

Description of the study carried out

Lama Jesus?

Conversion as seen by Tibetans who have become Christians (working title).

a) Research Topic

Lama and Jesus are two words from two different cultures that, based on their different religious orientation, hardly fit together. Thus, the Dalai Lama is against Tibetans adopting Christianity. From his point of view, they are irreversibly Tibetan Buddhists. This makes obvious, that the nine Tibetans who claim to be Christians, swim against the tide of their religious and cultural tradition.

Claiming to be a Christian alone means for the most of the nine interviewees a break from friends, acquaintances and relatives. This fact alone speaks against a socially motivated conversion. The loss of social contacts meant converts are not spared emotional difficulties. Thus, it can be said that psychological motives for converts from Buddhism to Christianity are of lesser importance. The most important reason for conversion for the most of them was on a religious level. What this encompasses is not only a result, but the topic of this work.

The study topic draws from the interreligious conversion of nine former Tibetan Buddhists to Christianity. The following questions are examined:

- a) What light do the stories of the Tibetans converted to Christianity shed onto the topic of conversion?
- b) Which factors contributed to the Tibetans turning away from Buddhism, their traditional religion, in order to embrace Christianity?

The first part deals predominantly with the conversion to Christianity. Important questions are, for example: Is conversion to be assessed as a process or as a singular occurrence? Or: What light do the results shed on the current concepts on the topic of conversion? The second part deals primarily with the varying influences that urged Tibetan Buddhists to convert. But also with factors that confirmed their conversion. Important questions are, for example: Are they social, psychological or transcendental factors, which essentially contributed to conversion? Or: What are the differences, according to the Tibetans, between the two religions?

These questions are posed within the scope of the comparative religious studies. They relate to a comparison of religions between the (Tibetan) Buddhism and Christianity. Even though it focusses on the conversion from Buddhism to Christianity, the author allows various examples to flow into this work, which assume that a conversion to the other direction could be described, in some areas, with similar internal processes.

While the author, as psychologist, emphasizes the psychological factors, he soon realizes that these factors take up little space in the Tibetans' conversion stories. The social structure and integration into the religious tradition play a much larger role in Tibetan culture than in the individualistically conditioned and secular West. Therefore, the author had to modify his own perspective.

There are three main disciplines in conversion research. Initially, it was only a theological topic. Later, psychology and sociology also took up the issue. In theological conversion research, the Conversion of St. Paul is denoted as the fundamental paradigm. In psychological conversion research, one speaks of the Jamesian Paradigm, while in sociological conversion research, the work of Lofland und Stark is considered significant. Paul, James and Lofland & Stark could be labelled as trend, or better, as paradigm setters. It soon became apparent that a commitment to one of these disciplines would constitute too narrow limitations.

Research on the topic of conversion in the past years has been primarily from the sociological perspective. Hereby, the focus is on internal worldly and human factors, such as conflicting ideals, the search for alternative offers of redemption, turning-point descriptions, world view adaptations and active membership in a new religious fellowship. Transcendental, religious factors are either barely recognized or transcendence is viewed as an inner-worldly phenomenon. By marginalizing or redefining transcendence, the stories presented here would be inadequately interpretable, as Tibetan Buddhism encompasses transcendental phenomena. Individual converts, after their conversion, spoke freely of a transcendent World of God.

The research method should also be aligned so that the stories of each Tibetan contributes to the topic of conversion in general and to the topic of interreligious conversion from Tibetan Buddhism to Christianity in specific. These conversion narratives may articulate aspects of conversion which have been as yet underexposed or even unheard of.

b) Approach (Methodology)

In the author's opinion, the Grounded Theory methodology is most appropriate to this topic. This meta-theory is considered a particular research style and is applied here to research religious realities. This methodology founded on scientific theory is not directed towards the verification or falsification of existing theories. The accent of its approach lies, in the initial instance, in generating and developing substantial (related to the substance of the research) theories which, so to speak, should be discovered from the research data. These are theories with minimal impact. At the beginning of research, there is no theory, only the research area itself exists. This has the advantage of a more unbiased approach during the talks.

In the sense of Grounded Theory, a theory is not a solid structure, but a kind of fluid that is constantly in motion. Therefore, it should not so much be verified or falsified, rather continuously modified. This is generally the case in religion research, and advantageous to the question regarding a definition of conversion, as this deals with descriptions of religions and conversion which consist of subjective experiences and reports.

In a later stage of the study, after minor, substantial theories have been formulated, there will be a comparison with larger, formally existing theories on the topic of conversion. When these existing theories may also be understood as a fluid, an eventual modification of these theories can contribute to the general understanding of conversion.

The method of data compilation is carrying out narrative interviews. This does not mean checking off a catalog of questions, but rather holding interviews in which only one major question is asked. The question, or better, the request is: Tell your conversion story. This request can be elucidated. Possible ensuing interposed questions serve, or encourage, to tell as yet undisclosed aspects of the story.

As already mentioned, the study material consists of nine stories told by Tibetans who were Buddhists and claim to have become Christians. All of them express that 'God' came into their lives as something absolutely new and unknown, and thereby began to play a major role. All of them articulated contact with, for them, a new or essentially different transcendent world.

Of the nine interviewees, only one person spoke English directly. Seven of them spoke Tibetan or Chinese. All of them were translated into English by translators.

The individual research data consist of contextual sensible sentences. The transcribed English translations of the interviewees' oral expressions, were divided into units of meaning and numbered. Thus, they were prepared for the allocation into a system of seven major categories and three subcategories.

The three subcategories are *Sociological*, *Psychological* and *Religious*. Statements regarding the (social) environment are assigned to *Sociological*. Statements regarding one's own emotions, thoughts and actions are assigned to *Psychological*. And by *Religious*, are all statements concerning the practices, the statements or the impacts of both religions. On the one hand, there were direct statements on the grounds for conversion that were relatively easy to allocate into one of the subcategories. On the other hand, there were also hidden, indirect motives in the data which first became apparent after a comprehensive evaluation.

The seven main categories are *Situation*, *Friction*, *Communion*, *Conversion*, *Confession*, *Confrontation*, *Integration*. They arose in the course in the evaluation process. It soon became clear that a classic conversion narrative divided into three parts (before, the event and after) was insufficient. Even five categories allowed too little space for the more circular narrative style of the Tibetans. The seven categories render an account of a linear, story-like narrative style as well a circular one. The last four categories depict the time as of conversion. Herein it becomes clear that conversion can also be viewed as a process of falling and getting up, as an interaction between judging and experiencing or between passive self-surrender and active reflection.

c) Innovation (originality of topic and innovative approach)

Most recently, the conversion between Islam and Christianity has been researched more than the conversion to all possible sects or new religious movements. In contrast, much less research addresses the interreligious conversion between Buddhism and Christianity; and even less with the conversions of Tibetans, who, due to their nationality are Buddhists, to Christianity.

The author's personal interest in the topic of conversion came about as he was once a Tibetan Buddhist himself, and later became a Christian. This fact could be detrimental on the one hand, and on the other, it turned out to be beneficial. The converts felt better understood, gained confidence and were prepared to reveal more. In all interviews, there was also a personal relationship between the interviewees and the interpreters. Without trust, most likely hardly any worthwhile statements would have come from the Tibetans, nor noteworthy results of the research.

Tibetan Lamaism is full of occult practices. Therefore, transcendence is an integrated phenomenon in the Tibetan society. Thus, with converts, the question arises to which extent occult powers played a role in the conversion occurrence or in the process of conversion. The latter can be seen, for example, when converts must resist temptations by no longer bowing before the deities or participating in old rituals, which would lead to backsliding from Christianity and reverting to the old religion.

Since all interviewees encountered strong resistance from their own relatives, and the fellowship of believers was still quite weak, it must be pointed out again that the conversion can be based far less on social motives than in Western countries.

If there really was a psychological motive for a conversion to Christianity, this would be, in the course of time, challenged. Not only the motive, but the conversion itself would often be cause for strong doubt. Hence, the thought developed to consider difficulties, fears and doubts as elements of the conversion process.

In contrast to other ideas of conversion, not only event attributes, but also process attributes of the conversion were asserted. This assertion emerged immediately by the first evaluation of data and soon became the basis for new discoveries on the meaning and character of conversion.

Also interesting was the fact that this is a first generation of Christians. None of the interviewees had ever heard of Christianity before. As far as they had the possibility to meet with other Tibetan Christians, they became the first fellowship of Tibetan Christians ever. Help from foreign Christians was only through isolated contacts. Since the Chinese authorities prohibit group contact with Western Christians, the converted Tibetans must cope with creating their community as a church without foreign help.

d) Plan of work

During a trip to Tibet in 2009, the first contact to Western persons, living in China and speaking Chinese and Tibetan, was made. Spontaneously, an opportunity arose for a longer interview with a former Tibetan Lama, who related how he became a Christian. An interview of the same year was already available on video. This material aroused the author's interest. The idea came into being to study the conversion of Tibetans to Christianity more deeply.

While looking for a professor in the Netherlands, the author encountered Paul van der Velde. He supported the theme and a rough plan was agreed upon. In 2012, during a second trip to China, nine interviews were carried out.

The recorded interviews were transcribed, divided into individual units of meaning and numbered. In the following process of detours and research a schema of seven main categories and three sub-categories emerged. The individual, numbered data was arranged within this schema. From this, the first results materialized, but also additional questions. These were written down in the first three chapters. Twice a year an exchange with Professor van der Velde takes place.

On the advice of the Professor, an additional trip was taken in 2015 and seven of the nine persons interviewed could be interviewed again. Hereby, the question was whether and how their Christian faith has developed further. The results of the last interviews were summarized in the fifth chapter.