

the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ and justification through faith, but that they barely mention them and instead focus on virtue (and so things that could be considered the outworking of salvation becomes their primary theological focus). In fact, as Macleod points out, it was actually the evangelical camp themselves who, in the 1800s, brought in the German higher criticism that led to the deconstruction of Westminster orthodoxy.

Moving beyond bare historical theology, Macleod provides thoughtful evaluations and guidance to the church today. This work will be of greatest interest to the evangelical stream of the church and to those wishing to interact with it. This comes with the caveat that there are times when extra care needs to be taken to sort out Macleod's theological evaluations from his descriptions. Overall, an excellent work of historical theology and of theology.

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**Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche, *From a Mountain in Tibet: A Monk's Journey* (London: Penguin, 2023), pp. 272, ISBN: 978-0241988954. £10.99**

It was a joy and a privilege to be asked to review one my most enjoyable reads of the last decade, not least because I have had the privilege to meet the author, Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche, on a number of occasions. Lama Yeshe is the protagonist in this beautiful and vivid memoir of family life in rural Tibet, and a dramatic and dangerous escape across the Himalayas. The story includes his encounter with the Woodstock generation in America, where he enjoyed the excesses of the lifestyle, before a personal transformation led to him eventually becoming Abbot of a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in Dumfries and Galloway, established by his brother Akong Rinpoche. One of his lasting contributions is procuring Holy Isle, off the island of Arran, where he set up a beautiful retreat centre.

This is not a self-congratulatory tale but a very human story of inner struggle, as the author takes on the responsibility of becoming a religious leader in Scotland, a far cry from his joyful simple childhood in the



isolated Tibetan mountains. It is a trope often found in novels and in cinema: a reluctant rebel, turned good, and their many dramatic turns along the way. In this case, it is all told with gentle self-deprecating humour.

It is a story of particular interest to myself as I had the privilege to spend some time at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery and refugee settlement outside Mysore, India, when working as a volunteer teacher in 1998. I fondly remember being woken at 6.30am each morning to the beautiful sounds of the monks, some as young as six, chanting in the temple. I was struck by the beauty of the faith, the approachability and kindness of the people, and their sense of playfulness and fun.

Lama Yeshe's autobiography starts with the captivating tale of his early life in Tibet. With no schools, he spent his days playing with friends. Life had a simple and natural rhythm. People lived according to the seasons, tending to their animals and crops. Harsh winters were spent indoors around the fire telling stories. People lived together in harmony, with a strong sense of community. Faith was written into the fabric of life, and interwoven throughout Lama Yeshe's story are the teachings of Buddhism, shared in a very accessible and relatable way.<sup>1</sup> He notes that he felt that he was a living part of the fabric of this interconnected world and this brought happiness and stability.

However, he was painfully aware that his blissful existence as a carefree boy was going to change forever. One of his elder brothers, Akong Rinpoche, had been identified as a reincarnated 'tulku' (a spiritual master who had chosen to be born again to guide humanity towards enlightenment). Akong Rinpoche had left home to fulfil his spiritual vocation and live at Dolma Lhakang Monastery where he was enthroned as Abbot at the tender age of four. As the younger brother of a tulku, Lama Yeshe knew that his life would be interrupted by his own new vocation to become his brother's full-time assistant at the monastery.

And so, Lama Yeshe moves to the monastery at the age of 12. He shares that it felt like his life was over. Compared to running free in the hills of home, it felt like a prison with its strict regime. He said his mind was closed to the teachings, sealed by resentment and self-pity, and that this resentment lasted for decades. He particularly resented his brother,

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<sup>1</sup> Although there is no Index in the book, there is a glossary of key Buddhist vocabulary.



who was strict with him and not emotionally effusive, although he recognises that he was a person of deep compassion.

Alongside the backdrop of the Himalayan mountains, the threat of Chinese invasion loomed large. It soon became apparent that the monks would need to escape. Lama Yeshe shares that initially he was very excited by this new adventure and the freedom he felt on leaving the monastery. He looks back somewhat bemused by this 15-year-old boy whose self-centredness blinded him to the reality of the sadness of exile and the destruction of his way of life by the People's Liberation Army. While initially trying to get to Lhasa, they heard news that monasteries had been destroyed and Buddhist Lamas rounded up and murdered. The Dalai Lama and the Karmapa (the head of their Buddhist lineage) had already escaped to India, so this seemed to be the only possibility open to them now.

Many people joined them, including children and the elderly, and Lama Yeshe recounts a tale of extreme hardship walking through the Himalayas where out of 300 travellers, only 13 survived. Perhaps most striking is when he recounts that they were so hungry that they resorted to eating their leather satchels, and by the end even eating their own shoes despite walking through the winter snows. Lama Yeshe realised that although he had railed against the rigours of monastic life, it had given him a basic training in forbearance, faith and trust which helped him to survive the suffering he endured.

The next few chapters outline his experiences of living in India, New York and at Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in rural Dumfries and Galloway. It is a 'racy' read at times as Lama Yeshe shares a no holds barred account of encountering life in the West in the swinging sixties. As a young man untethered from his cultural upbringing and with a rebellious streak, he recounts how he is influenced by alcohol, fast cars, motorbikes and casual relationships, a life of self-confessed self-centredness.

However, a time came when he found this lifestyle to be empty, unsatisfying and lacking in purpose. After five years living in New York, at the age of 37, he reflects that,

I'd believed in the idea of America as an optimistic and equitable place, built on aspirations for a better life. Now I felt that my eyes had been opened to the poverty of this materialistic viewpoint. [...] I saw how unhappy people were. They were so attached to



everything they had acquired, but on some level they knew it was worthless. (p. 159)

In contrast, he saw that those who had taken up a spiritual path had a humility, sincerity, and sense of purpose. He decided to transform his life overnight. He says, 'I knew with absolute certainty that I needed to become a monk, to go into long retreat and give myself over to contemplation and meditation, in order to tame my mind so that I might eventually be able to help others' (p. 160).

Not doing things by halves, he becomes a monk and shortly thereafter embarks on a four-year silent retreat. During this time his brother summons him to Samye Ling and he continues his retreat there. At that time 100 Westerners were also undertaking a four-year silent retreat at Samye Ling and Lama Yeshe saw that some of them were really struggling. The retreat leader was Tibetan and very strict. They weren't accustomed to the regime and the long periods of silence could bring up many negative thoughts and emotions.

There is a very satisfying narrative arc as Lama Yeshe shares how his many years of absorbing the excesses of Western culture helped him to understand the Western mindset and the retreatants' unique struggles in taking on such a different life focused on meditation. He was able to share his previous mistakes with them with humility and good humour in a relatable and approachable way, and so he was able to encourage and support them with authenticity. He understood the benefits of kindness and patience as he too had been supported by the Karmapa and the constant care of his brother Akong throughout his wayward rebellious years. This also helped to shape the flavour of Buddhism at Samye Ling in time to come. Lama Yeshe established a one-year ordination for people to become monks or nuns to experience the benefits without having to take the vocation on for a lifetime. He also established full ordination for women which had not been allowed in Tibet but has now been accepted by the Karmapa.

A part of Tibetan Buddhism is a sensitivity to signs and symbols. Akong Rinpoche had been chosen as a reincarnated tulku as he was given a test at the age of two to identify the belongings that he had owned in his previous life which he immediately picked out from an array of random objects. Lama Yeshe's procurement of Holy Isle was similarly fated. The lady who owned the island had a dream in which she saw the Mother of



Jesus tell her to give the island to a 'Lama Yeshe'. The island had been a place of Christian pilgrimage for a thousand years and had a strong spiritual energy. Lama Yeshe had also had a dream of this island during his retreat in America. In four months the entire sum was raised by individual donors to purchase the island. A centre for nuns was built on the south end of the island for the four-year silent retreat and the Centre for World Peace and Health on the north end, where anyone could come on retreat and experience the healing energy of the island.

This would have been the end of a beautiful story but tragically 10 years later, Akong Rinpoche, along with his nephew and another monk were murdered on a visit to China by a group of men, including a monk who had previously worked at Samye Ling as the master craftsman. Knowing that Akong had brought money to China for various aid projects the monk had unfairly demanded an additional large sum for his artistic work. Akong explained that he couldn't hand over the charity funds as it wasn't his to give, so they took his life. Lama Yeshe related that his many years of Buddhist meditation practice helped him not to react with anger and bitterness towards the perpetrator, but with pity for the two men sentenced to death by the Chinese authorities.

One of the key themes of the story is how we deal with suffering and difficult circumstances in life. Lama Yeshe outlines the philosophy of Buddhism that says that suffering is inevitable, but it is how we respond to the painful events in our lives that will determine the extent and duration of our suffering. The Tibetans had no choice but to support one another in their harsh and isolated environment. Their sense of family, community and faith held them together and Lama Yeshe shares that human beings thrive when we feel part of a bigger whole, and that being part of nature and community builds compassion for all living beings and the natural world, and a deep sense of gratitude.

By contrast, Lama Yeshe noted that in the West, people attempted to escape the pain of life, from alcohol to excessive busyness. He likens this pain to an arrow, but there is a second arrow that does even more damage, and that is resistance to or avoidance of pain. He said he also observed a third arrow, particularly prevalent among Westerners, and that was to blame themselves for not avoiding the inevitable suffering of life.

Another key theme in this story is the nature of true freedom. Is it a peaceful pastoral and isolated existence in the mountains where everyone supports each other but has a delineated role? Is it 'liberation' from



religion and medieval feudalism by the People's Liberation Army? Is it escaping the rules and discipline of monastic life and living for yourself in the 'freedom' of a Western consumerist society? Or is it in training the mind to live in the present moment and work with whatever circumstances are sent your way? As Lama Yeshe says in the introduction, 'This is my most deeply held wish: that more and more people will begin to tame their unquiet minds so that they may be able to live joyfully and to offer compassion to every living being on this earth' (p. x).

Finally, this is a story of hope and transformation. Lama Yeshe relates that people have come to him with stories of hopelessness, but he insists that change is possible for every single one of us, however broken or exhausted we may feel, and that every challenge we face is the raw material for our transformation.

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**Jennifer C. Snow, *Mission, Race, and Empire: The Episcopal Church in Global Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. viii + 360, ISBN 978-0197598948. £25.99**

What an important contribution this is to ongoing efforts to effectively, creatively problematise our tendency to valorise and venerate oversimplified historical narratives. Our prevailing (supposedly neutral) historical narrative is often given through a *de facto* white male perspective and is thus limited in its range and application without first making critical adjustments. It is furthermore essential when considering any discussion about the church to ask who is being excluded in our historical narratives. This conviction animates Jennifer Snow's *Mission, Race, and Empire*.

Observing and correcting absences is as crucial to the task of critically narrating church history as listening with a generosity of spirit to those already present. Snow's openness about her own identity as 'a white

