities, and modern education and economies have been introduced. Since these efforts to modernize the country have meant that in terms of economic development and standard of living, Tibet has surpassed any previous period in

its history, it was predicted by many that the Tibetan people would also become secularized. The predictions, however, seemed to be both misplaced and premature, as extensive demonstrations, motivated largely by the lack of religious rights, burst out in Tibet again last year. But if in the past three decades China has offered Tibetans more substantial economic benefits than ever before in the history of the PRC, why would the Tibetans demonstrate?

Many socioeconomic evils lie behind the Tibetan protests. These include the impoverishment of rural Tibetans; the growing economic gap between the Tibetans and the Chinese; Han Chinese population influx to the Tibetan areas; and the social marginalization of Tibetans. However, the dispute between the Tibetans and the Han Chinese seems largely to be a cultural conflict which goes beyond political and economic interests. There is a profound gap between Chinese and Tibetan expectations of the place of religion in the 'modernizing' Tibetan society. More precisely, whereas modernity for China is in many ways antithetical to religion, the interview data collected among Tibetans in the Qinghai province of China suggests that Tibetans have both made use of their Tibetan Buddhist religion in defending their assumed ethnic identity and culture, and negotiated the transitions of modernization to fit and promote the traditional religion and modes of life. Thus even if far-reaching generalizations can hardly be made from experiences on the micro-level, the interviews on their part show how macro-level changes in society are approached by some individuals. Hence, at least to some extent, investing traditional religion with new functions seems to challenge the presumption of the declining importance of religion in Tibet and the idea of inevitable 'secularization' of modernizing societies.

In what follows, I will first briefly introduce the secularization thesis and explicate the alleged relationship between 'modernity' and 'secularization.' Second, I will discuss the Chinese attempts to 'modernize' Tibet, and the changing place of religion in Tibetan society. After these basic discussions, I will then analyse my own interview data collected among Tibetans in Amdo and Kham in the Qinghai province of China and show how the Tibetan monastic institution has been invested at the micro-level with new meanings and functions in the changing society. I will then discuss the validity of the secularization thesis in the Tibetan context and conclude by proposing the need to study 'global' processes such as 'modernization' and 'secularization' locally, in the specific time, culture and social situation.

Secularization – Inevitable By-Product of Modernization?

There is a profound disagreement over the meaning of 'secularization.' Most interpretations of the concept, however, refer to a historical development by which religion has lost its presumed central place in society (McGuire 1997:274; Pesonen 2002:4). The secularization process is usually considered to have begun with the Age of Enlightenment, which emphasized a rational view of the world based on scientific knowledge and technology (Norris and Inglehart 2004:1), or even further back with the Protestant Reformation, which is seen as accelerating the rise of individualism and rationality (Bruce 1996:22–23, 230). In the nineteenth century, many seminal social theorists believed that the significance of religion would gradually fade with the advent of the industrial society. The assumption that religion would decline was still held during most of the twentieth century (Norris and Inglehart 2004:1), and it was not until the 1960s that attempts to develop more systematic and empirically grounded secularization theories emerged (Casanova 1994:19).

Whereas scholars do not agree on whether religion is 'declining' or not, most accept that macro-level social changes in modernizing societies give religion a different social role than it once had. Thus ideological changes, along with the rise of modern science and technology, capitalism, industrialization and urbanization, are seen to alter the place and nature of religious beliefs, practices, and organizations, and to reduce their relevance to the lives of nation-states, social groups, and individuals (Bruce 1996:362; Bruce 2002:2; Eriksen 2001:297–298; Casanova, 1994:21).

In explaining the social location of religion in modern societies, theorists have emphasized several processes of social change, perhaps most often institutional differentiation, societalization, privatization and rationalization (see Bruce 1996 and 2002; Casanova 1994; Wilson 1976; Norris and Inglehart 2004; McGuire 1997). The decline of the social significance and communal support of religion as a part of these macro-level social processes is sometimes seen to lead to a decline in the plausibility of once taken-for-granted beliefs and practices at the individual level as well (Woodhead 2002:5, 10–11; Norris and Inglehart 2004; McGuire 1997). Thus, whereas some use the concept of 'secularization' to designate the transfer or relocation of people, things, functions and meanings from their traditional location in the religious sphere to the secular sphere (see Casanova 1994:13), others also use the

concept to describe a decline in people's engagement in religious practices and beliefs (see Bruce 2002:3).

Theorists of the secularization thesis have usually been careful not to make implicit universal claims about secularization, and have tended to limit 'modernization' to the historically and geographically specific phenomena in the West. While modernization implies an assumption of the evolution or development of 'traditional' societies along modern Western patterns, 'modernization' should not be taken as exclusive to the West. Due to the globalizing effect of modern communication technology, economics, politics and tourism, social transformation can increasingly be seen to take place everywhere (see Eriksen 2002). Despite this, the Western experience of 'modernity' should not be taken as the definitive model of 'evolution' and 'development' to be imposed on all cultures and societies. The extent to which the different processes of 'modernization' are repeated elsewhere depends on the extent to which new circumstances match the old, and how the different processes of modernization operate together or in some combination (Bruce 1999:17; Woodhead 2002:3–4). This means that modernization and its implications should be studied locally, in a specific time and place. For this reason, I will turn to the attempts by China to 'modernize' the Tibetan society and show how these 'modernizing reforms' were to change the place of religion and religious institutions at the macro-level of the Tibetan traditional society.

'Modernizing Reforms' and the Changing Face of the Tibetan Religion

The idea of a religious 'pre-modern' Tibet has already been dismissed as nothing more than a Western projection (e.g. Lopez 1996; Adams 2000). Yet, while Tibetan religiousness is in many ways a construction of Western fantasies and Tibetan responses to the fantasies, Tibetan Buddhism had an important social function in historical Tibet. In fact, before the advent of Communist China, the Tibetan monastic institution and the institution of spiritual teachers (lamas) played central roles in the Tibetan public spheres of life.

In addition to their spiritual, ritual and educational functions, monasteries were central in Tibetan socio-political life. The political role of monasteries varied depending on the differences in social structure in different regions and at different historical periods. In

politically centralized regions large monasteries were part of the governmental administrative system, while in decentralized areas, monasteries were integrated in local populations. The biggest monasteries were also wealthy landowners and important in Tibetan socio-economic life (see Samuel 1993). The socio-political function of the monasteries gave birth to the lama institution, the combination of spiritual and political authority. The most well known examples of the double role of the lama in Tibet are the Dalai Lamas, who gained religious and political power in the 17th century. The reciprocal relationship between the monastic institution and the central government of the Dalai Lamas led to an expansion of the monasteries, with the result that as much as 20 percent of the Tibetan male population are believed to have belonged to one of the over 6,000 monasteries still existing in the 1950s (see Samuel 1993; Powers 1995).

While 'pre-modern' Tibet should not be considered as a closed or unchanging entity, its first large-scale encounter with 'modernity' came only with the new Chinese rulers in the second half of the 20th century. Attempts by the 13th Dalai Lama to 'modernize' Tibet in the 1920s with the introduction of Western-style education, the creation of a standing army, Tibetan currency and a postal service, had largely been unsuccessful due mainly to the opposition of the powerful Buddhist monasteries (see Samuel 1993; Smith 1996; Cantwell and Kawanami 2002). In the 1950s, as the official Chinese discourse states, agreements were made between the 14th Dalai Lama's government and the central government of the PRC for the 'peaceful liberation of Tibet and for bringing Tibet to the era of the state-controlled programs of *modernity* (Adams 2000: 516, emphasis added). The invasion was thus largely justified by the idea of Chinese cultural and social superiority and the belief that minor nationalities could not develop culturally or economically without the assistance of the 'advanced nationality,' the Han Chinese (Smith 1994: 57, 59, 61). Radical socio-economic reforms were introduced to help 'backward' Tibet progress, while the destruction of Buddhist temples and monasteries were begun in eastern Tibet in the 1950s and throughout Tibet after the failed 1959 uprising and the Dalai Lama's escape to India (e.g. Smith 1996; Samuel 1993).

In 1966, Mao began the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to quicken the elimination of all the traditional values of the 'old' society – old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. Religion became a key target of repression. Following the traditional Marxist tenet, religion was seen as an erroneous worldview that was produced in response to certain external forces. These forces kept religion alive and had to be removed through revolutions, education,

and science (Yu 1971:49). By the end of the Revolution in 1976 almost all the Tibetan religious institutions had been destroyed and both public and private religious practice had been strictly prohibited (Powers 1995:175, 179–182; Goldstein 1998:9–10; Smith 1996).

At the end of the 1970s, the Chinese government shifted its attention from political efforts to economic development by adopting a series of market-oriented reforms. The 'Four Modernizations' – industrial, agricultural, techno-scientific, and defence – were introduced, and the previously contradictory ideologies of socialism and capitalism became compatible. Additional affirmative action measures were introduced in Tibet in the early 1980s to promote 'economic growth, social stability and rapprochement between Han Chinese and Tibetans' (Hao 2000:12). As a result of these actions, Tibetan living standards and the general economic conditions started to improve, though the actual impact of 'modernization' – including the construction and expansion of infrastructure, industries and urban facilities – is a subject of much debate[3] (see Hao 2000; Gyamtso 2008).

More liberal policies in the 1980s brought about the revitalization of Tibetan culture and religion. As soon as the state revoked its prohibitions, Tibetans began to practice religion again and rebuild the destroyed monasteries and temples (e.g. Goldstein and Kapstein 1998). Communist sentiments toward religion, however, continue to persist in official views. Thus traditional culture is labelled as problematic because it represents all that was 'backward' about the old, feudal China, and Buddhism continues to be seen as the principal source of 'exploitation of the masses.' Yet, along with the recent attempts to modernize the economy of the PRC and, more specifically, to promote tourism in Tibet, policies have been shifted toward preserving religion. Together, the two policies are seen to have led to the greater regulation and surveillance of monastics and the deployment of monasteries as tourist attractions (Adams 2000:516–517).

The 'modernizing' efforts taken by China in Tibet have meant drastic changes in the Tibetan societal structure, which was previously founded on religious institutions. Secular officials have removed religious rulers from power; monasteries have become politically and economically insignificant institutions; and the religious training given by monasteries has been largely replaced by the modern Chinese education system. Further, increasing tourism means that Tibetan cities such as Lhasa are claimed to have been transformed from religious

centres into commercialized tourist attractions with thousands of shops, restaurants and karaoke bars (see Lam 2006).

It should be safe to argue that many of the processes of what is understood as 'secularization' have occurred in Tibet. In other words, as governance, education, welfare and community organizations are taken over by secular agencies, traditional religion has fewer social functions in the society and is increasingly being relocated to the private spheres of life. Also, improved communication, urbanization, and Chinese migration have destabilized local Tibetan communities where religion is traditionally located. The lives of Tibetans have become increasingly dominated by the Chinese nation state.

Some have interpreted institutional secularization as signifying a decline in Tibetans' engagement in religious practices and beliefs. Thus, for example, Vincanne Adams (2000), an anthropologist in Lhasa, argues that Lhasa Tibetans are today more interested in social mobility and economic security than in their religion. It is also claimed that the younger generation of Tibetans has become 'less attached to the lamas and other religious figures' thanks to a new education system that supports the learning of Mandarin Chinese and values compatible with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideals (see Lam 2006).

If institutional secularization is eroding the relevance of the religious beliefs, practices, and organizations in the lives of 'modern' Tibetans, how should the religious nature of the Tibetan protests be understood? After all, the main reason behind the demonstrations according to Tibetans was the lack of religious rights and their longing for their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. In the following, the discussion of secularization in Tibet will be brought to the micro-level to describe how Tibetans use religion at the local level to defend their ethnic and national identity in a 'modernizing' society, and how they negotiate the changes to fit and justify their traditional worldview and culture.

Case Study: Counter-trends of Secularization in Qinghai

The following discussion is based on observations and interviews conducted during a field trip to the Tibetan regions of Amdo and Kham in the Qinghai province of China in the

autumn of 2007. Amdo and Kham compose two of the three traditional Tibetan regions of the Great Tibet, the third being Ü-Tsang, or Central Tibet. Parts of Amdo and Kham were annexed to the PRC in the 20th century and today are mainly divided between the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan. Both Amdo and Kham were the home of many important monasteries and lamas with a major influence on both the politics and religion of the region (see Samuel 1993).

In addition to visits to a number of monasteries, I conducted twenty-six interviews. The randomly selected Tibetan interviewees were laymen, laywomen, monks and nuns between the ages of 19 and 68, and were of different social backgrounds. All the interviewees were asked the same set of questions concerning the place and function of the monastic institution in present-day Tibet. As argued above, monasteries were perhaps the most visible manifestations of the 'pre-modern' Tibetan religion, and the changes in their social role are among the most observable transitions in the Tibetan society. After nearly total destruction of the more than 6,000 monasteries before and during the Cultural Revolution, extensive reconstruction of monasteries is taking place in all the Tibetan regions, and both men and women are joining the monasteries and nunneries. How are we to interpret the enduring significance of the monastic institution in 'modernizing' Tibet?

While many explanations could be offered, the idea of counter-trends of secularization provided by Steve Bruce (2002) seems to be illuminating here. Bruce's theory is intended for analysing trends in the modern West, but it seems to have some value in understanding the enduring significance of religion in 'modernizing' Tibetan societies. Bruce argues that religion diminishes in social significance, becomes increasingly privatized, and loses personal salience except when it is used in the work of 'cultural defence' or 'cultural transition.' Firstly, religion remains a powerful social force when it is involved in ethnic and national group identity and when it provides resources for the defence of a national, local or status-group culture. Thus wherever culture, identity, and sense of worth are challenged by either an alien religion or secularism, and that source is negatively valued, secularization will be inhibited. Secondly, religion retains its social significance when social identity is threatened in the course of major cultural transitions or in times of rapid social change. In the process of cultural transition religion may provide resources for negotiating the transitions or asserting a new claim to a sense of worth (Bruce 2002:30–34).

Religion appears to be involved in cultural defence in Tibet. The two following excerpts reveal how religion is linked to Tibetan ethnic identity. The first excerpt is from an interview with a 42-year-old male painter from Kham:

> Q: *Why are there so many monasteries in Tibet?*
> A: *Under the 7th century king, Tibet was a very 'rough' place. The king thought that this problem had to be solved and invited two teachers [from India] to Tibet. Because there were no roads, accessibility was a problem and many monasteries had to be built. A monastery can change our minds. So after the monasteries had been built, people changed. For example, if Western people see a dying dog on the road they go away. But Tibetan people pray for the dog; they chant mantras. That is the reason for monasteries.*

The story refers to the well-known legend describing how Tibet became a Buddhist country. According to the legend, an Indian-born teacher, Padmasambhava, tamed the local gods and spirits of Tibet and bound them to the service of Buddhist teachings during the reign of the second Great religious king, Trisong Detsen, in the 8th century. In the Tibetan conception, this act enabled both Buddhism and 'civilized' life to be established within Tibet (Samuel 1993: 203, 220).

In addition to signifying the beginning of Tibetan 'civilization', Buddhism is seen to separate the Tibetans from both the Chinese and the Westerners. In fact, scholars of Tibetan nationalism have argued that according to Tibetans, it was Buddhism that traditionally separated them from non-Tibetans. 'Tibet' thus referred to a certain territorial entity that was united by the Buddhist religion, while the idea of Tibet as a nation was a later development (see Kolås 1996; Samuel 1993; Smith 1994). The founding of the first Tibetan monastery is particularly seen as signifying the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet – and the beginning of Tibetan 'civilized' culture. This is how a 32-year-old male teacher from Amdo describes the importance of the monastic life in Tibet:

> Q: *What are the benefits of the monastic life?*
> A: *Many religious practices have been destroyed and opportunities to study Tibetan are few. Tibetan traditional culture is in the monastery. It is the resource of Tibetan culture and life. That's why many monasteries were destroyed; they are [=they have become] central places to spread Chinese culture. The Tibetan monastery has thousands of years of history and knowledge. It is a resource of our culture. In the monastic life, religious practices, such as positive deeds, can be incorporated into daily life.*

By the beginning of the 20th century, Buddhism and the monastic institution had become inseparable from the idea of the prosperity of the Tibetan nation and culture (Samuel 1993).

Besides their spiritual and ritual function, monasteries provided basic education for (mostly) young boys and maintained a Tibetan Buddhist scholastic tradition, the pride of Tibetans (see Dreyfus 2003). Interestingly, the idea of the monastic institution as a symbol of Tibetan culture and civilization is still held in the 21st century. The monastic institution provides resources for maintaining and promoting Tibetan ethnic identity and culture, as a twenty-year-old male student from Amdo says:

> *Monks can help Tibetan culture, they can 'keep' it. They know the language. In big monasteries monks study Tibetan. They can preserve Tibetan culture. Some monks want to help Tibetans. Monks are important. We respect them and need them.*

It also provides resources for the defence of a national culture. A layman, 62, from Kham says: *The purpose of the monastery is to spread Tibetan culture and to save Tibetan culture.*

It is conceivable that the outright oppression of religion by the Chinese was counter-productive and served only to strengthen Buddhism as a symbol for Tibetan ethnicity (see Smith 1994). As the monastic institution has lost its previous political power in the society, it has become an important symbol and locus of the Tibetan ethnic and nationalist struggle.

Bruce (2002) argues that in addition to its role as a cultural defender, religion may provide resources for negotiating major cultural transitions or asserting a new claim to a sense of worth when social identity is threatened by rapid social changes. Whereas the secular ideology of Chinese Communism has not replaced religion, some of its ideas have been adopted by the Tibetans interviewed. This is how a former trader, a 68-year-old man from Kham, describes the similarities and differences between Chinese Communism and Buddhism:

> *In Tibet, we consider Tibetan monastics as very important for our nation. Why is it? It is because we are the followers of Buddhism, which came from Siddhartha. That's why in Tibet we have lots of monasteries. And Buddhism has a very important relationship with science and also with Chinese law. In terms of Chinese law, for example, the Chinese have this theory; they say 'serve the community.' And in Buddhism the main practice is also to serve the community, goodness for other people. So when we compare these two, they have differences in terms of range. Buddhism is bigger. When we say 'serve other people' it includes all six realms of sentient beings. But according to the Chinese policy, when they say 'serve the community' it only includes the Chinese themselves, the people, only human beings. They are related but there are also big differences. (....) Once you decide to be a monk then you are really committed to dharma [Buddhism]. You are also saying that 'I'm a follower of Siddhartha, Sakyamuni [Buddha]. I will serve the community, the goodness of the*

community.' Monastics have these two motivations. One is to help themselves first, and then help others, bring them happiness.

The idea of religion in the 'service of a community' is also brought up in other interviews. For example, a 33-year-old monk from Amdo describes benefits gained from the monastic life in this way:

> *First, if a person is at peace, his heart is at peace. There is no longing or desire in monastic life. Second, the idea is to practice for the community. So happiness for yourself and happiness for others, that's the main benefit.*

Buddhist monastic life is seen to be founded on mainly two different and often contradictory ideologies. Some argue that the idea behind the monastic life is an individualistic effort the goal of which is personal liberation (e.g. Ortner 1978; Goldstein and Tsarong 1985). By contrast, others have seen monasteries mainly as a field of merit for the laity and have emphasized the reciprocal relationship between the monastics and the laity (e.g. Mills 2000; Gutschow 2004; Dreyfus 2003). It can be argued that Tibetan monastic life is founded mainly on the ideals of compassion and the *bodhisattva*[4]. Thus, according to the ideal of compassion, monastics as bodhisattvas practice for the benefit of others and serve as a field of merit for the laity.

New ideologies and ideas may be negotiated to fit old ones in order to avoid an ideological conflict between the old and new ideologies. Thus, the interviews suggest that the Communist ideology of the communal good is seen as compatible with the Buddhist ideal of a compassionate bodhisattva who ceaselessly works for the benefit of others. Interestingly, promoting the monastic life is justified by the idea of the communal good of the monastic life. A 25-year-old laywoman from Kham says:

> *Monastic life benefits the community. After you die if you know about Buddhism you don't need to go to hell. As monastic life develops, it also supports the Tibetan tradition, language and education…. In the old days monastery buildings were old. The monasteries now are new and fancy. In the old days there were few monks but now there are more and Buddhism has also developed. For example, in the old days, there were no nuns in my village but now there are a lot of nuns, monks and lamas…. In to my opinion when monastic life develops it also benefits the community.*

It is apparent that whereas the 'modernizing reforms' by China have in many ways been disastrous for the traditional functions of the Tibetan monasteries, the higher living standards resulting from the reforms has made the revitalization of monastic life possible. Higher living

standards and promotion of monastic life for the communal good is also brought up in the following two excerpts. The first is a discussion with a 42-year-old laywoman from Kham:

> Q: *Do you think monastic life has changed somehow?*
> A: *The monastic life has grown and developed, so it's getting better in our place in Kham. It's getting better.*
> ….
> Q: *What are the benefits of monastic life?*
> A: *If the monastery is economically developed it is helpful for the community as well.*
> Q: *Why is that?*
> A: *It depends on economics. If you have support, financial support, then many things will be done. Then you can make monasteries bigger. The number of monasteries can be increased.*

Another layman, 68 years old from Kham sees the number of monasteries increasing through economic development:

> Q: *Do you think monastic life has changed somehow?*
> A: *It's a big change and the present monastery is better than in the past.*
> Q: *How is it better?*
> A: *Because the government, the Chinese, made normal peoples' living conditions better. So, present monasteries are really developing and progressing. It doesn't matter whether it is outside people or inside people; they can both support the construction of the monasteries, to increase the number of the monasteries. So at present, the monasteries are really developing and progressing.*

Not everybody sees the 'progress' of the monasteries in such a positive way. A 36-year-old female university teacher from Amdo considers tourism the main reason for building new monasteries:

> *But you know tourism is booming. The government needs more money. So they also give some money for construction, to build new…. Then many tourists come and take pictures of us. But inside the monastery the education is really very, how to say, serious; how to preserve tradition, the culture. Before, in traditional society, the monasteries were the centre, the heart of our area. There is a high level of knowledge…. From outside it's very beautiful… [but] the monks and the nuns, they cannot focus on their practices and studies. So it's really a problem for the future.*

The interviews suggest that the Tibetan monastic institution has maintained its significance for the Tibetans interviewed because it is used on behalf of 'cultural defence' and 'cultural transition.' First, the monasteries play a central role in preserving Tibetan ethnic culture and identity and in resisting the changes brought by modernization. Second, the traditional ideologies behind the monastic institution are negotiated to fit the new secular ideologies to ease major cultural and social transitions that threaten the traditional worldview. More precisely, monastics are seen as compassionate bodhisattvas that serve the community – and

meanwhile preserve and cultivate the Tibetan culture and nation. Is the secularization thesis applicable to the differentiating Tibetan society?

Applicability of the Secularization Thesis to Tibet

It was suggested above that 'secularization' is taking place in Tibet at the institutional level in that Tibetan societies are becoming increasingly differentiated. Thus, the institutional spheres of the society have become separated from each other, each institution performing specialized functions. In the process, religion seems to have lost its importance in public life and is increasingly being relocated to the private sphere of society. The declining importance of religion in the lives of Tibetans is, however, more difficult to verify. The interviews conducted among the Tibetans in the Qinghai province of China suggest that despite – or because of – the major social transitions and institutional secularization, traditional religion is still influential at the individual level. How should the discrepancy between institutional secularization and the enduring significance of religion at the local level be explained?

An analytical separation of different secularizations by José Casanova (1994) proves to be useful here. According to Casanova (1994), a single theory of secularization is actually made up of three different propositions: secularization as differentiation; secularization as religious decline; and secularization as privatization. Casanova claims that the main fallacy in the theory is the confusion of the historical process of secularization proper with the alleged and anticipated consequences which the process has upon religion. Thus the differentiation thesis has been linked with two sub-theses: the decline-of-religion thesis, postulating that the process of secularization brings in its wake the decline and eventual extinction of religion; and the privatization thesis, proposing that the process of secularization brings privatization and the marginalization of religion. Casanova suggests the analytical separation of the three theses so that we can fully make sense of the complexity of modern reality (Casanova 1994:7, 19–20, 212, 215). While secularization as differentiation is to some extent taking place in Tibet, the other two theses, secularization as religious decline and secularization as privatization, are not necessarily valid in the Tibetan context.

In understanding the enduring significance of religion at the individual and communal level in the 'modernizing' Tibetan society, the counter-trends of secularization as presented by Bruce seem convincing. The implication is that traditional religion provides resources for the defence of a Tibetan national and local culture under extensive social changes, as well as resources for negotiating the changes meaningfully. First, the monastic institution, which traditionally marked the superiority of Tibetan culture, has become the source of Tibetan ethnic identity and value, and the symbol of the Tibetan nationalist struggle (see Smith 1994, 1996; Samuel 1993). Second, when religion is not used openly in cultural defence efforts, it is negotiated to fit the changing realities. The Buddhist bodhisattva ideal has acquired new dimensions under Communist rule and, 'community service' has become one of the most important ideals of religion and tasks of the monasteries.

In fact, the nature and certain flexibility of the Tibetan religion seem to be the key to its enduring significance. The Tibetan religion has hardly ever been separate from political and societal life, so adopting it to the nationalist struggle is not surprising. It can also be argued that the aspects of 'modernization', such as individualism, rationality or pluralism, do not erode religious beliefs because they are existing features of Tibetan Buddhism. According to Tibetans, the Buddha taught different ways to enlightenment, and that salvation can thus be attained by meditation in solitude, by logical reasoning in monastic life, as well as by cultivation of meritorious deeds in lay life.

The confusion of institutional secularization with the anticipated consequences that the process has on religion largely appears to be behind the dispute between the Tibetans and the Chinese. While China anticipates that modernization and economic development will make religious practices vestigial and irrelevant in the lives of Tibetans, economic development and improving living standards have not won over the hearts of Tibetans and have certainly not eroded the significance of religion (see Schwartz 1994:228; Lioxing 2008:29).

Concluding Remarks

In Tibet, 'modernity' was postponed until the mid-twentieth-century Chinese occupation and was largely imposed from outside. 'Modernizing' efforts have considerably changed Tibetan

traditional ways of life and the place of Tibetan religion in the Tibetan society. While secularization as institutional differentiation has occurred in Tibet, secularization as religious decline or privatization is more difficult to demonstrate. It became evident that the Tibetans interviewed in the Qinghai province of China used religion to defend their ethnic and traditional culture and also negotiated the social transitions to fit their traditional religious worldview. While these findings cannot be considered as the whole reality of the Tibetan society, they suggest that the relationship between modernization and secularization is not definitive or straightforward.

For understanding the co-existence of institutional secularization and the enduring importance of religion at the individual level, an analytical separation of the different 'secularizations' is important. Thus, institutional secularization does not necessarily involve the decline or the privatization of religion, and the decline in individual religiousness or privatization of religion does not necessarily mean that religious institutions lose their place at the core of society. In Tibet, religion seems to have remained important because of at least two reasons: First, the Tibetan Buddhist religion and Tibetan ethnic identity are intertwined, and religion is a tool in the Tibetan national struggle. Second, the plausibility of Tibetan Buddhism as an ideological system is not necessarily eroded by social changes, such as modernization.

To conclude, it can be argued that the usability of the secularization thesis in understanding the changing place of religion in a modernizing society requires taking into consideration at least the following aspects. First, 'secularization' should be defined and the various propositions of the secularization thesis should be analytically separated. Second, 'modernization' and its implications need to be studied locally in the specific context. Third, understanding 'religion' as an ideological system and as a social force is necessary. Only when these aspects are taken into account can global processes such as 'modernization' and its various and often locally specific implications be understood.

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Notes

1) Mitra Härkönen (mitra.harkonen@helsinki.fi) is a social and cultural anthropologist and a doctoral student at the Department of Comparative Religion at the University of Helsinki. Her special interests lay in questions concerning religion and gender in the Tibetan region of Kham in China.

2) I will not discuss the relationship between modernization and religion among exile Tibetans.

3) The actual impact of 'modernization' in the Tibetan areas is a subject of much debate. According to critics, the modernization projects have had little influence on the life of the majority of rural Tibetans, the Chinese themselves often being the greatest beneficiaries of the projects. Some also argue that the modernization efforts would not have been undertaken to the degree they have were it not for the Tibet question, that is, the unsolved political status of Tibet in relation to the PRC (see Hairong 2000; Gyamtso 2008; Smith 1994).

4) An enlightened being who, out of compassion, forgoes nirvana in order to save others.

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