

Jesus on the Roof of the World

A Survey about the Phenomenon of Conversion
of Individual Tibetans to Christianity

Martin Kamphuis



Summary

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A study on the phenomenon of conversion of individual Tibetans to Christianity

This study deals with the rare phenomenon of interreligious conversion of Tibetans, who were Buddhists because of their ethnicity, to Christianity. Contrary to the generally prevailing popular opinion and that of the Dalai Lama, namely that Tibetans are and remain Buddhists, these few individuals dared to swim against the current of their religious and cultural tradition. For them it meant a break with friends, acquaintances and relatives, in short, with their social environment.

The author's personal interest in this subject originates from the fact that he himself was a Tibetan Buddhist and later became a Christian. This fact might at first glance be considered disadvantageous, but it turned out to be positive - despite its challenge in terms of maintaining objectivity - because it enhanced both the confidence of the interviewees in the author and contributed to mutual understanding. To the converted Tibetans, confidence in the author was very important because in Tibet, which is under Chinese rule, Christians are persecuted.

Specifically, this study is about nine people who, at least at the first meeting, stated that they were no longer Buddhists but Christians. The interviews dealt with the questions of how their confessions came about and what conversion meant from their points of view. The fascinating thing about this rare phenomenon is that Tibetans, because they are all principally Buddhists, lack any knowledge and experience of Christianity and are therefore completely unencumbered by assumptions about the Christian faith. It is also astonishing to observe how they assert their Christian faith within a hostile political environment and have to learn to live out their Christianity and form a Tibetan church without much external help and support.

The introduction describes the research objective. First, a conceptual framework was developed to capture the statements of the nine converts. Second, a description of conversion based on these conversion stories was researched using and defining appropriate terminology. Thirdly, less exposed aspects of conversion were highlighted, such as the process character of conversion, the importance of the effect of a spirit behind religious experiences, and the gestalt-character of conversion that links the event with the final religious goal.

The first chapter explains the cause, the methodological procedure and the concrete questions of this study. The idea for this dissertation began with an unplanned, spontaneous encounter with an ex-Lama during a trip to China in 2009. The first informational material (data) was gathered in this encounter. Three years later, this material was expanded by additional interviews with two ex-monks

and six female Tibetans through narrative interviews. On a third trip to China in 2015, further interviews were conducted with the aforementioned persons about the development of their Christianity.

The transcribed stories from 2012, translated directly into English by translators, were divided into sections, numbered and assigned to a newly developed scheme of phases and categories. In order to examine the question of why and how the conversions took place, the stories were primarily considered as qualitative case studies (QF). Various ideas from the Grounded Theory Approach (GTA) as well as the method of Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) helped to answer the question of what conversion is from the perspective of the interviewees.

This research project is an exploratory study. It is not in the first instance about a finished definition of conversion among Tibetans, but rather a conceptual framework that can provide a helpful basis for possible further research on interreligious conversion. The reality of conversion is seen as complex and its general description as incomplete. The statements of the interviewees refer to visible phenomena in the social sphere, and to invisible phenomena in the psychic and spiritual-transcendental sphere, but for them, they are real.

In the iterative process of this study, further research was conducted on the basis of the following three important interim results: a) conversion is event and process, b) the most important factors are of a spiritual nature, and c) conversion design is part of the conversion process. In each case, the two main questions were: 1) how did the conversion take place, and what factors contributed to turning away from the traditional religion in order to turn to the Christian faith? 2) what is conversion or what description of interreligious conversion can be found in the stories of the Tibetans interviewed?

After the author explains his personal interest in the topic in the second chapter, the three main disciplines dealing with conversion research are briefly presented: theology, psychology and sociology. It became clear that a commitment to one of these disciplines would not adequately represent the descriptions of the stories of the converts. The stories revealed inner-worldly (social), inner-human (psychological) and trans-worldly (spiritual-transcendental) aspects. With a marginalization or reinterpretation of transcendent aspects the stories would be poorly represented.

The analyses of the data made clear that the action of an external agency contributed to the conversion. In order to be able to describe this, the concept of a *religious communicative field* was introduced. This field impacted the converts through a *religious interpretation system* (e.g. Bible or Christian), a religious experience (e.g. as personal feeling) and something transcendent (called God/Jesus by the converts). Just like the Christian *communicative field*, the Buddhist *communicative field* has an effect on persons in the course of a *conversion process*. In order to visualize the social, psychological and spiritual aspects of the *communicative fields*, they were described as stages that shaped the respective persons and through which they experienced their conversions. These are the stage of the world, the stage of the soul, the stage of Christianity and the stage of Buddhism. The image of the stages underlines the most fundamental changes of the Tibetans during the transition from Buddhism to Christianity in the spiritual realm.

The third chapter focuses on the way in which the converts reflect. The interreligious conversion examined here revealed that their reflection takes place in the dynamic confrontation of three entities: between a) a reflective person, b) the *communicative field* of Buddhism and c) the *communicative field* of Christianity. It became clear that the *conversion process* consists of an

interaction between the reflective activity of the person and the communicative activity of the *religious fields*. The communication of both *religious fields* is partly active and partly passive. The person also reacts to it partly passively and partly actively.

In order to grasp the breadth of a *conversion process*, the author decided to divide it into seven phases: I. Situation, II. Friction, III. Communion, IV. Conversion, V. Confession, VI. Confrontation, VII. Integration. The phases contain different forms of reflection. The first three phases work towards the actual conversion and the last three phases represent their effect in a process of falling and rising. Phases and reflective activities are not only to be considered linear, but can also be repeated several times in a circular process related to different topics.

Phase I describes a passive reflection on their original situation as prescribed by tradition. If the interviewees had not been questioned on multiple occasions, they would hardly have said anything about it. Phase II was about changed circumstances, e.g. leaving home. The ex-Lama Levi, in particular, not only questioned his tradition in an active, reflective way, but also came into conflict (friction) with it. Phase III describes how, through the presentation of the new (Christian) religion, interaction (communion) with it became possible, thus initiating some questioning of the (Buddhist) tradition. Because the questioning happened as a reaction to the active presentation of the new religion, this reflection was comparatively passive. More active reflection was only resumed in phase IV, in which the decision for conversion was brought into focus. Ester's report, in particular, showed how she pursued this so-called decisive reflection both passively and actively; otherwise, surprisingly little was reported about the events of the actual conversion.

In our western countries, conversion narratives stress the time before conversion. But the reports recorded here contain considerably more statements about the time after the conversion experience. In terms of comparative reflection, the persons related the most in Phase V. They actively compared Buddhism and Christianity with each other and mostly idealized the latter. Their descriptions often had denominational character. The conflicts described in phase VI, which followed a clear confessional character in relation to the social environment, led with Sara, for example, at times to backslide. For Simon and Lea, the influence of the old Buddhist tradition returned strongly. During this phase, they behaved passively as far as reflection took place, as it felt like it was forced on them. Phase VII describes the integration of the conflict of phase VI. The conflict prompted integrating reflection in which the crisis was seen as a part of the *conversion process*.

Chapter Four contains the evaluation of the 2012 interviews by assigning the data to the system of the seven phases, three categories, and three sub-categories mentioned in Chapter 3. The purpose of assigning each of the narratives to this system was to compare the individual *conversion narratives*. First of all, two direct motives for conversion were listed in each case. These were discerned on the basis of direct inquiries or the immediate context of the event of conversion. Then, indirect motives were searched for in the complete set of data. All listed motives were divided into social, psychological and spiritual aspects. The spiritual aspects were further subdivided into the area of a *spiritual-doctrinal* statement and that of a *spiritual-supersensory* effect.

The nine interviewees were divided into three groups. Four stories were examined in greater depth from a social point of view, since an above-average number of statements were assigned to this area. In the same way, three of the stories were examined under the psychological aspect. In order to also assign three stories to the spiritual aspect, Levi's story was examined under the psychological as well as under the spiritual aspect.

The result in the social field is that, on the one hand, a socially motivated conversion like that of Rahel and Tamar had to be strengthened by spiritual aspects. On the other hand, a new social environment that confirms conversion was an important support to the converts in all interviews, as was the struggle with the old social environment that rejects conversion. In the psychological field, personal needs, a changed attitude, the relationship to the spiritual, a voluntary decision, a felt religious vacuum, a psychological need, and a completed deconversion or even an exit were essential *conversion motives*. The attainment of a spiritual balance, in which a changed attitude brought the person into a correct relationship with the spiritual and with his soul, was of central importance. Sara's story of liberation from her backsliding showed how important spiritual motives were in this recovery process.

Spiritual backgrounds were often only explained when specifically requested. All mentioned an action or communication of God. Christianity's impact on life, as the main motive for Simon and Lea, did not prove to be a viable option. On the other hand, Levi related that Christianity's impact on life proved effective, as it triggered in him the urge to question his tradition and to accept Christianity. Levi did not connect his experiences as an ex-Lama with transcendental powers. Simon, on the other hand, clearly spoke of his connection with tantric entities, which he had as an ex-monk and which he still regarded as positive after his conversion. Sara, however, described earlier and later Buddhist influences as satanic because of her knowledge of the teachings of the Christian *interpretation system*. By ascribing to these teachings, she succeeded in overcoming personal temptations. Her development seemed to be influenced by doctrinal-based spiritual knowledge and to be comparatively good and purposeful.

Concrete factors leading to conversion in the nine stories were varied. In the social field, factors included a needy family situation, the help of Christians in case of illness, and a believing spouse. In the psychological field, a personal crisis, longing and searching for meaning, and psychological needs were all factors. In the spiritual field, factors such as divine healing, speaking of the Bible as the Word of God, a spiritual search for truth, and an encounter between the powers of Buddhism and those of Christianity.

The effects of conversion on the interviewees on a social level were, for example, membership in the faith community, the denomination of faith and social welfare activity. The effects on a psychological level were, for example, a gradual inner change, a desire for spirituality, the recognition of spiritual guidance, a fruitful cognitive activity, consistent actions, dealing with the system of interpretation and fruitful activity appropriate to the faith. The effects on the spiritual level were, for example, the Holy Spirit as teacher, a grasp of spiritual truths, supernatural guidance, theological justifications, and the belief in divine help.

Factors that contributed to backsliding in the social sphere were, for example, resistance and demands of the social environment, distressing circumstances, and worldly temptations. Factors in the psychological sphere were, for example, a timidity of religious teachings, an ambiguous attitude, discontinuity, lack of distinction and ignorance of the new religion. Factors in the spiritual sphere consisted of participation in rituals from the old tradition, claims from the old religion, incomplete deconversion and ignorance of the new system of interpretation regarding transcendence.

The fifth chapter describes the analysis of the interviews of 2015. By analyzing the personal stories from 2009 and 2012, an unexpected familiarity appeared in the 2015 round of interviews. The 2015 interviews, therefore, brought a very valuable personal deepening of the investigation. These

interviews did not provide more in-depth information or details about the instance of conversion, rather, they were informative regarding the further course of the conversion.

In order to be able to grasp the results, the concepts of *gestalt* and *development* of a conversion were introduced. The conversion gestalt includes both a visible outer appearance through change of the person, social action and reference to the new system of interpretation. The gestalt likewise includes an invisible, inner appearance which lies in a growing relationship to transcendence (for the interviewees: *God*). The development of a conversion includes the intermittent development of the relationship to the spiritual, as well as to the social and psychic, which are shaped by this. The goal of conversion is an ultimately complete, visible and invisible form. Research highlighted influences which inhibited or stimulated the growth of the gestalt of conversion, as well as factors which were either goal-directed or goal-absorbing.

Social influences that hindered growth included: an environment strongly influenced by old religious ideas, oppressive circumstances caused by the rejection of relatives, a class differences in the church and the deficient identity of the Tibetan church. Examples of psychological influences that hindered growth include a crisis of attitude, backsliding, superficial faith, a lack of identity, and ignoring or negating problems of all kinds. In addition, a superficial approach to religion, a frivolous conversion based on emotion, and an insufficient rejection of the old religion also were hindrances. Influences from the spiritual realm that hindered growth include heresy, legalism, lack of knowledge about the goals and differences between the religions, and, with regard to the new system of interpretation, negative transcendental effects and challenges.

Growth-stimulating factors from the social sector included: the confirmation or help of a supportive social environment and the imparting of knowledge about the new *religious communicative field* by advanced members of the religious community or by spiritual parents. Factors from the psychological field included a change of attitude, a willing acceptance of knowledge of the new *interpretation system*, genuine conversion with repentant insight into wrong ways and obedient implementation of good principles. Among the factors from the spiritual sphere were a calling to serve others, a knowledge of the new system of interpretation regarding challenges from the invisible world, and the activity of prayer. The converts learned that prayer was not about fulfilling wishes, but about surrendering one's own will and having a changed heart.

In order to be able to depict the development of the conversion of the investigated Tibetans schematically, the author finally chose a three-dimensional representation with the three axes social, psychological and spiritual. The social axis describes the progress of the person in space and time. On this axis, conversion begins with a (punctual) event and develops in as a process into a visible presence in the world. Its final goal, however, lies in a transcendent world beyond. The psychic axis describes the personal development of the soul, which begins with a (voluntary) decision and also develops in a process to a new (Christ-centered) personality. Its path to its intended goal, namely, a Christlike, redeemed heavenly personality, is partly visible and partly invisible. The spiritual axis describes the development towards the religious goal, which begins with a change of spiritual stage and unfolds in an invisible spiritual life. Its ultimate goal is the complete entry of the person into the eternity indicated by Christianity. For each of the nine interviewees a place in the picture was sketched out descriptively.

Chapter Six describes the most important results with regard to the three assumptions described: 1) the assessment of conversion as a process; 2) the central importance of spiritual factors in

conversion; and 3) conversion gestalt, considered as part of the actual conversion. It also contains a definition of conversion based on the conversion stories studied. Also included in this chapter are statements from a conversation during a spontaneous encounter in the USA with a man of Tibetan descent converted to Christianity, which underline how difficult it is for Tibetans to hold on to their conversion. This was also evident in the stories of Lea and Simon, who, according to the system mentioned in Chapter 5, found themselves in a vacuum between the progressive unfolding of the Christian person and in the opposite direction, the development of the Buddhist person.

The conversion narratives made it clear that for the interviewees their conversions were not about marginal differences. For this reason, the author pleads for conversion research as an independent research field in the social sciences, and not as a partial aspect of the growing direction of spirituality research.

Although Jesus on “the Roof of the World” is still only perceived by individuals, they illuminate the topic of conversion in a refreshing way. Rare phenomena such as those examined here may encourage us to re-explore the core of (inter-)religious conversion with appropriate terms and in its true meaning.

