Tibet and China, Marxism, Nonviolence

Select a link to find the Dalai Lama's answer.

Q: A considerable portion of Tibetan territory has been redistributed to neighbouring Chinese provinces. What do you think the borders of the future autonomous Tibet should be?

A: In the seventh century, the border between Tibet and China was drawn up very clearly. The Chinese government has tried to use all sorts of historical arguments with references to the thirteenth century and the seventh century.... Given the fact that I accepted the first condition set down by Mr. Deng Xiaoping, I feel I have every right to discuss the rest of the issue. So I told them that since the Chinese government itself recognizes the existence of all sorts of regions, districts, zones, and even counties which the government itself calls ethnic Tibetan zones, counties, and districts, why not regroup them all together as one single entity? This would make it much simpler and much easier to preserve and protect Tibetan culture and identity. Already in the eighth century, during the reign of King Trisong Detsen and King Tri Ralpachen, the border between China and Tibet had been clearly demarcated from the Chinese province of Yunnan to the Tibetan province of Amdo, in the north. There are inscriptions, some of them on pillars, others on rocks. In Yunnan province, for example, there are rock carvings. These ancient inscriptions indicate the true border between China and Tibet, and this is not something we have made up, but historical reality.

All authoritarian regimes in general, and Communist regimes in particular, have an unfortunate tendency to distort history by rewriting it. I saw this very clearly when I went to China in 1954 and 1955. I spent roughly six months in China proper, then I visited Manchuria, which the Chinese call Tumbe, and also the regions of Hreang and Heilongjang. There I saw a museum of Japanese atrocities, where it was explained that the Japanese only surrendered once the Soviet army had destroyed the Japanese army division in Manchuria, the Quangtuong army. I was in Lhasa at that time, and there we learned what had really happened--in fact, the Japanese surrendered only after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Russia declared war on Japan after the bombs were dropped. The Chinese version claims that the Japanese surrendered only after the Russians had annihilated the most powerful Japanese army in Manchuria. This is an example of the distortion of history.

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Q: You have often stated that you would like to achieve a synthesis between Buddhism and Marxism.

What is the appeal of Marxism for you?

A: Of all the modern economic theories, the economic system of Marxism is founded on moral principles, while capitalism is concerned only with gain and profitability. Marxism is concerned with the distribution of wealth on an equal basis and the equitable utilization of the means of production. It is also concerned with the fate of the working classes--that is, the majority--as well as with the fate of those who are underprivileged and in need, and Marxism cares about the victims of minority-imposed exploitation. For those reasons the system appeals to me, and it seems fair. I just recently read an article in a paper where His Holiness the Pope also pointed out some positive aspects of Marxism.

As for the failure of the Marxist regimes, first of all I do not consider the former USSR, or China, or even Vietnam, to have been true Marxist regimes, for they were far more concerned with their narrow national interests than with the Workers' International; this is why there were conflicts, for example, between China and the USSR, or between China and Vietnam. If those three regimes had truly been based upon Marxist principles, those conflicts would never have occurred.

I think the major flaw of the Marxist regimes is that they have placed too much emphasis on the need to destroy the ruling class, on class struggle, and this causes them to encourage hatred and to neglect compassion. Although their initial aim might have been to serve the cause of the majority, when they try to implement it all their energy is deflected into destructive activities. Once the revolution is over and the ruling class is destroyed, there is nor much left to offer the people; at this point the entire country is impoverished and unfortunately it is almost as if the initial aim were to become poor. I think that this is due to the lack of human solidarity and compassion. The principal disadvantage of such a regime is the insistence placed on hatred to the detriment of compassion.

The failure of the regime in the former Soviet Union was, for me, not the failure of Marxism but the failure of totalitarianism. For this reason I still think of myself as half-Marxist, half-Buddhist.

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Q: You have called for the repatriation of the Chinese who now line in Tibet. Might there be a place for a Chinese population in a democratic, open Tibet?

A: I think we should differentiate the various groups of Chinese living in Tibet. There are, on the one hand, those who were already there in 1949; then all those who went there or were sent in compliance with official plans; and, finally, those who have been coming since the so-called "liberal economic policy," and who come on their own initiative, as individuals. We should also distinguish the Chinese who speak Tibetan and respect Tibetan culture--for, after all, Buddhist culture is not so foreign to them--from all those who come to Tibet merely in search of material wealth and not spiritual wealth. Those who respect Tibetan spirituality could prove themselves to be very beneficial if they stay. If there are not too many of them I see no reason why we could not work it out so that they can remain in Tibet. But as for all those who think that Tibetans are backward and barbarian, that they are dirty and smell bad (we think in turn that the Chinese smell bad, that they eat too much garlic), it would be better if they went home. Why should they stay in a place if they think it is dirty?

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Q: Your Holiness, in your struggle to liberate Tibet, do you absolutely refuse the use of violence, or is nonviolence for you simply the best way to attain your goal?

A: Yes, I absolutely refuse the use of violence. For several years now I have been asked on several occasions what I would do if the despair of certain Tibetans drove them to violence, and I have always replied that if that were to happen I would give up and step back. I have reasons for thinking in this way; it is not merely a blind belief First of all, I believe that the basic nature of human beings is gentle and compassionate. It is therefore in our own interest to encourage that nature, to make it live within us, to leave room for it to develop. If on the contrary we use violence, it is as if we voluntarily obstruct the positive side of human nature and prevent its evolution.

The First World War ended with the defeat of Germany, and this defeat left a deep trauma in the German people. That is how the seeds of the Second World War were sown. Once violence gains the upper hand in a situation, emotions can no longer be controlled. This is dangerous and leads to tragedy. This is exactly what is happening in Bosnia at the moment. Violent methods merely create new problems.

In our case, what is most important is the fact that we Tibetans and our Chinese brothers and sisters have always been neighbours and must remain so. The only alternative for the future is to learn to get along and live in harmony with our neighbours. We must seek a solution between the Chinese and the Tibetans that will offer mutual benefits. Because of our nonviolent attitude, Chinese people both within China and abroad have already expressed sympathy and concern for our cause; some have even said they greatly appreciate our nonviolent attitude.

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