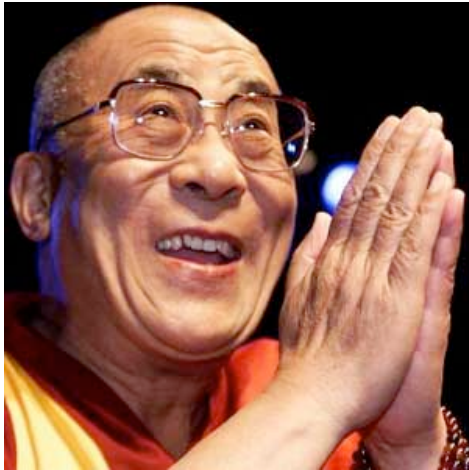


RELIGION

Dalai Lama is peace-loving Germany's spiritual pin-up

YENNI KWOK in Hamburg



Pope Benedict proved a huge hit in his native country, but in terms of popularity he faces a formidable challenge from Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

In cities such as Hamburg and Berlin, it is easy to see how much people revere Tibet's Buddhist leader. Many shops sell postcards with images of the Dalai Lama or display placards adorned with words of wisdom from the darling of the German media.

A picture of the Dalai Lama hangs in the window of a Turkish tailor's shop in Hamburg, along with a quote about the ultimate futility of money and business. German translations of his books are best sellers.

His image has even made it into the world of fashion, with Elternhaus, a clothing store, producing bags adorned with his picture. "We like him a lot," said Daniel Josefsohn, artistic director of Elternhaus. "The Dalai Lama reflects our ideology of world peace and non-violence. He shakes hands and makes friends with everybody."

When the Dalai Lama turned 70 last month, major newspapers, magazines and TV stations ran special coverage of his life, while more than 20,000

admirers crowded a park in the German city of Wiesbaden to hear him speak and see a German state premier hand him a book inscribed with thousands of birthday greetings.

The Dalai Lama appeals to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. His teachings on happiness, love and overcoming destructive emotions are seen to fulfil the need of spiritual guidance in an increasingly secular German society.

“He talks a lot about a moral philosophy that is universal and not exclusively Buddhist,” said Axel Prosch, managing director of the Tibetan Centre in Hamburg.

His principles of non-violence and tolerance also strike a chord in a country that experienced both religious and politically motivated wars.

“He is genuinely interested in peace. Despite the threats to his life and the gruesome destruction of the Tibetan culture, he always condemns violence,” said Jan-Ulrich Sobisch, a Hamburg native and assistant professor of Tibetan studies at the University of Copenhagen.

While his popularity is perhaps understandable in the predominantly Protestant areas of Germany, where a charismatic spiritual leader is lacking, he also finds admirers among German Catholics.

In a poll by *GEO* magazine in 2002, 37 per cent of the Catholic respondents chose the Dalai Lama as the wisest public figure, ahead of Nelson Mandela and Pope John Paul II.

The Dalai Lama's popularity is also believed to contribute to the growing appeal of Buddhism in Germany. An estimated 100,000 native Germans are Buddhists, with the Tibetan branch the most popular school.

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