

If Buddha could rule the world . .

WESTERNERS generally believe that eastern religions encourage fatalism among the masses. Why, we ask, do they passively accept their poverty-stricken lot? One glib answer is that their cosmology encourages them to do so.

Some aspects of oriental religions certainly support this view, in that they stand in stark contrast to the protestant ethic. Take, for example, Buddhism, whose doctrine of *karma* can be used to pacify the poor.

In the eighth century the King of Tibet, Muni Tsenpo, tried to bridge the great divide between rich and poor by proposing a reform which involved the redistribution of land. When he checked on the progress, he found that the rich had merely grown richer!

Tsenpo consulted Padman-sambhava, the Buddhist sage, who told him that he could not use force to close the gap between rich and poor. Why?

"Our condition in this life is entirely dependent upon the actions of our previous life and nothing can be done to alter the scheme of things."

There are suggestions that the king "was poisoned because of the unpopularity of his reform programme".*

Tibetans did, in fact, have to wait until the 14th century for political reorganisation which also involved the equal division of land among agriculturalists. This was under the guidance of Changchub Gyaltsen (1302-1364), who effectively unified the country.

But evidence that Buddhism is not necessarily a dead-hand on the backs of the peasants comes from the 13th Dalai Lama. Upon his return to Tibet, following the Chinese invasion in 1910, he issued a declaration of independence which acknowledged that Tibet was rich in natural resources but poor in scientific development.

This meant that people had to rely on farming for their livelihoods: and the Dalai Lama did not like what he saw in the countryside as he made his way

By PETER POOLE

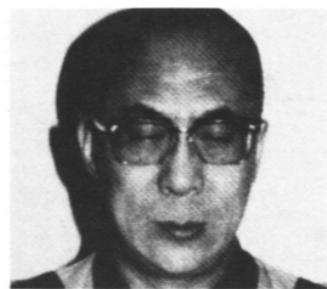
back to Lhasa. For in his declaration he said:

"Tibet, although thinly populated, is an extensive country. Some local officials and landholders are jealously obstructing other people from developing vacant lands, even though they are not doing so themselves. People with such intentions are enemies of the State and our progress. From now on, no one is allowed to obstruct anyone else from cultivating whatever vacant lands are available. Land taxes will not be collected until three years have passed; after that the land cultivator will have to pay taxes to the government and to the landlord every year, proportionate to the rent. The land will belong to the cultivator."

The Dalai Lama set a 10% tax payable to the government and 5% to the landlord.

This, and other reforms, led the people of Tibet to proclaim the 13th Dalai Lama the best they had ever known. The reforms were not, of course, popular with the privileged class.

The 14th Dalai Lama maintained a similar attitude (which he would, of course, since he was merely the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama). He said in 1959 that he particularly wanted to radically reform the land tenure system, which would entail the distribution of land to the tillers — but that the Chinese who



● The 14th Dalai Lama, photographed by Michael Harris Goodman, author of *The Last Dalai Lama* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1986).

Sir Charles Bell, a British Political Officer in Tibet who became a close friend of the 13th Dalai Lama, noted: "In the exercise of his secular authority the Dalai Lama spends several hours daily. All cases of importance, civil, revenue, and administrative, are referred to him. When I was in Lhasa, disputes regarding land — which are always deemed to require especial care — came before him once a week, fifteen to twenty such cases on the average.

"Even an application by a tenant for the reduction of his rent has sometimes to be submitted to him" (Charles Bell, *The Religion of Tibet*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931, p.187).

Today, the 14th Dalai Lama is prevented from arbitrating on land disputes: he fled in the face of the Chinese military occupation in 1950.

now occupied his homeland made such changes impossible to administer.

Politics, it seems, can erect more barriers to constructive change than religion!

BRAINWAVE

A PROPOSED state land value tax law, titled the "Pro-Enterprise Act," is included in a 1987-88 manual for state legislature published by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), writes *Walt Rybeck*.

The law's stated purpose is "to permit local governments to raise revenue in a manner that stimulates the private economy, encourages housing construction and repair, generates job opportunities and fosters development that reduces the premature invasion of farmland and open space."

ALEC is an organization of state legislators. Every biennium it publishes its *Source Book of American State Legislation*. "Some of the most significant legislation developments at the state level can be traced back to

*Tsephon W.D. Shakaspa, *Tibet: A Political History*, New Haven: Yale U.P., 1967.