



This article was published by F18News on: 8 December 2003

MONGOLIA: Religious freedom oasis? (Part 1 of 2)

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Forum 18 News Service has found a remarkable degree of agreement amongst state officials, cultural figures, Christians and Buddhists in Mongolia with the sentiments of a Mongolian member of parliament, who told Forum 18 that "Chinghis Khan invited Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Daoists here back in the thirteenth century. Mongolians are very tolerant in the religious sphere - I've never come across anything like it anywhere else." This embraces freedom to witness and state registration of churches, which are difficult issues in surrounding countries. A Russian Buddhist source commented to Forum 18 that the Buddhist reaction to someone becoming a Christian would be "It is their karma - let them." However, some Protestants (see subsequent F18News article), have raised very serious concerns.

"Chinghis Khan invited Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Daoists here back in the thirteenth century," Mongolian member of parliament Sendenjav Dulam pointed out to Forum 18 News Service on 18 October. "Mongolians are very tolerant in the religious sphere - I've never come across anything like it anywhere else."

For the most part, Forum 18 has found agreement that this is the case among religious, government and cultural representatives in the Mongolian capital, Ulaanbaatar.

The British executive director of Joint Christian Services (JCS), a consortium of 15 international Christian missionary agencies aiming to spread the Gospel in Mongolia through relief and development projects, maintained that the country's 1993 religion law "gives a lot of scope for churches." As a measure of this, Bill Manley pointed to the particularly high ratio of foreign missionaries to the 2.7-million population. While there appears to be no official figure, he said that over 70 are employed by JCS and estimated that a further 150 Korean missionaries operate in Ulaanbaatar alone. Mentioning that two "stadium healing crusades" by foreign missionaries passed without obstruction this year in the Mongolian capital, Manley told Forum 18 that he had not heard of any cases of missionaries being denied visas.

In addition, state registration of churches in Mongolia is both "straightforward" and unaccompanied by attempts at bribery, according to Manley: "But that wouldn't happen to foreigners or anywhere near them - we are held in almost too high regard." More important in practice than the law, however, is relationship-building with local officials, he told Forum 18. "I have heard the same official say that there cannot be a church in a place one year and then request it the next because Christians have made such a difference to the local community."

Lower level officials initially said that they "did not need Catholics" either since they already had Buddhism, shamanism and Islam, "but then they saw us doing things and were surprised," Bishop Wenceslao Padilla told Forum 18 on 20 October. When the Mongolian authorities requested diplomatic relations with the Holy See in the early 1990s, "we set the condition that we could send our missionaries," he said. Eleven years on, the Catholic Church Mission in Mongolia - comprising 45 foreign clergy and monastics - runs a host of free social projects, including kindergartens, English classes, outpatients' consultation, a technical school, soup kitchens, two farms and a care centre for 120 disabled children. "I'm not interested in converting people - we are trying to help the Mongolians in their social needs," Bishop Wenceslao insisted. While there were approximately 460 locals at Mongolian-English mass in Ulaanbaatar's new Catholic cathedral the previous Sunday, the bishop added, his mission has baptised only 176 Mongolians since 1992, "but we're not counting."

Although they detailed several areas of very serious concern (see the second part of this article), Mongolian Protestant representatives acknowledged that they enjoy greater religious freedom than in Russia, to say nothing of China. On 16 October Agaa Lkhaasuren - more usually known by his Christian name, Luke - claimed to Forum 18 that presidential meetings with Buddhist abbots - "not even shamans are invited" - informed government policy towards minority confessions. A Christian lawyer at the Rule of Law Institute of Mongolia, Luke added that he does not consider this policy to be particularly aggressive, however, and described his country's religion law as "generally good."

Also speaking to Forum 18 on 16 October, president of the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance N. Enkhbayar - more usually known by his Christian name, Joshua - pointed to the absence of lingering socialist-style controls over religion in Mongolia. Today the state "doesn't have the strength" to monitor religious activity or to control the number of foreign missionaries, he maintained, and added

that the motivating factor behind the restrictions which are enacted is not ideological, but "arbitrariness." On 17 October, Professor Dojooiin Tsedev of the Mongolian University of Arts and Culture told Forum 18 that - notwithstanding the purges of the 1930s - the influence of militant atheism upon the Mongolian people had been negligible. "There was a popular joke about a college lecturer teaching atheism in the morning and paying a visit to a lama in the afternoon," he remarked. Agreeing that there had been very few convinced atheists in Mongolia in the socialist period, Sendenjav Dulam told Forum 18 that today's politicians "don't concern themselves with the faith of their citizens - everyone has the right to choose their own belief."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 19 October in his capacity as a religious studies lecturer at the Mongolian State University, the religious affairs adviser to Mongolian president Natsag Bagabandi touched upon the subject of Buddhist influence upon government policy. However, while Buddhist representatives usually complained about Christian activity in the country, said Samdan Tsedendamba, "I think that they should acknowledge the fact that there are people who are choosing different religions from theirs and accept them as competitors." On 17 October a Russian Buddhist source pointed out to Forum 18 that Mongolians' apparent tolerance towards unfamiliar faiths might actually be due to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation. "A person could have been born in other cultures in past lives, which inevitably leaves its mark upon their present psychology - they might become Christian, for example," she remarked. "The Buddhist reaction to that would be: 'It is their karma - let them.'"

A printer-friendly map of Mongolia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=mongoli>

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