

A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF WHY YOUNG PEOPLE BELIEVE IN BUDDHISM

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(Editor's note: These published results of a three-year research project will give our readers an appreciation of how a Marxist value system judges religious motivation and faith.)

In recent years, with the implementation of the Party's policy on religion, religious activities in monasteries in various parts of the country have been resumed. A number of young people have embraced Buddhism enthusiastically, some even applying to enter monasteries and become monks or nuns.

For example, in Fujian, a province with a long history of Buddhism, the number of monks and nuns in 1982, shortly after the implementation of the policy on religion, exceeded 800. Some of these entered monasteries in the latter part of the "cultural revolution." Besides these, there are many young people now who want to study to become monks or nuns. One Buddhist seminary, which aroused widespread interest when news of its opening was made public, received many letters asking about the study program and the requirements for admission. Over a period of a few months they received more than 200 applications for admission.

Among the applicants were some young girls still in high school, who in their letters said they very much admired the professional monks and cherished the hope of becoming devout Buddhists. Others wrote that they were "facing the decision of what road to take in life,..." and, "believing in Buddhism and admiring eminent monks," they were determined to follow the path of a lifelong religious vocation.

The applicants represented various backgrounds, ranging from high school students and unemployed high school graduates to cadres and workers, but the vast majority were from the rural areas. These young people were "born into the new society and grew up in the sunlight (of the Party)." What, then, makes them so eager to become Buddhists? Why does Buddhism hold such a fascination for them that they are willing to leave their home and families to live the lonely and monotonous life of monks and nuns?

We present here a preliminary analysis of their reasons for believing in Buddhism based on a survey carried out by the Department of Religious Research of the Shanghai Institute of Social Sciences. Information for the survey came from Buddhist circles and includes interviews with young monks and nuns and student novices going back to 1982. The Institute also worked closely with and had the cooperation of the religious affairs sections of the various regions in which the survey was conducted.

I. The Influence of Buddhist Families

A very important reason why some young people choose Buddhism is the influence of devout Buddhists within the family unit. Buddhism has had a long history in China, and while our society in recent years has experienced world-shaking changes, religious thinking as an ideology continued to exert an influence, and will continue to affect the minds of people for a long time into the future. The elderly who are products of the previous society retain faith in Buddhism; even the chaos of the "cultural revolution" could not shake their belief. The religious faith of these people inevitably affects those around them, in particular members of their own families.



A seventeen year-old young man from Hubei, when interviewed, said that as a child he often listened to his grandfather telling Buddhist stories. As time passed, his belief in Buddhism deepened, until at last he decided to apply to a Buddhist seminary.

In another interview, a young man from Hunan said, "My parents have remained faithful Buddhists throughout their lives. Under their influence I made up my mind, while still a child, to learn more about Buddhism and to become a monk. I read the scriptures and prayed daily to Buddha." It was the influence of his parents' Buddhist ideology which led to this young man's deep-rooted faith and his decision to enter the Buddhist seminary.

A young junior high school graduate in Jiangxi, who came from a Buddhist family that were strict vegetarians since his grandfather's time, said that his parents had read the Buddhist scriptures each morning and evening. His interest in Buddhism began in childhood as he lay in bed listening to his parents chanting. At the age of ten he began his own study of the Buddhist scriptures under the instruction of his parents. He was also taught by his father's teacher, a Buddhist monk. These influences eventually led him to become a monk.

Other young people said that they were directed towards a religious vocation by parents or family members who had become monks or nuns. One young man from Ningxia often visited his mother, who had become a nun in 1961, in the monastery she had entered. His brother had entered the same monastery in 1975. Through their influence he finally made the decision to become a monk himself.

These examples illustrate the deep influence older family members have on young people's religious faith. Of over one hundred monks and nuns in a certain Buddhist seminary class, more than half said they were influenced by older family members or relatives. In some cases all the members of the family eventually became monks or nuns.

Generally speaking, these young believers are not only more pious but also more knowledgeable about the faith than their predecessors. They are the core group of a cohort of young believers. The important question is, how to instill a firm patriotic ideology that will channel their initiative into making important contributions to the four-modernizations movement.

II. The Influence of Buddhist Culture and Works of Literature and Art.

Religious culture is a definite part of a nation's culture. Buddhism has had a long, influential history in China. Some of China's most striking cultural achievements are crystallized and preserved in the context of Buddhist culture. Buddhist philosophy has enriched the ideological concepts of our country and Buddhist art, including architecture, painting, music, etc. and continues to inspire today. Buddhist culture continues to attract young people, arousing their interest in learning more about it, and eventually leading them to religious belief.

Recently a young worker, who had won many awards in his factory, developed an avid interest in Buddhism from his love of literature and

the arts. When he applied to study in a Buddhist seminary, he wrote in his letter of application that he wanted to study in a seminary in order to do research on the Buddhist dharma. He wished to probe into the essence of Buddhist dharma to learn more about it in terms of culture and scholarship.

Another young man, a farmer, in applying for admission to the Buddhist seminary, said: "Buddhism, along with ancient medicine, architecture, martial arts and calligraphy, is part of the brilliant cultural heritage of the motherland. This should not disappear. I am still young, and I want to learn something of that heritage."

Another example is that of a twenty year-old man from Wuxi who wrote, "I like reading our ancient classical literature. I love philosophy, logic, literature, calligraphy, painting, music, and martial arts. I know very well that much of the best of our cultural heritage can be found in the Buddhist scriptures. Because we lack trained personnel, this precious cultural heritage is not properly cared for." This young man would like to study in a Buddhist seminary to acquire the relevant knowledge he needs in order to pursue a career in this field.



Most young people who think this way already have a basic education and a love of learning. They are enthusiastic about the splendid cultural heritage of our people and possess certain ideals and ambitions. Their basic reason for applying for admission to Buddhist seminaries is a desire to further their classical studies. They are not drawn out of piety as those are who choose to become monks as a result of family religious influences, and they lack the ideological motivation to pursue a lifetime monastic vocation.

Still other young people come into contact with Buddhism by exposure to books, magazines and literary works. A seventeen year-old senior high school student said, "I have read about monasteries and monks in books and newspapers, and seen them in films, but I have never been to a real monastery or seen a real monk. I have learned from my

reading that some monks stood up and fought fearlessly and relentlessly against reactionary rulers, some even gave their lives for the motherland and the people. The film Shaolin Temple is an example of this."

Another man who is now studying Buddhism at a certain temple first came into contact with Buddhism through reading novels. His interest in Buddhism increased on reading books about predestination. When he was eighteen his parents wanted him to marry, but he was not willing to do so. He continued to adhere to his Buddhist beliefs, kept to a strict vegetarian diet, and finally became a monk.

There is a young monk at a monastery in Sichuan who, as a child, loved reading imaginary tales - stories about fate, predestination, retribution and reincarnation. Through his reading, and also the influence of his family, he came to believe that Buddhist teachings give a very thorough and satisfactory explanation of human life and the universe. As a result he became a Buddhist and entered a monastery.

From these examples we can see that not all young people who apply to study in Buddhist seminaries or enter monasteries are purely religious believers. Quite a few of them are just curious. They feel that there are gaps in their knowledge and are searching for answers. Thus, some people come in contact with religion simply out of a strong desire for learning. Therefore, our comrades who carry on ideological work, particularly among young people, must show concern when they see young people entering monasteries or coming into direct contact with a religion. They should analyze their motives and instruct them on what religion really is. Only in this way can they help to implement the Party's religious policy and advance the cause of socialism.

Other matters also deserve our attention, such as the question of how to encourage research on religion, including the history of religions, ideologies, culture and the present state of religious affairs. We need to broaden their understanding of religion so that young people can deal with religion in a correct way. Religion is a very complex social phenomenon, and for a variety of reasons it is shrouded with layers of man-made veils. Thus it appears from the outside to be quite mysterious. Most of our young people today, including college level students, have no idea of what religion is all about.

A certain university made a survey of its students and found that most "haven't the least knowledge about religion," or "know very little," or "know only vaguely." Young people have a very strong desire to learn, and some express a desire to learn more about religion. This



is only normal. When we fail to meet this desire, they come to know and judge religion only by hearsay or by reading certain literary works. Some of them seek such knowledge from religious organizations or by entering temple schools and monasteries. Therefore, it would seem proper that we make available some information on religion, to introduce some facts about religious history and religious culture to young people. This will help them to come to a proper understanding of religion and it will also help in the implementation of the Party's religious policy.

One university offered a special study unit on religion in its course on historical materialism. Many students said that this special study unit had filled in some of the blanks in their religious knowledge. Some of them mentioned that the lecturers made them more aware of the origins, the nature, the essence and the basic forms of religion, which enabled them to get a clearer comprehension of religion with which to understand correctly the Party's policy on religion.

III. Turning to Buddhism as a Release from Despair and World-Weariness

While socialism has eliminated exploitation and oppression and the social sources for religion, there remain many conflicts which in actual life often bring serious personal problems. Different people approach these conflicts in different ways. Some press onward in the face of difficulties and become stronger. Others lose faith in life or lose courage because of setbacks and turn to religion in the hope of gaining some spiritual comfort, not daring to face up to life's realities.

Based on our survey, the social and personal problems which are the reasons why many young people turn to religion can be summed up as follows:

1. Problems of love and marriage

Love and marriage are intense experiences for young people. True love and a happy marriage make life richer and fuller, but

disappointment in love or an unsuccessful marriage bring endless trouble and pain. How does one heal the wounds of a broken love affair? A person of strong will can rise above the trauma and transfer his feelings into other positive spheres. But there are certain young people who take love as the total content of their lives. When they suffer disappointments in love, they can find no way out and life becomes meaningless for them.

For example, a young man, who lost his mother when he was very young, became acquainted with a girl in junior high school. They were close friends for a long time and very fond of each other, and apparently in love. The girl, however, married someone else and the young man was devastated. After that, he felt "life held little meaning for me" and decided to become a monk.

In another example, a young man in Jiangsu Province about twenty years of age, was disappointed in love. He had never thought there could be such sadness and sorrow from a broken love affair, so lacking the courage to fight against fate, he began to think about becoming a monk. He declared that he would never fall in love again and, in order to avoid a repetition of his trauma, he would give up any thought of marriage. He would become a monk and seek a new life. He did avoid the pain of another disappointment in love but he did so by choosing to flee from love.

2. The problems of securing a higher education and work

Many young people aspire to attend college. Of course it would be of great personal benefit to go on for further study, to acquire more knowledge and thereby to be able to make a larger contribution to one's country and people. But one need not attend college to accomplish this; even if one fails to go to college one can still contribute through an ordinary job. However, some young people give up with one setback, such as failing in college entrance examinations, or they become despondent and find life meaningless simply because of the nature of their employment.

For example, a certain young high school graduate, having failed twice in the college entrance examinations, was waiting at home for a job assignment. He felt depressed and finally turned to religion for help. When interviewed he said, "The superior socialist system can never salvage my fate. I will find only disillusionment in this world so I shall seek my place in a quieter life."

A young monk now in a temple in Sichuan received a similar blow when he failed to pass his college entrance examinations. Although he had found work, he felt that which he was called on to do was meaningless. He said that young people aspire to do great things. But when they see others entering college and themselves as inferior, the way they find spiritual comfort is to take the road of Buddhism. Thus he became a monk.

Another young man, originally a student in a big city, settled down for some years in a rural district. Later he was transferred to a mine where the work was hard and conditions poor. When he learned that some of his classmates who went to the countryside with him were sent back to the city and others had entered college, he lamented over the way fate treats different people. At that time, his mother died and lacking a supportive home, he became miserable, depressed and disillusioned. He went to a monastery asking to become a monk.

3. Problems of psychology and environment

Circumstances in life have great influence on the development of religious psychology, particularly for some young introverts. When they are unable to adapt to a situation they blame others.

A certain young villager replaced his father in a city job. He was alone, without nearby family or relatives and "for the first time he tasted the bitterness of the world and the difficulty of living in society." There were high buildings and broad streets in the city, but for this young man from the country, with "not even a small room of his own to live in and no place to walk freely, he suffered as if imprisoned in a cage." Besides this, the young man "could not bear the sight of people plotting against each other and selfishly pursuing personal gain. He did not want to live with these people and "soil his character," And so he "cut off all worldly goals and decided to devote his life to Buddhism, to burn himself like incense in the temple."

A young factory worker lost confidence in himself as he thought he was "weak", "a sacrifice to political movements" and "the undeserved target of his leaders' anger." After several years of this he despaired of life in the world as he saw it and turned to Buddhism as the only way to "wash away worldly sorrows."

Some people come to believe in religion purely for psychological reasons. Often they are young women who are lonely introverts and prefer to live undisturbed by themselves.

There was a young woman living in a big city who believed that with her temperament she should live in an environment conducive to a quiet state of mind. This was incompatible with life in a noisy city. She yearned for a place of retreat and chose Buddhism as her shelter from real life. She said her fondest wish was to leave her present situation and live as a Buddhist.

Another woman who enjoyed calligraphy, painting and music said, "These would fill the emptiness in my mind and heart." She felt that everything mundane was disgusting and loathsome. She wanted a quiet and solitary life, and to have this, her only hope was to become a nun.

These stories show that a rich material life is not equivalent to an abundant spiritual life. While building a socialist materialistic civilization, we must pay attention to the developing of a rich and varied spiritual dimension to life. Those young people who cannot accept the materialistic goal and feel a vacuum in their lives deserve our concern and love. We need to find activities that fit their special needs, raise the level of their culture and ideology, and enrich their spiritual life.

We have listed above reasons why some young people become dispirited and despondent. We need to learn how to encourage and respond to young patriotic believers in religious circles. At the present time most patriotic religious believers are aware of the changes that took place as we moved from the old to the new society. They have received patriotic education and have a strong foundation of patriotism. Yet, no matter what, they will persevere in their love of the motherland and of their religion.

When we study the actual situation of young believers, we find that many of them have turned to religion because of difficulties encountered in daily life. Many of them find society and its ways repugnant and want to escape from realities. It is a difficult task to give these young people an education which combines "loving the nation" and "loving one's religion." If we can find the answer to this question, it will show us how people in religious circles hold to a love of country and at the same time love their religion.

IV. The Influence of fatalism and superstition

Fatalism is an idea long present among the Han people. All people know the sayings, "What will be will be, don't try to resist it;" and,

"Life and death are predestined, wealth and poverty depend on the will of heaven." The people of new China still react to such sayings. A number of young people say, "It won't do not to believe it, neither will it do to believe all of it."

A family in Fujian believed the fortune teller when he told them they were all predestined to become monks. The husband and wife, together with their child, laid aside their family life and entered Buddhist monasteries.

A twenty year-old young man decided that he was destined to become a monk. He left his wife, sold his property and became a monk.

Other young people are attracted to Buddhism by preposterous sayings and unrealistic ideas. For example, a certain Buddhist seminary found among the newly recruited students applicants claiming to be reincarnations of deceased monks and nuns or to be born of Guanyin (Goddess of Mercy). Some maintained that they had a "vision" and came to ask for "instructions". Others while "protecting the incense and the lamps" at a "celestial palace" on a mountainside, were forbidden to do so by the public security officers. As a result they wanted to go to Emei Mountain to "cultivate their moral character" or "to cultivate themselves according to the teachings."



There were two young men in Jiangxi Province studying Buddhism with their "adopted mother". This person was very mysterious, something of a sorceress. Rumour had it that she lived on fruit and water only. She earned money telling fortunes, physiognomy (reading faces) and curing illnesses.

Another young man held he would find a way to put "God" in people's hearts and thus enhance the beauty of their lives. The ideas expressed by these young and earnest Buddhists diverges sharply from traditional Buddhist teachings.

Most of these young people came from the less cultured rural districts and mountainous areas. Since their education level was low,

they could more easily be swayed by superstitions. They knew very little about Buddhism and were not able to tell the difference between religion and superstition. These cases should convince us that the education of a young person should start at the very beginning: that is, they should be given more scientific and cultural knowledge, this would help them do away with superstitions, and gain an understanding of dialectical materialism along with a correct outlook on life.

We should do more to help people distinguish between superstition and religion. In order to implement the party's policy on religious freedom, we should train young people to tell the difference between normal religious activities and illegal, superstitious religious activities. We should outlaw illegal, superstitious practices that are harmful to people's physical and mental health.

V. Other Influences

There are additional reasons why some young people come to practice Buddhism.



For example, some want to enter Buddhist seminaries or training classes thinking that, as a high-ranking monk, they can go abroad. Others want to use religion as a springboard for moving from the rural areas to the city. Others publicly admit that they study Buddhism for reasons of economic security.

Some young villagers abhor working on the farm and yearn for city life. They ask to enter a monastery in a large city. Some Fujian young people first became monks in a small temple in their native town; then they transferred to a temple in Fuzhou or to Nanputaoshan Temple in Xiamen. After that they visited other famous temples, monasteries and mountains, staying longer at the best places, quickly leaving those they didn't like. All this had nothing to do with genuine belief. They simply lived off Buddhism.

There are a small number of people who hid themselves in temples in order to avoid legal punishment for crimes they had committed. These people are few, yet they do exist.

Young people who profess to believe in Buddhism for these reasons are not genuine religious believers. They stay temporarily in temples and monasteries from personal interest. Once they get what they want, or find out they cannot get it, they leave. Of course, it is always possible that some of these people will change and become sincere Buddhists.

It can be seen from our analysis that there are a multitude of reasons why young people become Buddhists. The depth and breadth of their belief vary with their experience, life circumstances and cultural level. In socialist society religion is a long-lasting social phenomenon. As an ideology it exercises influence not only on those who came from the old society, but on a number of people who are maturing in the new society. These are the ones who will become the core believers of the various religions. Their life situation, their ideological changes, the reasons for their belief and their activities both in society and in their religious groups, will be intimately connected with the development and changes of religion. To overlook this fact will be detrimental to our future work.

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