

## **Highlighting Unity: Two Approaches to Non-Sectarianism in Twentieth Century Tibet**

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In the late 19th and early 20th centuries there were attempts – apparently connected with the so-called “Ris med Movement” – to strengthen the scholastic traditions of non-dGe lugs schools in Eastern Tibet. These efforts included the establishment of dozens of scriptural colleges (bshad grwa) throughout the region, and the printing and dissemination of works by the Sa skya scholar, Go rams pa bSod nam seng ge (1429–1489) and the Nyingma polymath, ’Ju Mi pham (1846–1912). The texts of these two influential philosophers, complete with their notorious criticisms of mainstream dGe lugs pa thought, came to represent the orthodox viewpoint for followers of their respective traditions within many newly founded scriptural colleges. These developments were not without controversy, however, and inspired much debate and polemical exchange. In commenting upon this period and its key figures, some modern scholars have questioned how the strengthening and promotion of individual philosophical traditions could be regarded as non-sectarian. Yet, in spite of this, there is no question that ’Ju Mi pham and the publishers of Go rams pa’s writings continue to be associated with the Ris med ideal. In this paper I will explore the views of two writers who took a different approach to inter-sectarian (and intra-sectarian) discourse during this same period of Tibetan history and who both lived in the mGo log region of Eastern Tibet. These authors aimed less at differentiating and strengthening rival doctrines, and more at highlighting their underlying unity or compatibility. The Third rDo grub chen, ’Jigs med bstan pa’i nyi ma (1865–1926), is known for his comparative writings on elements of gSar ma and rNying ma tantra, in the course of which he repeatedly asserts the correspondence of the subtle mind of clear light (’od gsal; prabhāsvara) described in Highest Yoga Tantra and the pure awareness (rig pa) of rDzogs chen. Unlike Mi pham and his followers, ’Jigs med bstan pa’i nyi ma claimed that the principal difference between rDzogs chen and gSar ma tantra lies in the methods they employ, rather than their respective views. And although encouraged by Mi pham to promote the rNying ma school, he neither made use of Mi pham’s distinctive terminology nor echoed his key assertions. While ’Jigs med bstan pa’i nyi ma maintains the superiority of Atiyoga and thus proposes an inclusivist, hierarchical model of the various vehicles, his rDzogs chen writings are notable for their emphasis on commonality as well as difference. mDo sngags chos kyi rgya mtsho (1903–1957) was a dGe lugs pa lama from dPal sNyan mo Monastery in mGo log, who drew inspiration from ’Jigs med bstan pa’i nyi ma and his

immediate disciples. In his writings he explicitly sought to heal sectarian division by uniting rNying ma views on rDzogs chen, especially those expressed in the works of Klong chen rab 'byams (1308–1364) and Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po (1012–1088), with the views on Highest Yoga tantra set out by Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419). These syncretistic appeals to unity are in marked contrast not only to the distinguishing approach taken by the likes of 'Ju Mi pham and Bod pa sprul sku bsTan pa'i nyi ma (1898–1959), but also to the more exclusivist tendencies prevalent within the dGe lugs pa school – as witnessed, for example, in the infamous letters of Pha bong kha pa bDe chen snying po (1878–1941). Through this brief examination, I will suggest that the approach of strengthening scholastic traditions and highlighting their uniqueness may have actually served to increase intersectarian rivalry and conflict. Although the more ecumenical approaches discussed in the paper had only limited influence, they represent significant ideological opposition to dominant trends, especially as rival claimants to the loaded term “non-sectarian” (*ris med*). While Tibetan Buddhism has tended in recent years towards sectarian differentiation, with religious leaders concentrating their efforts on preserving and re-establishing their own traditions in exile, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has often attempted to highlight the underlying unity of the major schools. And, in so doing, he has drawn upon the very writings discussed in this paper. In conclusion, then, I will suggest that there is a broader significance to this 20<sup>th</sup> century debate. It certainly represents an intriguing case of ‘intra-religious dialogue’, but it also raises perennial questions, both for Tibet and more generally, such as: What does it mean to be truly non-sectarian?