

THE CULT OF TĀRĀ: MAGIC AND RITUAL IN TIBET

Stephen Beyer

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973 (Paperback edition, 1978). xxi. 542pp. 45 Illustrations, 16 Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Index. \$11.50

Tibet has for a long time been a country clouded in mystery and wonderment, due primarily to its remoteness and inaccessibility. Since Tibet is a country located high in the plateau region of the Himālaya mountains, very few westerners have been able to brave the harsh environment in order to study its culture. Recently, it has been cut off from the western world by its dominance by The Peoples Republic of China. Thanks to a group of refugees who fled Tibet with the Dalai Lama during the revolt of 1959 and settled at Dalhousie, Himachal Pradesh, India, a bit of Tibetan culture has been brought into closer contact with the western world.

Stephen Beyer has undertaken a study of the traditional rituals as preserved among this group of refugees, who are devoted to the Indo-Tibetan goddess Tārā. Beyer spent some time with this group working with informants and gaining first hand information about the rituals surrounding this cult. He combines this first hand knowledge with a thorough understanding of the traditional Tibetan and, where necessary, Sanskrit sources in order to give as a detailed description of many of the religious practices performed by the cult's devotees.

The work is divided into three chapters of varying length. The first chapter, entitled "Worship", treats ritual "Offerings, Praises and Prayers". It begins with a small section which traces the history and evolution of the cult. The remainder of the chapter, as well as of the book, concerns itself with a description and explanation of the rituals. The second chapter, "Application", deals with ritual practices pertaining to "Protection and Attack". The final chapter, "Acquisition", is devoted to the "Initiation" rituals and "Ritual Service".

The goddess Tārā is generally considered to have originated in India. The introduction into Tibet of a cult surrounding the image of the goddess may have occurred as early as the seventh century A.D. It is however, more probable that the cult was brought into Tibet from India during the "second propagation Buddhism" around the middle of the eleventh century A.D. Beyer explains that there were two 'original' traditions involving the goddess Tārā: A 'green' Tārā, based on a Tantric tradition, and a non-Tantric 'white' Tārā tradition. Initially, only the 'white' Tārā tradition was allowed to flourish in Tibet, since the 'green' Tārā "might have a bad influence upon the morals of the Tibetans" (pp. 11-13). The rituals of this 'white' Tārā are those practised by the cult members and described by Beyer.

While in Tibet Tārā with her pantheon of minor deities assumed Tibetan characteristics which are distinct from those of her Indian counterpart. These are exemplified in the many woodblock prints scattered throughout the book. The smooth and complacent representations of many deities of the Buddhist pantheon in India are replaced by awesome and often fearful representation of gods in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon.

Catholic missionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries described many rituals similar to those found in the Tārā cult and stated that they were

merely based on the rituals contained in the Mass. These statements led many early scholars of Buddhism even to suggest that the rituals of Tibetan Buddhism were borrowed directly from those of the Catholic Church. This attitude has for a long time been dismissed, and a perusal of Beyer's book certainly demonstrates that there is little of any similarity between the rituals of the Catholic Mass and those of Tibetan Buddhism.

The rituals themselves are described with the utmost care and accuracy, often illustrations of hand gestures or *mudrās* are included. Beyer has even inserted quotation from a wide range of "western" poets and writers. One gets the feeling that by using these quotations, he is trying his best to understand these rituals and at the same time to make them intelligible to the reader; yet it is often ill-timed to include them. For instance, there is a quotation from Karl Shapiro's poem "Auto Wreck" used in connection with the explanations of the Tibetan concept of death (p. 367). While reading the accounts of the Tibetan attitudes concerning life and death, the reader is slowly led to an understanding of these phenomena according to the Tibetan tradition. Suddenly, a quotation which is neither from the Tibetan nor from the Sanskrit, but from twentieth century poetry, is encountered. Immediately, one loses contact with Tibetan culture and is jolted into a world which the Tibetans never knew — nor for that matter is it likely that Karl Shapiro knew the Tibetan attitude towards life and death. The technique is clever but annoying.

It is very difficult to assess which ritual or group of rituals is most important to these people. It becomes clear from reading the accounts of the rituals that in fact all of them are of the utmost importance. Likewise, it is evident that these rituals form an integral part of the everyday life of Tārā's devotees.

It is quite refreshing to see a book on the subject of Buddhism which does not try to analyse the subject from the point of view of Philosophy. Philosophy is certainly an important aspect of Buddhism, but it is not nearly the totality of it. Beyer's book is a most significant step in the direction towards bringing these other aspects of Buddhism to light.

The specialist may find some difficulty with the manner in which Beyer has set up his index. He lists important Tibetan words and concepts according to his own English translation rather than according to the original Tibetan word.

The book is, on the whole, an important contribution to the study of Tibetan culture and Buddhism in particular, both for the interested person and the specialist.

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Marcelle Bernstein

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Nuns is an informative treatise about Catholic and Episcopal religious congregations of religious women. It includes first hand information about their religious life in Britain, France and America with briefer references to Germany, Italy, Spain, and Africa. It is based on extensive interviewing, visiting, and reading. Marcelle Bernstein describes herself as having "unlikely qualifications" for her self-appointed task of writing a book that answers the questions an interested non-theologian, non-nun or ex-nun wants to know about life in a convent, a book that cuts through the stereotype of the "strict and stuffy sanctity" of the negative image and the "sweet unworldly" media presentation of the *Sound of Music*. Instead she wanted to find out what nuns are really like. She describes herself as Jewish and "not at all religious", with a genuine skepticism about the possible positive qualities of chastity which she sees as "the single most characteristic quality of nuns".

From this unique perspective she has, I think, succeeded in discovering the personal qualities of women who have decided to become nuns, and has even captured some of the distinguishing characteristics of different religious congregations. After her over five hundred interviews and extensive library survey, she has created a most interesting and valuable account of religious life which derives its distinctive quality from her particular curiosity and worldly perspective. For anyone who is studying nuns in historical context or is interested in knowing them in that context, this book, well written, is a decided contribution. The author makes no attempt to be unbiased. She introduces her point of view through effectively placed phrases, such as, "now that the rigid superstructure of convent life has undergone the massive undermining of the last ten years," (p. 68); or, in speaking of a custom she could not accept: "this devastating ritual" (79); or, "until recently many also seem to have been veritable martinets" (p. 83); and, "the church is the most exclusive male club in the world" (p. 143); "Nuns made themselves hideous by cutting off the bottoms of their habits", (p. 195); "The militant nuns of America are into everything from spending a month in jail to . . ." (p. 221); "The woman who joins the missionary orders is of a special breed. Tough enough to . . ., dedicated enough to . . . it is almost impossible to overstress the heroism of these women" (p. 242-248). Speaking of books about nuns by disenchanted ex-nuns, she says: "but the picture they present is as biased as a divorcee talking about marriage". (301).

This book quotation says much about the style of the book. Of course, what divorcees have to say about marriage is important and revealing, but it is only one aspect of an experience. Bernstein treats a variety of published materials and media presentations about nuns in a perspective that allows the reader space to reflect on new meanings because she is not special pleading. The reader can guess that she is fascinated with the contemplative life as lived by the Benedictines, Poor Clares, Trappists, and Carmelites she has visited, that she admires the unique beauty and practicality of the long robe, cowl or veil, and sandals and cincture of the monastery and finds distasteful the current

modifications in it, that she knows that this life away from the world will continue because it has lasted so long and overcome so many vicissitudes, even while she can express repugnance, disbelief, and even horror at some still retained practices of penance, and some ancient, now cured, corruptions of the life. She admires and affirms those modernizations in the life of missionaries which allow them to work more effectively in remote areas providing for health and literacy where no developer or investor cares to go; she regrets the decline in vocations for providing needed services caring for the elderly, alcoholics, drug addicts and effecting reform, revenue sharing, war protesting, and social reforms that establish better economic and legal systems. She doubts the future of those congregations which set no times for prayer, allow too fashionable dress choice, living away from community, and non-involvement in any specific work connected with their religious orders. Obviously, she has in the course of her study captured a sense of what constitutes the religious life and this she presents effectively in the words of her interviewees.

Whom does she interview? Some remarkable women. People many of us know well. Ethne Kennedy of the National Association of Women Religious in the United States, Mary Ellen Traxler of the National Coalition of American Nuns, Liz Thoman of the Sisters Communication Center, and Lillian Kopp, founder of the Sisters for a Christian Community. She acquaints us with other women who know their congregations well by naming them as she quotes them. Sisters from the Society of the Sacred Heart, Notre Dame of Namur, Maryknoll, Glenmary, Immaculate Heart of Los Angeles, Loretto, Good Shepherd, Medical Missionaries, Mercy, Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, and Benedictines. She lets them tell us about the customs of silence, the order of the day, and the enclosure rules that prevented necessary public activity. She juxtaposes their quotations to confirm at times the reader's naive understanding of religious life and then adds information that puts the stereotype into context more historically and currently accurate than are most popular accounts of convent life, thereby, leading the reader to a new point of view. She uses popular accounts from films and books by direct reference and makes interpretations from her interview material that allow the reader to review and reformulate their ideas.

Her historical account reaches back to the fourth century and is interspersed with current material about entering religious orders, taking vows, participating in the last ten years of renewal activity, remodeling the "habit", leaving the convent and adapting again to the world, recruiting new members, choosing new works, experiencing certainty in the calling, loneliness in community, even bitterness in aging. Whatever she sees that contradicts what she hears she names so that the reader can continue to do what she herself is doing: learning about the life, being fascinated, repelled, being led to admiration, and even to boredom by different aspects of it. But, in the end, the reader retains a sense of a credible life, with a mysterious calling, an amazing potential for service, unwarranted anachronisms, and a demand for commitment that does not allow a lightly considered choice. Marcelle Bernstein does not know what the future holds for the active orders. Secularization is a factor in the decline in vocations but whether that is cyclical or linear she cannot say. Of contemplative life, she feels the future as the past is both certain and precarious. She wants those congregations that provide human services in selfless ways to continue. She admires many of the women she has met but not all. In every case the reader

knows what she saw, heard and interprets. The book is worth reading by people inside and outside the walls. It is of particular interest to those who study religion comparatively.

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