

# Two Catholic Missionaries

## In Tibet



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Miscellaneous Essays

## Two Catholic Missionaries in Tibet

By the 1840's the Imperial Chinese government was beginning to realise just how precarious its long cherished independence was. It looked on with alarm as one of its neighbours after another fell to the Western powers. The pattern of absorption was often the same — first came either missionaries who attacked traditional institutions, or merchants who demanded unfair privileges. When their behaviour caused trouble and the government tried to keep them in line, the missionaries or merchants would demand protection from their respective governments and soon gunboats were sailing and armies marching. Determined that this would not be their fate, the Chinese had banned all missionaries and had tried to restrict merchants to a few so-called treaty ports. But if the merchants were cunning and determined, the missionaries were even more so. Ignoring rightfully enacted laws and statutes, missionaries had disguised themselves and penetrated into some of the most remote parts of the empire. Suspecting some of them of spying for Western powers, as indeed they often did, the Chinese had put in place a series of draconian measures to deal this threat.

Any missionary caught could be expected to be executed, often after horrible torture. Such was the situation when Father Regis-Evariste Huc, a French member of the Lazarist Order arrived in Portuguese enclave of Macao in 1839. The next year, taking advantage of yet another British attack on Chinese forces, Huc slipped across the border in disguise and made his way to Peking. From there he went through the Great Wall into Mongolia. He spent three years learning the language and later met Father Joseph Gabet who was head of the mission there. The two became friends and gradually conceived the audacious idea of taking the Gospel to the most remote, the most forbidden place on earth — Lhasa, the heart of Tibetan Buddhism. The chances of getting there and returning alive were, the two men knew, very slim, but with a courage and faith typical of their kind, this only made them more determined to go. In August 1844 the two intrepid missionaries together with a Mongolian convert acting as servant, set off towards the west on what was to be a remarkable 2400 kilometre journey.

Passing through seemingly endless stretches of uninhabited grass land and desert they finally got to the regions where Tibetan Buddhism prevailed. On one occasion while staying at a wayside inn a senior lama and his retinue arrived. Curious to know who the strangers were the lama paid them a visit. Huc and Gabet refused to stand to greet him, a breach of etiquette which the lama had the good grace to ignore. After a few polite exchanges the lama saw the prayer book which the missionaries had deliberately put out for the purpose of initiating a discussion on religion. He picked up the book, flicked through the pages, admired its gilt edge and then said; “Our two faiths are like this”, raising two fingers and putting them besides each other as he did so.

The missionary's response to this spontaneous gesture of good-will and magnanimity was predictable. “Your beliefs and ours are at odds with each other”, Huc replied. “The object of our journey and our efforts, and we make no secret of it, is to substitute our prayers for those in use in your monasteries.” “I know”, said the lama with a smile and after some more conversation he left. If Huc and Gabet were hoping to become martyrs it would not be at the hands of the Buddhist lamas. Despite their rocklike sense of superiority and occasional rudeness, Huc and Gabet were generally far more sensitive and tactful than most missionaries of the time. Huc later wrote: “All the experience of our long journey... convinced us that it is through teaching and not controversy that one must work for the conversion of the unbeliever. Argument can reduce an adversary to silence, humiliate him even, anger him sometimes, and convince him never. When Jesus Christ instructed his Apostles, he told them; *'Ite docete omnes gentes'* and this does not mean 'Go and argue with all nations.' In our own day, two schools of philosophy, one following the steps of Descartes and the other of Lamennais, have long argued the question as to whether paganism is a crime or an error. In our opinion it is neither, but simply the result of ignorance. The mind of the pagan is in darkness; show him a light and the darkness is gone. He needs no Cartesian non Lamennaisian imputations, he simply

needs instruction.” However, such sentiments also highlight Huc’s naive optimism. During their stay in Mongolia and Tibet the two missionaries had the opportunity to “show the light” to many people but only one came forward to be baptised.

After many adventures and difficulties Hue and Gabet eventually arrived at Kumbum, the fourth largest monastery in Tibet, housing as it did some 4000 monks. This monastery had been built over the birth place of Tsong Ka-pa, the great 14<sup>th</sup> century reformer and the founder of the Gulupa, the main sect of Tibetan Buddhism. They found accommodation and someone to teach them Tibetan and then settled down to a period of diligent study. Their main aim was to both learn Buddhism and then write a book explaining the basic tenets of Christianity. As word of the two strange ‘lamas’ got around they started to have a continual stream of curious visitors. Monks would come and respectfully ask them about the altar they had erected and inquire about the meaning of the pictures of various saints put up on the walls.

The polite questions, the nods of appreciation and the requests for deeper explanations raised the two men’s hopes that they were going to make some converts. But the lamas were nearly doing what is natural for Buddhists - being respectfully interested in and open to other faiths. Huc and Gabet tried to impress their visitors by telling them about the miracles Christ had performed. But wonders that had supposedly happened long ago and far away did not have the same immediacy or appeal to the Tibetans as the wonder that they could see every day - the Tree of Ten Thousand Images. Kumbum monastery had grown up around a miraculous tree which, tradition said, Tsong Ka-pa had been born under. Called the Tree of Ten Thousand Images, this tree was famous throughout central Asia because it was covered with letters from the Tibetan sacred alphabet. Western scholars had heard of the tree and were curious to know whether the stories about it were true, but up till now no reliable persons had seen it. Huc and Gabet were the first Westerners to do so and to give a full and accurate description of it.

Huc wrote: “Here the reader will expect us to say something about this tree. Does it still exist? Have we seen it? What is it like? What about those miraculous leaves? All these are justifiable questions. And we will therefore try to reply to them as far as we are able. Yes, the tree still exists; we had heard so much about it during our journey that we were quite impatient to go and see it. On the foot of the mountain on which the monastery was built and not far from the main temple was a large enclosure surrounded by a brick wall. We went into the courtyard and could examine at leisure the miraculous tree whose branches we had already glimpsed from outside. We immediately looked at the leaves with burning curiosity and were dumbfounded to see that, sure enough, on each leaf there were well-founded Tibetan characters, sometimes darker green, sometimes lighter, than the leaf itself. Our first reaction was to suspect fraud by the lamas; but after the most detailed examination we could find no evidence of this. The characters gave every appearance of being part of the leaf, like the veins and nerves; they were not always similarly placed, but were sometimes on the top sometimes in the middle of the leaf, sometimes at its base and sometimes on the side. The young leaves had the character in a rudimentary form, only partly formed; the bark on the trunk and the branches, which peeled off something like the bark of palm trees, was also marked with characters. If one removed a piece of the old bark one could see on the new bark beneath the vague shapes of the characters, which were in the process of formation. The strange thing is that they were often different from the characters on top. We made every effort, until our brows were wet with sweat, to discover some evidence of fraud, but in vain. Others cleverer than we may be able to find a satisfactory explanation of the peculiarities of this tree, but we gave it up. Some will smile at our ignorance; we care little so long as our integrity is not doubted ...The Tree of Ten Thousand Images looked very ancient. Its trunk, which three men could hardly encircle, is not more than eight feet high. The branches did not go upwards but thrust outwards to form a plume and were very bushy. Some branches are dead and decaying with age, the leaves were evergreen, the wood reddish and with a delightful perfume rather like cinnamon. The lamas told us that during the summer, on about the eight moon, it produces large red flowers of great beauty. Over the centuries efforts had been made to grow offspring of the tree from seeds or cuttings but these had always failed and it remained the only one of its kind.”

After being in Kumbum for a while the monastic routine and the various pujas started to seem strangely familiar to Huc and Gabet, sometimes uncannily so. Huc commented: "It is impossible not to be struck by the similarities between the reforms and innovations introduced by Tsong Ka-pa and Catholicism. The rozier, the mitre, the dahntic, the cope or pluvial which the Grand Lamas wear when travelling or when conducting a ceremony outside the temple, the service with two choirs, the singing of psalms, exorcism, the five-chained censer which can be opened and closed at will, the blessing given with right hand raised over the head of the faithful, the chaplet, the practice of celibacy, the retreat, the worship of saints, fasting, processions, litanies, holy water: all these are common to both religions." Hue and Gabet were neither the first or last to notice these parallels. Amongst 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholics the most popular explanation for this closeness was that Tibet had once been Catholic under the legendary mythical king Prester John and then become perverted by the Devil and only the rituals remained. Huc suggested a much more rational explanation. He knew that in the 14<sup>th</sup> century several Catholic monks had arrived at the court of the successor of Genghis Khan. It is possible, he conjectured, that the Mongolians had been so impressed by the majesty of Catholic ritual that they had adopted it from where they passed to Tibet. Most scholars now put the similarities down to coincidence, albeit uncanny coincidence.

The missionaries also noticed that the behaviour of the lamas towards them accorded to what they would expect from the best Christian institutions. "So strong is the effect of religion on the heart of man, even when that religion is false and knows nothing of its true purpose! What a difference between these lamas, so generous, so hospitable, so brotherly towards strangers, and the Chinese who will even sell a glass of cold water to a thirsty traveller. At the welcome we received at Kumbum we could not help being reminded of those religious houses, built by our forefathers, those hospitable monks, as hostelry where travellers and the poor alike could always find relief of body and comfort for the soul."

After a three-month stay at the great monastery the two missionaries were ready to undertake the final long journey to Lhasa. They headed south and for a while travelled with a huge caravan which consisted of 15000 yaks, 1,200 horses, the same number of camels and 2000 men. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 1846, after a gruelling eighteen months on the road the weary but elated missionaries finally arrived at their goal — Lhasa. The golden spires of the Potala Palace, the richness of the Jokhang Cathedral and the colour of the pilgrims and merchants from every part of Central Asia were all overwhelming. But they had not come to sightsee and as soon as they found accommodation they began planning to conquer this citadel of paganism for Christ. When the authorities knew their presence they received an order to appear before the Regent, ruler of Tibet until the young Dalai Lama came of age. Full of trepidation and hope they obeyed. The Regent happened to be an urbane and deeply religious man and as soon as he was satisfied that the strangers were not spies but genuine men of religion, he became friendly towards them. When he asked why they were in his realm they told him that they had come to convert the Tibetans to the one true religion. Far from being perturbed or angry, the Regent was delighted. Hue recorded his words: "All your long journeys were made for a religious purpose. You are right, for man's business in life is religion. I see that you French and we Tibetans are one in this. But your religion and ours are not the same so it is important to find out which one is true. We shall therefore examine them both carefully and sincerely. If yours is true, we shall adopt it. Indeed, how could we not? But if ours is found to be true, I hope you will be reasonable enough to adopt it yourself."

The missionaries could hardly have wished for a more positive reception. It seemed that all their prayers had been answered. In the following months the three men met often, had long discussions and gradually developed a genuine respect for each other. The Regent arranged for them to learn more Tibetan so they could more easily clearly explain their beliefs, found them more comfortable accommodation and purchased their horses at a very generous price thus giving them much needed extra cash. As at Kumbum, curious and interested people began visiting them, some of them on a regular basis, to find out about the new religion. But just when it looked like all the missionary's prayers had been answered, disaster struck. The Chinese ambassador had been trying for some time to have the missionaries expelled but the Regent

had put him off, found excuses to do nothing or used delaying tactics. Now Chinese pressure became intense and the Regent and his government finally had to give in. After a friendly farewell from the Regent and an invitation to come again at a better time, the two men left the Forbidden City and headed east towards China.

Huc and Gabet arrived in Macao in October 1846 full of plans to establish a mission in Lhasa but their dreams were soon to be dashed yet again. They learned that the Vatican had granted the Society des Missions Etrangeres the exclusive right to preach the Gospel in Tibet and they were not prepared to let Lazerists or any other Order poach on what they now considered to be their turf. As it happens, the Society des Missions Etrangeres was never able to get around to organising a Tibetan mission and indeed no Catholic or even Protestant missionaries were ever to step foot in Lhasa again. Thus ironically it was not Buddhist resistance but sectarian rivalry and politics within the Catholic Church which prevented the Gospel being preached in the fabled Forbidden City. Father Gabet went to Rome to plead to be able to return to Tibet but was unable to reverse the decision. He was eventually posted to Brazil where the friendship he had cultivated with Tibet's regent, the language skills he had learned in China and Tibet and his knowledge of the religion were all wasted. He died of yellow fever in 1853. Father Huc remained in Macao for two years writing an account of the mission. In 1852 he returned to France but never really recovered from the hardships of his long journey and he died in 1860 worn out at the age of 47. This three-volume travelogue attracted much attention in academic circles, being the only first-hand account of Lhasa to appear during the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It went through several editions and was translated into English.

Huc's account of the Tree of Ten Thousand Images in particular created much interest. The idea of such a tree sounded so improbable and yet in all other matters Huc seemed to be a careful and objective informant. Further, as a Catholic missionary hostile to all aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, he had no reason to say anything positive about it. Unfortunately, the truth about the wonderful tree can now never be known for certain. The British traveller Peter Flemming saw it in 1935 but it was autumn and it had shed its leaves. Andre Migot saw it in 1946 but by then it had been enclosed in a temple and he was unable to examine it carefully. Chinese Red Guards destroyed the Tree of Ten Thousand Images in the 1960s.