

## **Forum on Minority Issues, sixth session**

**Topic: Promotion and protection of the identity of religious minorities**

**Proposed oral presentation (3 min.)**

*Otto Kölbl, University of Lausanne*

Thank you, Madame Chairperson. Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to make a suggestion for taking into consideration a new aspect in the draft recommendations: in addition to individual freedom, the organizational and financial capabilities of religious organizations should be addressed. Without an organized clergy able to support itself, the survival of religious minorities cannot be taken for granted. The present presentation is based on recent research in the Tibetan areas in China.

The relationship between the Chinese government and the Tibetan Buddhist monastic system has not always been smooth; the support of separatist forces by foreign powers has not made things easier. However, in recent times, despite ongoing tensions, both sides have been able to build up an interesting relationship which looks very promising for the long term.

In the traditional Tibetan society, the monasteries have always had not only religious, but also considerable economic, political and military power and have played an important role in structuring the lay society. After the widespread destruction during the Cultural Revolution, the objective was to rebuild the monasteries and to allow the Tibetans to develop their economy in order to enjoy a new prosperity.

However, within the lay society, there was no tradition of small entrepreneurship and trade; the Tibetans were not able to benefit from the new opportunities like the Han and Hui Chinese. On the other hand, the monasteries had a century-long tradition of engaging in business. This activity was conducted by monks who did not seek to get rich themselves, but dedicated themselves to the economic development of the monastery and the local community.

Since the beginning of the economic reforms in China, many monasteries played a pioneer role in developing the local economy, often with the help of the local government in the form of bank credits and favorable tax conditions. This process has allowed the monasteries as well as the lay community to raise their standard of living and to build up a model of business ethics in line with Buddhist principles. This interesting model should be investigated further and supported, for example through knowhow transfer in the mountain tourism sector. This whole process shows the importance of protecting not only individual religious freedom, but also organizational and financial capabilities of religious organization.