CHAPTER FOUR

THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

The above discussions have not addressed several important religio-political terms and concepts which must be understood if we are to have a clear picture of the relationship between religion and politics in the Imperial period and later. As with the terminology concerning rituals, they are presented in isolation, and for much the same reason: We are uncertain about which broader context is most appropriate for them. As a matter of fact, here even more diverse subjects have been chosen, but they do have one thing in common: All are central to understanding the religion and politics of the Tibetans over a long period of their history. They either helped define leadership or enhanced the special status of the leadership. They are given in order of what one might reasonably consider their rank of overall importance to the formation of Tibet’s religious culture.

Why Avalokiteśvara?

This question has not been given much attention in scholarship, yet it seems to be one of the most significant questions one could ask, given the form Buddhism has taken in Tibet.

The answer, not surprisingly, turns out to be political. It seems that not all Bodhisattvas are created equal, and Avalokiteśvara (Spyan Ras Gzigs) has a long, complex period of development which is permeated with political significance.

The history of Avalokiteśvara goes back to Chapter 24 of the Sad-dharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra. In this text, he is a rescuer of those in danger and protector of the defenseless in a violent world. Although his development is not a simple matter, his later character is not inconsistent with this beginning. Rather, all else is a logical progression.

Perhaps the most important source for understanding this development is the Karanḍavyūhasūtra [KVS]. In this work, Avalokiteśvara is provided with an impressive array of titles befitting the highest monarch: Lord of Beings; Overseer of the Three Worlds; Lord of the Three Worlds (a term with a close equivalent in Śaivite belief); Possessor of
the World; Supreme Ruler Protecting the Earth, etc. (lokeśasya jagat-
prabhu and jagannātha; trailokyādhipati; trailokeśvara (cf. tribhuvan);
lokanātha; ḷṣitipāḍhirājā), etc. Already in the two opening lines, he is
an Overseer of All Worlds (sarvalokādhipa) and is addressed as the lord
you go to for protection (tam nātham śaranam gatva). Not only does the
vocabulary here contain traditional Indian terminology connected with
sovereignty and religio-political status, it also lends a feeling of actual
power which complements those qualities indicative of Avalokiteśvara’s
soteriological function found there, such as sarvalokādhipa (i.e., Lord
of the Six Realms, hence his designation as Spyi Lha), as well as his
metaphysical dimensions (sarvadharmādhinātha). It is clear that the
author(s) of KVS understood that Avalokiteśvara cannot help beings
in all realms unless he can project a powerful presence, the status of
a ruler, in them.

The sum of this vocabulary, and the actions he takes, work to create a
seemless unity of his religious-soteriological and political-administrative
natures. In fact, even the rarified concept of a Cakravartin or traditional
Buddhist ‘Universal Ruler’ loses its significance in this stream of epithets
and titles, although references in the early sources to his behaving in
the way of a Cakravartin are a typical circumlocution for having that
status.1 This is emphasized by the fact that Avalokiteśvara, pictured in
Indian political vocabulary as Lokanātha, is a much more tangible fig-
ure than the Cakravartin, that ill-defined, transcendent ideal of earlier
Buddhist literature, although they share some important characteris-
tics, e.g., those surrounding solar symbolism (on which below). The
impression is given that being a Cakravartin is a minor adornment of
his, but it is clear that creating them—either through the six syllables
associated with him (KVS, p. 223: . . . sarvavidyādhirajendraścakrav
arti guṇākaraḥ / ṣaṭkapāramitām nityaṃ sampūrayeddine dine), or
through his thousand-armed, thousand-eyed (Phyag Stong Spyan Stong)
manifestation, where each of his arms becomes a Cakravartin, is one of
his major and enduring functions.2 Passages in the following sections
provide more details about how this concept was envisioned.

We could speak about many other characteristics discernable in the
developed figure of Avalokiteśvara, which certainly has many interesting
facets.3 To explain his popularity in Tibet, however, we need to choose
from among those qualities that would have made him attractive to
the leaderships of that country. (This resolves into: What encouraged
Sanghas to present him as an attractive object of worship for rulers