Shabkar and Interreligious Encounter on the Tibetan Plateau, 1781-1851

By Rachel Pang

Introduction

In this paper, I will examine a Buddhist response to religious and sectarian diversity on the Tibetan plateau in the nineteenth century. I am interested in: (1) how the inclusion of responses to religious diversity from different cultures and time periods affects the conversation in interfaith and interreligious studies; and (2) whether or not it is accurate, acceptable, or productive to use interfaith and interreligious vocabulary in our discussion of responses to religious diversity in different cultures and historical contexts. Following a discussion of Shabkar's non-sectarian activities and their historical context, I will explore the ways in which such a case study in the history of religion can broaden and enrich discussions in the emerging academic field of interreligious and interfaith studies.

The great Tibetologist Gene Smith once noted, "The roots of eclecticism and tolerance are sunk as deep into the soil of Tibetan tradition as those of sectarianism and bigotry."[1] Indeed, the countless examples of religious harmony and rivalry indelibly shaped the course of Tibet's history. Instances of inter-sectarian harmony resulted in the flourishing of ecumenical learning and exchange.[2] Instances of sectarian rivalry, on the other hand, caused irrevocable damage, sometimes escalating into civil war. These eruptions of violence were usually due to the involvement of powerful political and financial stakeholders in religious affairs—such as the Tibetan nobility and in some cases, foreign military powers like the Mongols.

Into this millennium-long history of co-existent religious tolerance and rivalry was born the celebrated Tibetan Buddhist spiritual master Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (1781-1851). Shabkar was born in Amdo province at the northeasternmost corner of the Tibetan plateau (modern day Qinghai province, PRC) but traveled extensively throughout his life to teach and to go on pilgrimages. Viewed by both himself and others as the reincarnation of the eleventh-century poet-saint Milarepa, Shabkar is primarily remembered by posterity for his spiritual autobiography, his ability to spontaneously compose and perform songs of spiritual realization (*mgur*), and his fervent promotion of non-sectarianism.[3]

As many scholars have pointed out, the idea of non-sectarianism was not unique to Shabkar or nineteenth-century Tibet. It dates back to the historical Buddha.[4] I suggest that Shabkar felt compelled to promote non-sectarianism so fervently due to three reasons.

Firstly, it would not be in accord with Buddhist ideals—and especially the Mahāyāna Buddhist ideals of loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, moral discipline, patience, diligence,

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1 Smith, *Among*, 237.
2 Important examples include the non-sectarian approaches of the 3rd Karmapa Rangchung Dorjé (1284-1339); the iron bridge builder and father of Tibetan opera, Tangtong Gyelpo (1361/1365-1486); the 14th century religious luminary Tsongkhapa; and the great composer of encyclopedias, Jamgön Kongtrül (1813-1899), and so forth.
3 The Tibetan word that I am translating as "non-sectarian" or "ecumenical" is the Tibetan word "ris med." Literally, "ris med," means "impartial," "unbiased," or "not taking sides." Shabkar uses "ris med" to refer to his attitude towards religious diversity. However, it is important not to equate the "ecumenical" of this instance with the Ecumenical Movement of Protestant denominations in the early twentieth century.
4 Ringu Tulku, 4-5. It was fine to debate with the views of other religions and sects in order to clarify one's understanding, but that was not seen as a form of criticism of others' views; sectarianism and criticism for criticism's sake were forbidden.

meditation, and wisdom—to engage in perpetual conflict with others over doctrinal difference. This reminds us of the specific religious and cultural background from which Shabkar emerged and that his approach to religious diversity was deeply rooted in the beliefs and values that he cultivated throughout his life.

Secondly, I suggest that Shabkar's non-sectarianism was a direct reaction to the religious environment in which he lived. His autobiography contains constant admonishments reminding people not to be sectarian. In Kyirong, Shabkar tells the lamas there not to engage in sectarianism by dividing the Buddha's teachings into categories of "good" and "bad."[5] To the general populace, he advises refraining from hostility (*ma sdang*) towards the tenet systems of others since the teachings of all tenet systems are the teachings of the Buddha.[6] In Lhasa, Shabkar advises, "There is no holy Dharma that is not profound / People of Lhasa, do not be sectarian, there is no point."[7] In his final testament, he advises, "Disciples who after listening, reflecting, and meditating upon the teachings / Engage in sectarianism after several years / And belittle the Dharma of others. / Do not abandon the Dharma and accumulate negative karma."[8] The presence of these admonishments suggests that Shabkar was likely reacting to instances of sectarianism that he encountered throughout his journeys on the Tibetan plateau; it would be highly unlikely for him to admonish others for being sectarian if there were an absence of such a phenomenon.

It is also clear from recent secondary scholarship that Shabkar grew up in an environment where there were tensions between different sects—especially between the Nyingma and Geluk sects. Sometimes, it involved verbal sparring.[9] Other times, it involved criticizing another sect in the book that one was writing, [10] and still other times, it involved silent grudges.[11] Clearly, sectarianism was widespread in nineteenth-century Tibet.

Finally, as Shabkar points out in the colophon of the *Emanated Scripture of Orgyen*, it has been prophesized that the future demise of the Buddhist teachings will not be due to an outside enemy, but due to Buddhists "quarrelling over which are good and bad teachings, and fighting due to attachment and aversion."[12] Therefore, the very survival of Buddhism lies in inter-sectarian harmony.

Shabkar's Communicative Strategies

Regarding his own attitude to other religions and sects, Shabkar says to his disciples,

> I went about training with faith, devotion, and pure perception in whatever Buddhist and non-Buddhist tenet systems. Because of this, wherever I went, many beings made offerings, praised, and served me, and I brought benefit to both myself and others.

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[5] Zhabs dkar, snyigs dus (2003), vol. 1, 675.1-.2. Ricard, trans., 386.
[6] Zhabs dkar, snyigs dus (2003), vol. 1, 675.4. Ricard, trans., 386.
[7] Zhabs dkar, snyigs dus (2003), vol. 1, 840.2-.3. Ricard, trans., 478.
[8] Zhabs dkar, snyigs dus (2003), vol. 1, 952.3-.4. Ricard, trans., 534.
9 Yangdon Dondhup, 50.
10 Ibid. Drakgönpa Könchok Tenpa Rabgyé was a throne holder of the famous Gelukpa monastery Labrang in Amdo, while Rigdzin Palden Tashi was an important Nyingma *ngakpa* leader in Rebgong. For more information see Dhodup, 47.
11 We find passages where Shabkar feels compelled to defend the veracity and purity of the Nyingma teachings from sectarian slander directed against it (Zhabs dkar, snyigs dus (2003), vol. 2, 115.4.), as well as incidents of prejudice between members of different sects (Zhabs dkar, snyigs dus (2003), vol 1, 896.4-897.1. Ricard, trans., 507).
12 Zhabs dkar, *O rgyan*, 576.

Thus, you should do as I did, and it will be good.[13]

While the basis for Shabkar's non-sectarian attitude involved the cultivation of respect for other religious traditions, Shabkar's approach to religious diversity was by no means simple or passive. In particular, his strategy for communicating this non-sectarian paradigm was multi-valenced, involving his life example and varied literary and religious means. The primary way by which Shabkar promoted non-sectarianism was through his own life example, preserved after his death in his autobiography. Throughout his life, Shabkar made it a point to study Buddhism from masters of all sectarian lineages. Generally speaking, his childhood and youth were spent immersed in the tantric Buddhist practices of the Nyingma; he received his monastic vows from the great Gelukpa abbot Arig Geshé and studied their scriptural tradition assiduously. He spent years of his adult life engaged in the Kagyu meditative practices of Mahāmudrā in the Himalayas. By the eighteenth century, sectarian identity had solidified in Tibet to the degree where it was usually the case that individuals from a particular sect would practice the teachings within their own sect more or less exclusively. Shabkar is a rare example of a Tibetan Buddhist saint who managed to master the teachings of three distinct sects: the Nyingma, the Geluk, and the Kagyu. In this way, Shabkar was an interesting anomaly in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, and the paradigm of the non-sectarian attitude.

Shabkar's approach to non-sectarianism was active and full of energy: in addition to cultivating a profound respect for the religions of others, he actively sought out opportunities to learn more about them. In this way, Shabkar's approach to religious diversity resembles aspects of certain contemporary examples of interfaith or interreligoius dialogue, such as Diana Eck's Pluralism Project, that envisions "pluralism" as "*the **energetic** engagement with diversity*," and "*the **active** seeking of understanding across lines of difference*," and so forth.[14] Historical examples of interreligious encounter such as Shabkar's represent interesting models for which to compare to present day instances of "interreligious dialogue" or "interfaith dialogue." In any case, the merits and shortcomings of all approaches should be actively explored and debated.

In addition to his life example, Shabkar used a variety of literary genres that would connect to a wide audience—sermons, songs, life narrative, "emanated scriptures," and "elegant sayings." With his eloquent and easy-to-understand prose and verse, Shabkar was able to convey his message to a wide audience ranging from the educated monastic elite to illiterate nomads and farmers. Shabkar's methods for expressing his ideas resonates with the fundamental place of song, verse, oral literature, and storytelling in Tibetan culture, making his chosen media highly efficacious.

Shabkar also linked non-sectarianism to a series of powerful religious ideas. For example, Shabkar grounds non-sectarianism in Buddhist cosmogony associated with the Nyingma tantric tradition. By emphasizing the common origins of all phenomena in the primordial *dharmadhātu*, or "Dharma expanse," Shabkar emphasizes that the ultimate nature of all buddhas, bodhisattvas, and spiritual masters is fundamentally the same. This can be read as an indirect argument for the common origin of all spiritual guides and the ultimately trivial nature of sectarian divisions. Shabkar also grounds non-sectarianism in Buddhist soteriology. He argues that a significant part of reaching full enlightenment, or nirvāna, involves "training in faith and pure perception towards all spiritual teachings (*chos*) and peoples, making offerings, giving praise, and being of service." He continues, "If one does that and simultaneously requests the blessings of the Victor and Sons, one's mental continuum will naturally ripen and be liberated."[15] Finally, Shabkar grounds his promotion of non-sectarianism in a series of revelatory visions. Near the end of his life, Shabkar sees the enlightened

[13] Zhabs dkar, snyigs dus (2003), vol. 2, 108.6-109.4.
[14] Eck, Diana. "What is Pluralism?" Bold added by this essay's author for emphasis.
[15] Zhabs dkar, snyigs dus (2003), vol. 2, 28.3-.6.

figure Padmasambhava in a vision. Padmasambhava reveals to him that he is, in essence, the same as the greats spiritual masters Tsongkhapa and Atiśa, who had appeared to Shabkar in a couple of earlier visions. In terms of non-sectarianism, the significance of this vision has to do with the different sectarian affiliations of Padamasambhava (Nyingma), Atiśa (Kadampa), and Tsongkhapa (Geluk). Thus, this revelatory vision indirectly argues that the teachings presented in the great variety of Buddhist texts lead back to Padmasambhava and by extension to the Buddha. This claim is echoed in one of Shabkar's songs, where he suggests that different tenet systems – Madhyamaka, Dzokchen, and Mahāmudrā – lead to the same truth.[16]

Shabkar's Non-Sectarianism and Interreligious/Interfaith Studies

Returning to one of the questions that I posed at the beginning of the paper: is it accurate, acceptable, or productive to adopt the interfaith and interreligious studies vocabulary in the study of interfaith engagement in diverse cultural and historical contexts? At present, it is difficult to answer the question. From my perusal of the websites of organizations devoted to interreligious and interfaith dialogue, and to scholarly literature on this subject, the terms interfaith, interreligious, multifaith, pluralism, and so forth often refer to different things in different contexts. For example, take the term "pluralism": in Christian theology,[17] in Diana Eck's highly influential Pluralism Project, and in common parlance, the term takes on drastically different meanings. While the terms "interfaith" and "interreligious" are most often used interchangeably, there are significant instances where they mean different things to different communities. For example, on the website of the Archdiocese of Chicago's Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, the term "interfaith" is defined as "relations with members of the "Abrahamic faiths" (Jewish and Muslim traditions)," while "interreligious" refers to "relations with other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism." This is in stark contrast to the use of "interreligious" to mean the interactions between different religions, as in the case of J. Abraham Vélez de Cea's work, which engages intimately with the Christian theological vocabulary, and in the case of a recent symposium in Chinese religions at Hamburg University entitled, "Modes of Interreligious Engagement: Buddhism And Other Religious Traditions In Medieval China." Without some sort of consensus on the meaning of these terms, or at least some systematic attention paid to what they mean in different contexts, it is difficult and confusing to use them in discussion at this point. Moreover, it would be beneficial to interfaith and interreligious studies if there were to be some sort of systematic study of the ways in which the key terms within this field were used.

I suggest that an answer to the first question can come from considering the second question, namely, how the inclusion of religious traditions from different geographic and cultural domains affects the conversation in interfaith and interreligious studies. Most of the literature that I have come across in interfaith and interreligious studies deals with modern America and, to a lesser extent, Europe. I suggest that in the process of coming to a consensus regarding the meaning of "interfaith," "interreligious," "pluralism," and so forth, we should also consider examples of interreligious encounters in different cultural and temporal contexts—like pre-modern India, medieval China, and nineteenth-century Tibet.

In this paper, we have seen that many aspects of Shabkar's promotion of non-sectarianism in nineteenth-century Tibet are remarkably similar to many examples of contemporary interfaith dialogue. Like in Diana Eck's Pluralism Project, Shabkar is actively engaged in learning about the traditions of other sects and religions; like the cases documented by Gustav Niebuhr and Susan Thistlethwaite'e volume, Shabkar's fervent promotion of non-sectarianism was in part a response to

[16] Zhabs dkar, snyigs dus (2003), vol. 2, 236.3-237.3. Zhabs dkar, snyigs dus (2003), vol. 1, 231.5-232.2; Ricard, trans., 138.
[17] See for example Kiblinger, 2, and Schmidt-Leukal, 14.

inter-sectarian hostility on the ground; like Paul Knitter and many theologians, Shabkar's promotion of non-sectarianism was motivated by his own faith. At the same time, however, Shabkar's promotion of non-sectarianism teaches us something new about interfaith dialogue. For example, how many individuals engaged in interfaith dialogue—be they theologians, students on a university campus, or religious studies scholars—use a varied repertoire of literary and religious media to convey their message?[18] Or, to what degree are modern forms of interreligious and interfaith dialogue grounded in specific religious, cultural, and historical backgrounds, as Shabkar's clearly was?

In the end, this comparative enterprise reminds us that religious diversity is not unique to our culture or the contemporary world, and in turn, this encourages us to be more self-reflexive of our own interfaith and interreligious endeavors in a deeper way. We'll find that, while some cases from other times and cultures fit into our existent molds and models, others do not. Shabkar's approach to religious and sectarian diversity on the Tibetan plateau in the nineteenth century is a case in point: while he was clearly engaged in activities that promoted intersectarian and interreligious harmony, we could not equate his activities to "interfaith dialogue" or "interreligious dialogue" as it occurs in twenty-first century America, for example. These two phenomena simply come from two starkly different historical and cultural contexts. And yet, by looking at examples of interreligious encounter from varying temporal and cultural contexts, we will be able to expand the limits of knowledge in this emerging field of interfaith and interreligious studies by looking at how individuals from different cultures responded to religious diversity in the past.

To conclude, I suggest that in order to enrich and broaden the scope of the emerging field of interfaith and interreligious studies, it would be productive to analyze how groups and individuals from different cultural and temporal periods responded to religious diversity. Adopting the interfaith and interreligious vocabulary in these varied case studies would be a powerful way of including them in the conversation. However, as to whether or not it is accurate or acceptable to adopt the interfaith and interreligious studies vocabulary in the study of varied historical and cultural examples of interreligious engagement, we must first systematically establish what these words mean and in which contexts.

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[18] The closest example that I can think of is the Pluralism Project, with its use of multiple forms of media, and varied modes of engagement with different sectors of society.

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