

Previous Dalai Lamas were not always peaceful monks

by [Daniel Burke](#)

July 12, 2011

WASHINGTON (RNS) The Dalai Lama is spending 10 days here leading an elaborate Buddhist ritual designed to encourage compassion -- exactly the kind of peacenik advocacy we have come to expect from the 76-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner.

But while most of Tibet's 13 previous Dalai Lamas displayed similar moral scruples, a few weren't quite so peaceable, or even very monklike at all.

Catholics may reluctantly recall instances of popes behaving badly. But Tibetans don't draw bright moral lines between "good" and "bad" Dalai Lamas, explained Robert Barnett, an expert on the history of Tibet at Columbia University in New York.

"They are not judgmental about these differences," he said. "All are considered necessary and valuable." And all are considered reincarnations of Chenrezig, a kind of Buddhist saint dedicated to saving others from delusion and suffering.

Just as the Buddha may be depicted as red with anger in one painting and serene in another, Tibetans expect their lamas -- or Buddhist monks -- to exhibit a variety of behaviors.

Following are a few of the more colorful Dalai Lamas:

-- The Third Dalai Lama (1543-1588) was the first to bear the title while alive. (The first two Dalai Lamas were anointed posthumously.) In 1578, Sonam Gyatso struck a deal with the Mongolian ruler Altan Khan: Altan Khan was dubbed "king of religion" and Sonam Gyatso deemed "Dalai Lama," which means "ocean of wisdom." The alliance was political

as well as religious, with both men seeking powerful friends at a time of violent tumult.

-- The Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) was the first to assume religious and political supremacy in Tibet. Before Lobsang Gyatso seized power in 1642, Tibet was ruled by competing tribes and religious sects. With the help of Mongolian warlords, the Fifth Dalai Lama waged war on rival monasteries, forcing them to convert to his Buddhist sect.

Though some Tibetans argue otherwise, most historians agree that "it is valid to say that the Fifth Dalai Lama became ruler of Tibet through violence," Barnett said.

Like the present Dalai Lama, "The Great Fifth," as he is often known, relinquished political power to devote his later years to religious study.

-- The Sixth Dalai Lama (1682-1706) might be called the Hugh Hefner of Dalai Lamas.

Fond of silk robes, beer and women, Tsangyang Gyatso refused to take monastic vows, choosing instead to pen poems and search for lovers in the towns that surrounded his monastery. Folklore held that huts in which that search proved successful were painted yellow; many remain so today.

Still, the Sixth Dalai Lama is beloved among Tibetans, who see deep dharma messages about the transience of earthly existence in the playboy's poetry. Like the Bible's Song of Solomon, the poems' celebrations of sex are often applied to religious pursuits, such as the attainment of enlightenment.

-- The current Dalai Lama's most recent predecessor, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876-1933), is often credited with bringing Tibet into the modern age.

Later dubbed "The Great Thirteenth," Thupten Gyatso introduced currency, developed a legal system, established Tibet's first post office, built public schools, founded a police force and bolstered the

military -- all while trying to fend off a British invasion and assert Tibet's independence from China.

Like his successor, Thupten Gyatso also built bridges to the West and downplayed tensions between the various Buddhist sects. Before he died at age 58, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama predicted dark days ahead for Tibet, accurately foretelling China's invasion, and a dimming of Buddhism's influence over daily life in the Himalayan highland.

(Additional sources: The Dalai Lama's official website:

www.dalailama.com, and "Secret Lives of the Dalai Lama," by Alexander Norman.)