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## **Christians in Bhutan seek to dispel regime's mistrust**

***Church leaders call for dialogue to defend against accusations of unethical evangelism.***

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct News (09.09.2011) / HRWF (14.09.2011) – [www.hrwf.net](http://www.hrwf.net) – Christians in this Buddhist nation have been awaiting a decision on whether they will receive official recognition, but it appears they will first see a measure against fraudulent conversion that the prime minister acknowledges is essentially designed to deter evangelism.

In this tiny country tucked between China and India in the Himalayan Mountains, Bhutan's parliament is considering an amendment to the penal code that seeks to penalize conversion by coercion or inducement. Under proposed Section 463 of the Penal Code, "a defendant shall be guilty of the offense of proselytization if the defendant uses coercion or other forms of inducement to cause the conversion of a person from one religion or faith to another," according to the government-run Kuensel newspaper.

Prime Minister Jigmi Yoser Thinley told Compass the proposed clause in the penal code was "essentially... to deter conversion," saying there was no reason why Christians should seek to induce others to join their faith.

"There are a few Christians and followers of other faiths as well [in Bhutan], and there is no difficulty with that," Thinley said. "That is good... we promote diversity of cultures. But then, when there are those who try to convert others without understanding the values, the principles, and the essence of the other religion, we have here what constitutes the worst form of discrimination."

In an exclusive interview in his office, Thinley said Christians seek to convert other Bhutanese citizens with the power of money and an attitude of spiritual superiority, accusations that Christian leaders in the country denied.

Thinley said "inducing a poor person" by "manipulating the social and economic disadvantages and circumstances of that person, to accept your religion, on the ground that it is superior to mine," divides society.

"And I have seen families being divided in the country," he said. "I have seen communities being divided."

The government of Bhutan commands an unusually high level of respect from its people. Christians, estimated to be between 6,000 and 15,000, equally admire the country's leaders, who in recent months appeared willing to grant them legal recognition but remain indecisive.

Christian leaders said they were distressed with the government's notion of Christians and Christianity, which they said was "far from true."

"No evidence of such allegations has come to our knowledge, but still we will never try to defend anyone who indulges in unethical conversions," said a Christian leader from Thimphu on condition of anonymity. "There might be some who are doing this, and the authorities must deal with them strictly for breaking the law of the country."

Several other pastors and leaders sitting with him nodded in agreement.

The prime minister, who has headed Bhutan's first fully democratic government since 2008, said Christianity can be beneficial to society.

"Having read most of the books [of the Bible], having attended church in my young days every Sunday, and then again every weekday when I was in school except for Saturday, I know that it is a good moral and ethical framework for the functioning of a good society," he said. "But just as I would not encourage and not think well of a Buddhist trying to convert a Christian, I think I feel the same way [about a Christian trying to convert a Buddhist]."

Thinley stressed that religion was "all about ethics and morality," but that when it is spread through immoral and unethical acts, "it's a crime against humanity."

"When a dying patient is being whispered into the ear, [to the effect that ] the only way to survive is to disown your religion and to accept this new faith, and when this whisper is being done by a doctor or by an attending nurse, I think it is the greatest sin one can commit," he said. "When a poor parent is being told that, 'Look, your child cannot go to school; you change your faith and we will provide you the possibility to ensure that your child can attend school,' that is corruption. And when a poor family is being told that, 'Why don't you embrace our faith because then you don't have to bear any cost for the burial of this person who is about to die in your family – it will be free,' that's corruption; that's bribery."

Some Buddhist sects in Bhutan expect their adherents to have elaborate, expensive funeral rituals.

Christians said officials were wrong to view them negatively and called for dialogue with the government. Compass learned that there has been no formal interaction between the government and Christians leaders apart from some individual pastors occasionally meeting an official.

Several stories have appeared in Bhutan's newspapers claiming that converts were being paid money by other Christians from Western countries. Compass met many journalists who sincerely believed that foreign Christian groups were offering money for converts.

"Perhaps this is what has created such mistrust between us and our government," said the Christian leader. "We hope the government would give us a chance to defend ourselves. We are more than willing to address the government's concerns."

He added that journalists should speak to pastors and other church leaders to verify stories about inducements to convert.

"We will extend full cooperation, as we do not believe in using coercion or inducement to convert others – it is against our Christian tenets," he said, adding, "We do not fear the penal code amendment."

Bhutan Minister for Home and Culture Minjur Dorji told Compass that the passing and implementation of the penal code amendment "may take some more time, due to procedures involved." Asked if some could misuse the law to make false allegations and

thereby create religious disharmony, as in Indian states with similar anti-conversion legislation, Dorji promised he would not allow that to happen.

### **Official Recognition**

Dorji said his department had yet to decide whether Christians could be recognized officially.

"There is no legal provision for that," he said. "It's not in the constitution, and not in the Religious Organizations Act."

The Religious Organizations Act states that one of its main objectives is to "facilitate the establishment of ROs [Religious Organizations] in order to benefit the religious institutions and protect the spiritual heritage of Bhutan [which is Buddhism, according to the constitution]." Only Buddhist and Hindu organizations have been registered by the country's authority regulating religious organizations, known as the Chhoehey Lhentshog.

Roughly 75 percent of Bhutan's population of 708,484 is Buddhist, and Hindus, mainly ethnic Nepalese, account for around 22 percent, according to Operation World.

The constitution of Bhutan allows religious freedom. Article 7(4) states, "A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion," and Article 3(2) says, "The Druk Gyalpo [King of Bhutan] is the protector of all religions in Bhutan." Christians say they are thankful to their political leaders and the country's highly revered king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, for granting religious freedom to all communities. But no church or Christian organization is a legal entity yet.

"The church in Bhutan is not underground any longer; we meet regularly on Sundays without any interference by the authorities," said the Christian source. "But we are not allowed to function as an organization with a legally recognized status."

Until Christian groups are legally recognized, their rights will remain ambiguous, he added.

"Legal status is also imperative for us to be able to actively engage in nation-building," said another Christian leader. "We love our country as much as other Bhutanese do. And we are equally proud of our nation's distinct culture."

One of the world's most isolated countries until recent years, Bhutan began to open up to the outside world in the 1970s. Former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck envisioned democracy in the country in 2006, after the rule of an absolute monarchy for over a century.

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## **Religious conversion worst form of 'intolerance,' Bhutan PM Says**

***Propagation of religion is allowable – but not seeking conversions, top politician says***

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (13.04.2011) / HRWF (18.04.2011) – [www.hrwf.net](http://www.hrwf.net) - In the Kingdom of Bhutan, where Christianity is still awaiting legal recognition, Christians have the right to proclaim their faith but must not use coercion or claim religious superiority to seek conversions, the country's prime minister told Compass in an exclusive interview.

"I view conversions very negatively, because conversion is the worst form of intolerance," Jigmi Yoser Thinley said in his office in the capital of the predominantly Buddhist nation.

Christian leaders in Bhutan have told Compass that they enjoy certain freedoms to practice their faith in private homes, but, because of a prohibition against church buildings and other restrictions, they were not sure if proclamation of their faith – included in international human rights codes – was allowed in Bhutan.

Prime Minister Thinley, who as head of the ruling party is the most influential political chief in the country, said propagation of one's faith is allowed, but he made it clear that he views attempts to convert others with extreme suspicion.

"The first premise [of seeking conversion] is that you believe that your religion is the right religion, and the religion of the convertee is wrong – what he believes in is wrong, what he practices is wrong, that your religion is superior and that you have this responsibility to promote your way of life, your way of thinking, your way of worship," Thinley said. "It's the worst form of intolerance. And it divides families and societies."

Bhutan's constitution does not restrict the right to convert or proselytize, but some Non-Governmental Organizations have said the government effectively limits this right by restricting construction of non-Buddhist worship buildings and celebration of some non-Buddhist festivals, according to the U.S. Department of State's 2010 International Religious Freedom Report.

It adds that Bhutan's National Security Act (NSA) further limits proclamation of one's faith by prohibiting "words either spoken or written, or by other means whatsoever, that promote or attempt to promote, on grounds of religion, race, language, caste, or community, or on any other ground whatsoever, feelings of enmity or hatred between different religious, racial, or language groups or castes and communities." Violation of the NSA is punishable by up to three years' imprisonment, though whether any cases have been prosecuted is unknown, according to the State Department report.

Bhutan's first democratic prime minister after about a century of absolute monarchy, Thinley completed three years in office last Thursday (April 7). While he affirmed that it is allowable for Christians to proclaim their faith – a practice commanded by Christ, with followers agreeing that it is the Holy Spirit, not man, that "converts" people – Thinley made his suspicions about Christians' motives manifest.

"Any kind of proselytization that involves economic and material incentives [is wrong]," he said. "Many people are being converted on hospital beds in their weakest and most vulnerable moments. And these people are whispering in their ears that 'there is no hope for you. The only way that you can survive is if you accept this particular religion.' That is wrong."

Thinley's suspicions include the belief that Christians offer material incentives to convert.

"Going to the poor and saying, 'Look, your religion doesn't provide for this life, our religion provides for this life as well as the future,' is wrong. And that is the basis for proselytization."

Christian pastors in Thimphu told Compass that the perception that Bhutan's Christians use money to convert the poor was flawed.

The pastors, requesting anonymity, said they prayed for healing of the sick because they felt they were not allowed to preach tenets of Christianity directly. Many of those who

experience healing – almost all who are prayed for, they claimed – do read the Bible and then believe in Jesus’ teachings.

Asked if a person can convert if she or he believed in Christianity, the prime minister replied, “[There is] freedom of choice, yes.”

In his interview with Compass, Thinley felt compelled to defend Buddhism against assertions that citizens worship idols.

“To say that, ‘Your religion is wrong, worshiping idols is wrong,’ who worships idols?” he said. “We don’t worship idols. Those are just representations and manifestations that help you to focus.”

Leader of the royalist Druk Phuensum Tshogpa party, Thinley is regarded as a sincere politician who is trusted by Bhutan’s small Christian minority. He became the prime minister in April 2008 following the first democratic election after Bhutan’s fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, abdicated power in 2006 to pave the way toward democracy.

Until Bhutan became a constitutional monarchy in 2008, the practice of Christianity was believed to be banned in the country. The constitution now grants the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion to all citizens. It also states that the king is the protector of all religions.

Thus far, the Religious Organisations Act of 2007 has recognized only Buddhist and Hindu organizations. As a result, no church building or Christian bookstore has been allowed in the country, nor can Christians engage in social work. Christianity in Bhutan remains confined to the homes of local believers, where they meet for collective worship on Sundays.

Asked if a Christian federation should be registered by the government to allow Christians to function with legal recognition, Thinley said, “Yes, definitely.”

The country’s agency regulating religious organizations under the 2007 act, locally known as the *Chhoedey Lhentshog*, is expected to make a decision on whether it could register a Christian federation representing all Christians. The authority is looking into provisions in the law to see if there is a scope for a non-Buddhist and non-Hindu organization to be registered. (See [www.compassdirect.com](http://www.compassdirect.com), “Official Recognition Eludes Christian Groups in Bhutan,” Feb. 1.)

On whether the Religious Organisations Act could be amended if it is determined that it does not allow legal recognition of a Christian federation, the prime minister said, “If the majority view and support prevails in the country, the law will change.”

Thinley added that he was partially raised as a Christian.

“I am part Christian, too,” he said. “I read the Bible, occasionally of course. I come from a traditional [Christian] school and attended church every day except for Saturdays for nine years.”

A tiny nation in the Himalayas between India and China, Bhutan has a population of 708,484 people, of which roughly 75 percent are Buddhist, according to *Operation World*. Christians are estimated to be between 6,000 to nearly 15,000 (the latter figure would put Christians at more than 2 percent of the population), mostly from the south. Hindus, mainly ethnic Nepalese, constitute around 22 percent of the population and have a majority in the south.

## **Religious ‘Competition’**

Bhutan's opposition leader, Lyonpo Tshering Tobgay, was equally disapproving of religious conversion.

"I am for propagation of spiritual values or anything that allows people to be good human beings," he told Compass. "[But] we cannot have competition among religions in Bhutan."

He said, however, that Christians must be given rights equal to those of Hindus and Buddhists.

"Our constitution guarantees the right to freedom of practice – full stop, no conditions," he said. "But now, as a small nation state, there are some realities. Christianity is a lot more evangelistic than Hinduism or Buddhism."

Tobgay said there are Christians who are tolerant and compassionate of other peoples, cultures and religions, but "there are Christians also who go through life on war footing to save every soul. That's their calling, and it's good for them, except that in Bhutan we do not have the numbers to accommodate such zeal."

Being a small nation between India and China, Bhutan's perceived geopolitical vulnerability leads authorities to seek to pre-empt any religious, social or political unrest. With no economic or military might, Bhutan seeks to assert and celebrate its sovereignty through its distinctive culture, which is based on Buddhism, authorities say.

Tobgay voiced his concern on perceived threats to Bhutan's Buddhist culture.

"I studied in a Christian school, and I have lived in the West, and I have been approached by the Jehovah's Witness – in a subway, in an elevator, in a restaurant in the U.S. and Switzerland. I am not saying they are bad. But I would be a fool if I was not concerned about that in Bhutan," he said. "There are other things I am personally concerned about. Religions in Bhutan must live in harmony. Too often I have come across people who seek a convert, pointing to statues of our deities and saying that idol worship is evil worship. That is not good for the security of our country, the harmony of our country and the pursuit of happiness."

The premise of the *Chhoedey Lhentshog*, the agency regulating religious organizations, he said, "is that all the different schools of Buddhism and all the different religions see eye to eye with mutual respect and mutual understanding. If that objective is not met, it does not make sense to be part of that."

It remains unclear what the legal rights of Christians are, as there is no interaction between the Christians and the government. Christian sources in Bhutan said they were open to dialogue with the government in order to remove "misunderstandings" and "distrust."

"Thankfully, our political leadership is sincere and trustworthy," said one Christian leader.

Asserting that Christians enjoy the right to worship in Bhutan, Prime Minister Thinley said authorities have not interfered with any worship services.

"There are more Christian activities taking place on a daily basis than Hindu and Buddhist activities," he added.

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## Official recognition eludes Christian groups in Bhutan

*Christians can practice their faith even without legal identity, officials argue*

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (01.02.2011) / HRWF (02.02.2011) – [www.hrwf.net](http://www.hrwf.net) - Bhutan officials have given assurances that freedom for Christians to worship “within the cultural norms” of the tiny Buddhist nation in the Himalayas will not be violated, but they remain ambiguous on whether and when the miniscule community will obtain legal identity.

The cultural norms include a prohibition against proselytizing. But Bhutan Minister for Home and Culture Lyonpo Minjur Dorji told Compass there are provisions in the Constitution of Bhutan that can be interpreted as allowing room for Christianity in “the Land of the Thunder Dragon,” as the country is called.

The country’s agency regulating religious organizations was expected to make a decision last December on whether it could register a Christian federation representing all Christians, but an official at the agency said the matter requires further investigation. Meantime, Home Minister Dorji indicated no change was necessary.

“What else do you need?” he said. “Ask Christians if they have been prevented from meeting together for worship. Two of our parliamentarians are Christian. Christians need not fear the government.”

He added that Article 3(2) of the constitution states, “The Druk Gyalpo [the King of Bhutan] is the protector of all religions in Bhutan,” and Article 7(4) states, “A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”

Dorji Tshering, member secretary of the regulatory authority locally known as Chhoedey Lhentshog, had earlier told Compass that the agency was likely to discuss and allow registration of a Christian federation at its meeting last December. (See [www.compassdirect.org](http://www.compassdirect.org), “Legal Status Foreseen for Christianity in Buddhist Bhutan,” Nov. 4, 2010.)

Last week Tshering told Compass that “certain issues” needed to be looked into before a decision could be made.

“The intent of the Religious Organizations Act of Bhutan [under which the regulatory authority functions] is to protect and preserve the spiritual heritage of Bhutan,” he said. “We need to see if such preconditions can be met if we register a Christian organization.”

Bhutan’s constitution states that Buddhism is the “spiritual heritage” of the country.

The Religious Organizations Act, enacted in 2007 and implemented in 2009, states that one of its main objectives is to “facilitate the establishment of ROs [religious organizations] in order to benefit the religious institutions and protect the spiritual heritage of Bhutan.”

The act also stipulates that registered organizations will not “compel any person to belong to another faith, by providing reward or inducement.” The government is also in the process of introducing a clause banning conversions by force or allurements in the country’s penal code.

Penden Wangchuk, secretary of the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, said the international community was mistaking lack of legal identity for Christianity in Bhutan with illegality.

"The issue concerning granting registration rights to Christians is not about legality or illegality of Christianity," Wangchuk said. "They are free to practice their religion. Their existence is not against the law."

Most Christian leaders in Bhutan who met with Compass agreed that they enjoyed certain freedoms to practice their faith, and that their leaders were trustworthy. Some pointed out, however, that it was not clear if propagation of faith, publishing of books and the right to Christian burial were allowed in the country.

While Christians meet in house churches, there is no church building, Christian bookstore or Christian cemetery in Bhutan.

Around 75 percent of the 708,484 Bhutanese are Buddhist, according to Operation World. Hindus, mainly ethnic Nepalese, constitute around 22 percent of the population and have a majority in the south. It is estimated that Bhutan has between 6,000 to nearly 15,000 Christians (the latter figure would put Christians at more than 2 percent of the population), mostly from the south.

Hindus have a legal entity under the federation of Hindu Religion Community (Hindu Dharma Samudaya) of Bhutan, which was registered with the Chhoedey Lhentshog authority along with Buddhist organizations over a year ago.

Officials maintain, however, that there is no difference between freedoms for Hindus and Christians. Asked if Christians could legally publish books for religious education though they are not registered, Home Secretary Dorji said, "If a book seeks to promote good values based on Jesus' teachings, no one will have any objections."

Tshering of the regulatory agency Chhoedey Lhentshog agreed.

"Teachings of Jesus like not letting your right hand know what your left hand is doing are good," he said. "There is no problem in publishing books on such values."

On Christians' right to burial, Dorji said he has been trying to find a solution.

"Our constitution says that 60 percent of the land will remain under forest cover at all times, and the government has decided to demarcate instead 70 percent of the country's area as forest," he said. "Moreover, the Buddhists believe that mountains are sacred, and no bodies should be buried there. So where do we have the land [for a cemetery]?"

Dorji said he would like to encourage Christians to cremate their dead, "which is more environment-friendly. We are trying to convince even Buddhists and others to use that method."

Local newspapers have reported on several incidents of secret Christian graves being exhumed and skulls and thigh bones extracted by some religious cults for Buddhist rituals. While most Christians take bodies across the border to the neighboring Indian town of Jaigaon, some take them to nearby jungles for burial.

On the Christians' right to propagate their faith, Home Minister Dorji said he suspected inducement to convert.

"We have found that most of the Bhutanese who have converted to Christianity are very poor," he said. "This shows that some are giving monetary benefits to convert them."



The minister also claimed that the government had evidence of Christians using money to lure people into converting.

Godfrey Yogarajah, executive director of the World Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission, told Compass that he recommended local Christian leaders come up with a code of conduct to address the allegation.

"There is little difference between the view the government and the Christians hold concerning conversions," said Yogarajah, who recently visited Bhutan. "The Christians also believe that no monetary incentive should be given to convert anyone, as this is against the Christian doctrine. So the Christians should practice self-regulation and assure the government that they themselves will investigate any allegation of misconduct by a Christian."

### **The Christian threat**

Asked if preaching without inducement or force was allowed, Home Minister Dorji said there was freedom for people to convert of their own will. But he also indicated that the growth of Christianity could be a threat to the nation, which sees its unique culture as its main strength.

The minister said the country's culture was rooted in Buddhism, and that "if we lose our culture, we will lose everything."

The minister also alluded to Bhutan's geo-political apprehensions as a reason behind the country's emphasis on preservation of culture.

Until a few decades ago, Bhutan had four neighbours – Asian giants India and China and Buddhist nations Tibet and Sikkim. Tibet, however, went to China in 1950, and Sikkim became an Indian state in 1975. Now Bhutan is the only "dot" between India and China. Most Bhutanese fear that their nation could meet the same fate as Tibet and Sikkim if its culture, which sets it apart from the two mammoth nations, is destroyed.

It was apparently this fear that led the then king of Bhutan to adopt a one-nation-one-people policy to enhance the cultural uniformity of the country in the 1990s. But the ethnic Nepalese in the south objected to and rebelled against that policy. When the government dealt with them strictly, it led to an exodus of around 100,000 ethnic Nepalese to Nepal.

While pro-government sources claim that the crackdown was a reaction to an alarmingly high influx of illegal migrants to south Bhutan, the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal call it ethnic persecution.

"Any organized effort to proselytize is a cause of concern for any small nation," said Pavan K. Varma, ambassador of India in Bhutan.

In October 2010, a court in south Bhutan sentenced a Christian man to three years of imprisonment for showing a Christian film. (See [www.compassdirect.org](http://www.compassdirect.org), "Christian in Bhutan Imprisoned for Showing Film on Christ," Oct. 18, 2010.)

Varma said that Bhutan did not want a radical change lest it lead to instability.

"Bhutan was never colonized – there was no disruption into the continuity and authenticity of the culture of Bhutan," he said, adding that the Bhutanese have been careful to keep change from breaking continuity with the past.

Moreover, Bhutan is the only Vajrayāna Buddhist (part of Mahayana, one of the two main divisions of the religion) country in the world, Varma said, alluding to why Bhutan was protective about its religious heritage.

### **Groundwork for freedom**

The former king of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, envisioned democracy in the country in 2006 – after the rule of an absolute monarchy for over a century. The first elections were held in 2008, and since then the government has increasingly been giving rights to its people.

Gopilal Acharya, an ethnic Nepalese and former editor of Bhutan's first private newspaper, the Bhutan Times, told Compass that the king toured the country and discussed constitutional provisions with the citizens to prepare them for democracy. Some requested that he be the protector of only Buddhism, Acharya said, but the king would tell them that all religious communities should be treated equally.

Agreeing with Ambassador Varma, Acharya said change should be allowed only gradually, and that the international community needed to be a bit more patient with developments in the country.

David Griffiths, South Asia team leader at London-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said Bhutan falls short of international standards on religious freedom in its apparent restriction on propagating religion.

"UN human rights bodies have taken the line that this is part of the right to manifest a religion," Griffiths said. "Restricting propagation of religion is understandable from the point of view of preserving Bhutan's unique and rich cultural identity, but it is not true religious freedom."

Griffiths added that the government should be encouraged not to restrict the propagation of religion in practice, "but in turn, the right to propagate should always be exercised with sensitivity and responsibility [by Christians]."

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