

THE ADAPTATION OF BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY TO ASIAN SOILS  
CHANSAMONE SAIYASAK, DMIN, PHD

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### The Current Status of Buddhism

At the beginning of the millennium, Buddhism has become widely known and followed throughout Asia and in numerous countries outside of Asia. In the last decade, the world has seen an unparalleled interest in Buddhism—with Buddhist groups, meditation centers and educational research institutes mushrooming across the globe in an unprecedented way. At the same time, Christianity is making some progress in non-Christian lands, particularly in China.<sup>1</sup>

In Asia, with the exception of China, Buddhism has been introduced from the top down, with kings and rulers adopting Buddhism and then inviting monks to establish the Indian-origin religion as the state religion. Philip Jenkins, Professor of Humanities at Pennsylvania State University, describes the powerful impact of Christianity on Asia.<sup>2</sup> But the impact and significance of Christianity waned and moved West—to Europe and the United States—and never regained its impact. Jenkins emphasizes the top-down impact of Christianity in Asia. From the opposite perspective is an American Sociologist Rodney Stark, who explains the rapid expansion of Christianity, particularly in the West, by its bottom-up approach.<sup>3</sup>

Buddhism, with its heartland in Southeast Asia, is the majority religion of eight Asian nations—Thailand (95%), Cambodia (90%), Myanmar (88%), Bhutan (75%), Sri Lanka (70%), Tibet (65%), Laos (60%), and Vietnam (55%). Being one of the “big three” missionary religions, along with Christianity and Islam, Buddhism now claims 6 percent (376 million) of the world’s population<sup>4</sup> and 18 to 41 percent of the over 4 billion Asians.<sup>5</sup> Although it ranks as the fifth largest religion in Asia, its influence on the Asian continent is considerable, having by far the most popular and largest religion within Asia.<sup>6</sup> Christianity, on the other hand, accounts for 8.5 percent of Asia’s total population<sup>7</sup> and predominates only in two Southeast Asian nations, the Philippines and East Timor, where over 85 percent of the population is Catholic.<sup>8</sup>

Of the three main forms of Buddhism, THERAVADA (Hinayana or “Lesser Vehicle”) is practiced today in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and part of Vietnam, while MAHAYANA (“Great Vehicle”) is practiced in China, Japan, Korea and most of Vietnam. However, the VAJRAYANA (Tibetan or “Diamond Vehicle”) is followed mainly in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, Kalmykia, areas of India, and, to a limited extent, in China and Japan.

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<sup>1</sup>Dyron B. Daugherty, *The Changing World of Christianity: The Global History of a Borderless Religion* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 19.

<sup>2</sup>Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2008).

<sup>3</sup>Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1996).

<sup>4</sup>“Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents,” Adherents.com, [http://www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html) (accessed August 11, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>*Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, “Buddhism by Country,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism\\_by\\_country](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_by_country) (accessed August 11, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>*Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, “Religions in Asia,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion\\_in\\_Asia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Asia) (accessed August 28, 2011).

<sup>7</sup>Sabastian C. H. Kim, “Christianity in Asia, 1919-2010,” in *Atlas of Global Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 136.

<sup>8</sup>Peter C. Phan, “The Church in Asian Perspective,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, ed. Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge (New York: Routledge, 2008), 276.

In comparison to Christianity, Buddhism has maintained strong status in Asia due to its strong appeal to the Asian minds and psyche. Its integrated approach as well as its identification with the historical-cultural and national struggles of numerous Asian nations has earned Buddhism a place in the sociopolitical, economic, governing and religious life of these nations. However, Christianity is highly influential in the fields of education, health care and social services.

### **Seven Factors Affecting Buddhism's Acceptance and Indigenization on Asian Soils**

Significant to Buddhism being accepted and indigenized in Asia are seven factors, which mainly characterized how the Buddhist religion spread. These determinants account for Buddhism's successful expansion in Asia.

#### *Manner of Expansion*

Beginning in the third century B.C. with Emperor Asoka's sending out Buddhist monks as missionaries to the northwest of India (present day Pakistan and Afghanistan), which later became a center of Buddhist learning. Therefore, Buddhism spread throughout Asia through trade relationships. Merchants who adopted this religion supported the establishment of monasteries along the trade routes, notably the Silk Route. Monks often accompanied merchants and provided spiritual support on their trips.<sup>9</sup> Local rulers often invited monks from the merchants' regions as teachers or advisors, and eventually adopted the Buddhist religion. While Buddhism spread rapidly throughout South Asia, Central Asia and East Asia, Southeast Asia experienced slow growth, according to Paul Hockings, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Illinois at Chicago.<sup>10</sup>

In the last half of the century (1950s and onward), a notable spread of VAJRAYAN BUDDHISM occurred as a result of the Tibetans fleeing the holocaust in which Chinese Communists invaded Tibet and tried to extinguish its religion. A large number of Tibetan Buddhists, including the Dalai Lama, went into exile to India, Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim and the United States. In addition, THERAVADA BUDDHISM has experienced considerable expansion in recent years due to the political instability of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar, thus creating an influx of Buddhist immigrants from these countries to major U.S. cities where they have established their temples.<sup>11</sup>

With the turn of the millennium, Buddhism has experienced a rise of interest and growth globally. For example, the 2005 Swedish government indicated that 60 percent of Swedish high school students favored Buddhism as their choice religion. In the Netherlands, the number of Buddhists grew 1,500 percent (16,000 to more than 250,000) in just over a decade (1998 to 2009). In seven years (2001 to 2008), Buddhist adherents rose 68 percent (5.5 million to 8 million) in Taiwan and 1 to 3 percent (35 million) in India.<sup>12</sup> Seven factors influenced this expansion: integration, historical-cultural roots, nationalism, royal patronage, ancestral honoring, and corporate solidarity.

#### *Integration Approach*

The expansion of Buddhism throughout most of Asia was peaceful. The Buddhist pioneer missionaries did not stress conversion or "ask others to denounce and give up their own religion and convert to a new one."<sup>13</sup> Instead, they

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<sup>9</sup>"The Buddhist World: Buddhism in East Asia - China, Korea, and Japan," Buddhanet, <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/east-asia.htm> (accessed August 12, 2011).

<sup>10</sup>Paul Hockings, *Buddhist*, 2011, <http://www.everyculture.com/East-Southeast-Asia/Buddhist.html> (accessed August 12, 2011).

<sup>11</sup>Robert K. Gunn, "American Buddhism," <http://www.uccrvc.org/American%20Buddhism.pdf> (August 11, 2011).

<sup>12</sup>*The Dhamma Encyclopedia*, "The Appeal of Buddhism," [http://www.dhammadownload.com/index.php?title=The\\_appeal\\_of\\_Buddhism](http://www.dhammadownload.com/index.php?title=The_appeal_of_Buddhism) (accessed August 12, 2011).

<sup>13</sup>Alexander Berzin, *Buddhism and Its Impact on Asia* (Cairo: Cairo University, Center for Asian Studies, 1996), Asian Monographs, no. 8.

offered solutions to problems of unhappiness and suffering of the people. They did not forcefully pressure the locals to convert, but made Buddha's teaching available and allowed the people to choose for themselves. In addition, throughout its long history of expansion in many diverse localities and cultures, no trace of its attempt to impose uniform views was found.<sup>14</sup> A well-known British scholar on Buddhism, Alexander Berzin, wrote:

To each new culture it reached, the Buddhist methods and styles were modified to fit the local mentality, without compromising the essential points of wisdom and compassion. Buddhism, however, never developed a hierarchy of religious authority with a supreme head. Each country to which it spread developed its own forms, its own religious structure and its own spiritual head.<sup>15</sup>

A Thai Buddhist scholar, Sunthorn Plamintr, argues that Buddhism's ability for accommodation and subsequent transformation of indigenous beliefs and practices was an important factor underlying the Thai acceptance of Buddhism.<sup>16</sup> As a result, in Thailand (which is 95% Buddhist), Buddhism became so integrated with Thai life that the two are practically inseparable, with Buddhist influence being detected in Thai lifestyle, mannerisms, traditions, characters, arts, architecture, language and all other aspects of the Thai culture and value system. The same can be said of Myanmar (88% Buddhist), where its culture is deeply rooted in the Buddhist faith,<sup>17</sup> and China where Buddhism is indistinguishable, in many ways, from Taoism. In Sri Lanka, it merged with Hinduism.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, popular religious views fused Buddhist and indigenous religious beliefs in all the countries where Buddhism spread. Rather than abolishing old religions and values, Buddhism adapted to and adopted local deities. Because of its policy of incorporation and integration, Buddhism became indigenous to the soils of Asia. A British anthropologist of the University of London, Brian Morris, observed: "People in many parts of Asia have always recognized themselves as Buddhists long before Europeans arrived on the scene in Asia."<sup>19</sup>

#### *Asian Historical-Cultural Roots*

Asia is the cradle of all world religions, including Buddhism and Christianity. However, excluding the Middle Eastern countries where Orthodox Christianity has for centuries remained, Christianity left Asia very early and was never accepted back, except as a stranger and intruder, due to the perception that it was the religion and tool for conquest of the colonizers. When one of the Asian countries, the Philippines, developed a Christian majority, it was forced to cut off its Asian roots, leaving with the Philippine church like most Christian communities scattered in the Asian diaspora.<sup>20</sup> Buddhism became accepted, indigenized into the Asian landscape, and part of the Asian mindset due to its Asian historical-cultural roots.

Since the earliest time, diverse forms of Buddhism have been deeply rooted throughout Asia. Its sacred dwellings of traditional spirits and indigenous deities were often incorporated into the Buddhist cosmology and became important pilgrimage sites.<sup>21</sup> Donald K. Swearer, Distinguished Visiting Professor of Buddhist Studies at Harvard

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<sup>14</sup>Serinity Young, *Dreaming in the Lotus: Buddhist Dream Narrative, Imagery & Practice* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1999), 17.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Sunthorn Plamintr, "Buddhism and Thai Society," in *Getting to Know Buddhism*, <http://www.buddhanet.net/cmdsg/getting.htm> (accessed 12 August 2011).

<sup>17</sup>Balbir B. Bhasin, *Doing Business in the ASEAN Countries*, in *International Business Collection*, ed. S. Tamer Cavusgil et al (New York: Business Expert Press, 2011), 97.

<sup>18</sup>Moni Lai Sorz, *Dancing with Dragons: Chopsticks People Revealed for Global Business* (Victoria, Australia: Global Business Strategies - Ren Division, 1999), 34.

<sup>19</sup>Brian Morris, *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>20</sup>Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 74.

<sup>21</sup>Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.)

Divinity School, Harvard University, accurately pointed out: "It must be kept in mind, furthermore, that the forms of Buddhism and Hinduism that took root in Sri Lanka and in insular and mainland Southeast Asia, grew in diverse cultural soils already enriched by various indigenous belief systems from the Sinhalese, Burmese, Thai, Lao and Khmer."<sup>22</sup>

### *National Identity and Nationalism*

A German Scholar on Asian Studies of the University of Bonn, Klaus Sagaster, wrote: "The contemporary problems hardly form a real danger for Buddhism in Mongolia. The religion is so deeply rooted in the hearts of the Mongols that neither physical force nor intellectual doubt can seriously harm it. Just as before, the Buddha remains one of the two pillars on which the Mongolian identity rests."<sup>23</sup> In Sri Lanka, Buddhism not only has deep roots in its history, but it is also closely aligned with its national identity. Regarding Cambodia, a religious scholar of the University College of St. Martin, Lancaster, stated: "Peasant protest movements against the tightening colonial grip escalated in the 1920s, many embracing millennial elements derived from Buddhism."<sup>24</sup> These protects with their links to Buddhism led to Cambodia's independence from France in 1953.

Similar sentiments also gripped Vietnam: "During the colonial era, Vietnamese intellectuals turned to Buddhism in search of a national identity."<sup>25</sup> In Myanmar, Buddhism is so identified with national identity throughout the twentieth century; the slogan "to be Burmese is to be Buddhist" has often been invoked. Since Myanmar's independence from Great Britain in 1984, Buddhism has been a rallying point for resistance against the colonial state and its successors.<sup>26</sup> Although in the Communist country of Laos was against Buddhism, closing temples and arresting priests, today it publically supports Buddhism as central to its national identity. The ruler of the Thai Kingdom "went as far as to suggest that those members of Thai society who abandoned the Buddhist faith were not really Thai,"<sup>27</sup> making the national identity contingent upon one's profession of religion. Thus, across Southeast Asia and many other Asian countries, Buddhism became identified with the struggles for national identity against colonial and other oppressive powers.

### *Royal Patronage*

From the onset, Buddhism received royal patronage in countries to which it spread. During its first Buddhist missionary efforts on the island of Sri Lanka around 240 B.C., Sri Lankan King Devanampiyatissa, a Buddhist convert, became the first to patronize Buddhism and donated a tract of land in order to assure that the Buddha's Way would take root in Sri Lankan soil.<sup>28</sup> Later, Buddhism became deeply rooted in the country. Today, 70 percent of Sri Lanka's population is Buddhist, placing it among the top five countries with the highest percentage of Buddhists. Other nations that also gave royal patronage also include such nations as Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. This history of royal patronage reinforces the profound degree to which Buddhism is part of the hidden, yet profoundly significant, personal honor code of the peoples in many nations of Asia.

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<sup>22</sup>Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 2d ed. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), x.

<sup>23</sup>Klaus Sagaster, "The History of Buddhism Among the Mongols," in *The Spread of Buddhism*, ed. Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007), 426.

<sup>24</sup>Ian Harris, ed. "Buddhism in Extremis: The Case of Cambodia," in *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 57.

<sup>25</sup>Jan Dodd and Mark Lewis, *The Rough Guide to Vietnam* (London: Rough Guides Ltd, 2009), 512.

<sup>26</sup>Juliane Schober, "Buddhism, Violence, and the State in Burma (Myanmar) and Sri Lanka," in *Religion and Conflict in South and Southeast Asia: Disrupting Violence*, ed. Linnell Elizabeth Cady and Sheldon W. Simon (New York: Routledge, 2007), 55.

<sup>27</sup>Michael K. Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 58.

<sup>28</sup>John Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook: A Complete Guide to Buddhist Schools, Teaching, Practice, and History* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditional International, 1998), 106, 226.

### *Ancestral Honoring*

Buddhist teachings enforce regular merit-making rituals which serve to declare a one's loyalty, honor, and identification with his or her ancestors and their teachings, thus avoiding the social shame that stems from any lack of public declaration to the Buddhist faith.<sup>29</sup> In August 2006, a Buddhist chief of Nathan village in Ubonratchatani province of Thailand expressed, "Even if the majority of my community converts to Christianity, I will remain as a Buddhist because I do not want to disappoint and disgrace my ancestors who had formerly chosen Buddhism for me."<sup>30</sup>

### *Corporate Solidarity*

Another prominent Asian traditional value shared across all peoples of Asia is corporate solidarity. Many of the Buddhist rituals associated with merit making are "collective rituals," providing occasions for advancing corporate solidarity.<sup>31</sup> As an integrative force and authority in social and cultural life, Buddhist monks promote national and community solidarity and regulate social life. Sociologists Vinita Atmiyanandana and John J. Lawler observe that Thailand--like the rest of Asia--scores high on the collective and power distance dimensions such as a "vertical-collectivist" culture, which is characterized by deference to authority and a sense of group cohesiveness dictated by community, as well as Buddhist and animistic religious leaders.<sup>32</sup> In Thailand, the social solidarity of Buddhism is so strong that the national identity of the people comes from Buddhism. To be Thai means to be Buddhist.<sup>33</sup> Thus, due to Buddhism's strong emphasis on honoring ancestors and social/corporate solidarity, Asian countries have adopted the Buddhist faith as their own. To the ordinary Thai individual, family, community and nation, Buddhism is at the very core of their personal honor and identity.

### **Summary Comparison of Buddhism's and Christianity's Adaptation to Asian Soils**

Buddhism has been accepted, indigenized and taken deep in Asian cultures due to these seven factors; however, Christianity has not been successful in its appeal to the Asian mindset.

- Asians have perceived Christianity as a Western invasion and continued to reject it (as opposed to Buddhism where the local and national rulers invited monks to spread Buddhism and officially adopted the Buddhist religion).
- While Buddhism accommodated indigenous religions and cultural values, Christianity demanded that its converts eradicate traditional religious and cultural values, thus alienating new converts from their support systems and living in social dishonor and shame.
- Buddhism thrived in the diverse cultural soils of Asia; simultaneously Christianity was denouncing and removing them, replacing them with imported soil that was not conducive to growth. Consequently, Christianity continually struggles to take root in Asia.

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<sup>29</sup>Sukanya Sridadee, Teacher of Mercy Christian School, interview by author, 16 August 2011, Ubonratchatani, Thailand.

<sup>30</sup>Chansamone Saiyasak, "A Study of the Belief Systems and Decision Making of the Isan People of Northeast Thailand with a View Towards Making Use of These Insights in Christian Evangelism" (Ph. D. diss., Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2007), 80.

<sup>31</sup>Charles F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia*, paperback reprint edition (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 165.

<sup>32</sup>Vinita Atmiyanandana and John J. Lawler, "Culture and Management in Thailand," in *Culture and Management in Asia*, ed. Malcolm Warner (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 233.

<sup>33</sup>Paul Hattaway, *Peoples of the Buddhist World: A Christian Prayer Diary* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004), 204.

- Buddhism identified with the quest for national identity and became a rallying point for those struggling for independence from Western colonial powers; Christianity, meanwhile, was perceived as an instrument for colonial control. Therefore, Asian societies have a mistrust of Asian churches.
- Buddhism received initial royal sponsorship from national rulers of Asian countries, with the exception of China. Conversely, Christianity forced its way into most of the regions, only to find itself being embraced by people at the lowest levels of society who had far less honor at stake at the point of conversion.
- As Buddhism respectfully recognized Asia's highest traditional, cultural value, ancestral honoring, and sought to preserve it, Christianity condemned the practice, presuming it to be evil.
- Whereas Buddhism promoted social and corporate solidarity in areas where it spread, many Asians believe that Christianity lacks solidarity because it does not have national Christian figure with a central authority to unite Christians in the nation. Recently, Christianity is even viewed as creating disruptions or divisions. According to Chaire Boobbyer, freelance world traveler, writer and editor, "It's illegal for foreigners to proselytize in Laos; persons found guilty can be subject to arrest and deportation for 'creating social divisions.'" <sup>34</sup>

Consequently, Buddhism's aptitude for adapting to the environment of religious, cultural and ethnic pluralism of Asia paved the way for its acceptance and deep growth in Asian soils. In the meantime, Christianity continues to struggle to find its place in the Buddhist heartlands.

### **Status of Christianity's Adaptation to Buddhist Asia's Context**

The interwoven nature of Asia's religions and cultures poses greater difficulties for Christians to understand and witness to those of the Buddhist faith than for Christians in other parts of the globe. A world-renowned Asian Lutheran theologian, J. Paul Rajashekar, attributed Western missionary indoctrination as the cause of Asian Christians rejecting the religious and spiritual heritage of their native cultures, causing them to be strangers to their own culture and context. <sup>35</sup> In pioneer stages of the missionary enterprise in Thailand, new converts of Protestant and Catholic faith were strictly prohibited from keeping any element of Thai culture, presumably preventing a contamination of Christianity by paganism. Sociologist Erik Cohen of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem writes: "The use of Thai instruments and tunes in Christian churches was strictly forbidden, for fear that they might unwittingly produce among Thai converts some associations with their previous religion." <sup>36</sup>

According to Rajashekar, "It is easy for Western missionaries to denounce beliefs of Asian religions, such as veneration of ancestors or filial piety, but for Asian Christians such a rejection is nearly impossible, living as they are in the midst of non-Christian neighbors." <sup>37</sup> Exclusive loyalty to one religious faith seems to have been a problem for Asians. Millions of Christians in Asia are "unbaptized believers" or "churchless Christians," that is, Christians by conviction without public affiliation with the organized church. Nonetheless, as a product of Western Christianity and its mission, Christian churches in Asia of almost all confessions have found themselves with uncomfortable and exclusive attitudes toward religions and cultures of Asia. <sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Claire Boobbyer, Andrew Spooner and Jack O'Tailan, *Footprint Vietnam, Cambodia & Laos*, 2d ed. (Bath, U.K.: Footprint Handbooks, 2008), 527.

<sup>35</sup>J. Paul Rajashekar, "Lutheranism in Asia and the Indian Subcontinent," in *The Future of Lutheranism in a Global Context*, ed. Arland D. Jacobson and James Aageson (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 70.

<sup>36</sup>Erik Cohen, "Christianity and Indigenization: Contrasting Process of Religious Adaptation in Thailand," in *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity*, ed. Steven Kaplan (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 38.

<sup>37</sup>Rajashekar, 70.

<sup>38</sup>Hans Ucko, *The People and the People of God: Minjung and Dalit Theology in Interaction with Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Munster: Lit-Verlag, 2002), 130.

Hence, the Asian churches, characterized by the foreign message and forms planted by the Western missionary movement, continue to struggle with new foreign identity and non-Asian roots. An expert in interreligious dialogue, Hans Ucko, agrees:

Becoming Christian in Asia meant changing identity, being in a way taken out of one's own culture... In becoming Christians, Asian Christians were thus regarded as estranged from their own people, since Christianity, as received and practiced, could not be separated from Western civilization and culture.<sup>39</sup>

In Indonesia, Christians in the Bali Church became disaffected from their Balinese culture, left their Balinese identity and assumed the identity offered them by the Dutch Christian tradition. An Indonesian missiologist, Wayan Mastra, noted that the alienation of the Balinese Christians from their own culture hinders the gospel from spreading into the Balinese context.<sup>40</sup>

Having been alienated from their cultural roots and influenced by the non-integrative mentality of the Western missionaries, the majority of contemporary Christians in Asia face further alienation due to their non-integrative approach to Asian Buddhist contexts. Erik Cohen appraises the adaptability of Thai Christians:

In contrast to the generally tolerant attitude toward and even encouragement by many contemporary Christian clergymen and missionaries of the introduction of indigenous forms of worship into Christian ritual, the majority of them refuse to adopt the conception and beliefs which support these in popular Buddhism. However tolerant in other respects, such "transpositions" of Buddhist meanings upon Christian practices are unacceptable to the churches and the great majority of their representatives, since such a process is seen essentially as the opposite of Christianization—it indigenizes Christianity, rather than Christianizes Thai culture; such indigenization is rejected by the churches, and by the majority of the members of the clergy.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Challenge for Asian Christianity in the Buddhist Heartlands**

By all indications, Asia will remain a non-Christian continent, Christians will constitute as a religious minority, and churches in Asia will face difficult challenges. By 2025, there will be 456 million members in Asia, mostly in China.<sup>42</sup> Thirty-four percent of Asia would then be Christian. However, the most immediate challenge involves Christianity's ability to contextualize, adapt and indigenize more fully in Asian soils, rooting and forming a distinctly Asian identity. A church historian at the Biblical Graduate School of Theology in Singapore, writes: "Contextualisation—which enables Asian Christians, on the one hand, to 'feel at home' while, on the other hand, avoiding syncretism – is the key to the emergence of a vibrant indigenous faith."<sup>43</sup> An Anglican Malaysian scholar, Albert Sundararaj Walters, asserts, "The challenge remains for the churches to relate themselves more fully to the local soil—to get down to the rice-roots level of Asian civilization."<sup>44</sup> Anthony Rogers, a prominent Christian leader of Malaysia, suggests that "the Church needs to rediscover the Asian roots of Christianity."<sup>45</sup>

### **The Way Forward for Christianity's Expansion Across Buddhist Asia**

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Chris Sugden, *Seeking the Asian Face of Jesus* (Irvine, CA: Regnum Books International, 2002), 146.

<sup>41</sup>Erik Cohen, 47.

<sup>42</sup>Rajashekar, 75.

<sup>43</sup>Violet James, "Christianity in South-eastern Asia, 1910-2010," in *Atlas of Global Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 146.

<sup>44</sup>Albert Sundararaj Walters, *We Believe in One God? Reflections on the Trinity in the Malaysian Context* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002), 54.

<sup>45</sup>Peter G. Riddell, "Contextualizing the Faith," in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social, and Strategic Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Mohammad Hashim Kamali (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), 180.

The future success of the expansion of the Christian faith in the context of Buddhist Asia is contingent on how well the Asian churches address the following six major issues that are factors in Christianity's acceptance and adaptation into the everyday religious experience of Asian Buddhist and animistic peoples. While the following issues will address past weaknesses of the work of Christian missions in Asia, they will steer Asian churches toward acceptance and growth across Asia.

### *Rooting Christianity in Asian Soils*

All across Asia, churches have labored tirelessly to plant the Christian faith as received from Western missionaries. Meanwhile, they have largely neglected the importance of rooting that faith in Asian soils; the result is that Christianity, though born in Asia, is still being regarded as a foreign intruder. Rooting the faith in Asian soils will erase that misconception, thus allowing the plant of the Christian faith to adapt and become indigenous in the Asian environment. Based in Hong Kong, the leader of the Protestant Chinese churches, Kan Baoping, states: "If we Asian Christians do not take root in our own cultures, we will not only be detaching ourselves from our cultural roots and become culture parasites but also fail to be effective in evangelism, theological education and leadership formation."<sup>46</sup> By rediscovering the Asian roots of Christianity and firmly planting the faith deeply in Asian soils, Christianity will be incarnated and accepted as one of Asian's very own.

### *Cultivating National Christian Identity*

From the Asian perspective, conversion to the Christian faith has entailed a rejection of one's belief, culture and traditions, while embracing another set of beliefs and their affiliated culture. Becoming Christian in Asia has meant changing identity. Consequently, without national identity, the Asian church does not easily expand due to estrangement from people whom it attempts to evangelize.

Hence, the Asian church must establish its national identity with an authentically Asian face, while maintaining its identification with the message and teachings of Jesus.<sup>47</sup> Cohen highlighted the "crucial dilemma facing Christian missionaries in Thailand: how to adapt Christianity to the Thai context, so as to divest it of its foreign character and enable Thai converts to preserve their national identity, while at the same time safeguarding the purity of the Christian message."<sup>48</sup> Many Asian church leaders believe that Asian Christian identity must be carved out of local cultural and traditional material.<sup>49</sup> This national identity should not be an extension of Western Christendom but authentic contextual expressions of the Asian peoples. A Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference cautioned several decades ago, "If the Asian churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future."<sup>50</sup> Thus, the efforts to expand the Christian faith in Buddhist Asia should not neglect the importance of cultivating local and national identity for assuring effective contextualization, adaptation and indigenization.

### *Fostering a Sense of Belonging*

Since Christianity could not be separated from Western culture, Asians who have converted to the Christian faith are regarded as strangers by their own people. Cut off from their Asian roots and deprived of cultural and national identity, Asian Christians have lost a sense of belonging. This poses a problem for Asian Christians since Asian cultures and peoples are characterized by a strong sense of group cohesiveness and inclusion.

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<sup>46</sup>Kan Baoping, "Partnership of Asian Churches in the Twenty-First Century: Theological Education and Asian Culture," in *Church Partnerships in Asia: A Singapore Conversation*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2011), 180.

<sup>47</sup>Peter C. Phan, 277.

<sup>48</sup>Cohen, 38.

<sup>49</sup>Ucko, 131.

<sup>50</sup>Peter C. Phan, 286.



A sense of belonging has been a key factor in the success of the spread of Christianity in global regions where the Christian faith was a minority. L. Michael White, Professor of Classics and Director of the Religious Studies Program of the University of Texas at Austin attributes the rapid rise of Christianity in the second and third centuries amid the national policy to eradicate Christianity from the Roman Empire to Christianity's ability to create a sense of belonging for its members: "What Christians offer probably as well as or better than anybody else in the Roman world is a sense of belonging."<sup>51</sup> Thus, the minority Asian churches have a good chance of expanding the Christian faith in predominantly Buddhist countries of Asia as long as they can create a strong sense of belonging for those who turn to Christianity.

#### *Working Along the Line of Trust Relationships*

Across Asia where Buddhism is now the chosen religion, trust relationships, social solidarity and harmony, and ancestral honoring are among the highly estimated values for determining social interactions. Peoples of Asia's regions transfer religious values and heritage along the line of relationships that are based on trust. This presents a problem for Asian Christian converts, who are recipients of religious values passed to them mostly from strangers. Consequently, these converts become estranged by their own families, relatives, and communities, where trust relationships are essential. Socially and culturally the new converts are disconnected from their network of trust relationships and are perceived as traitors.<sup>52</sup> The spread of the Christian faith is therefore hindered from flowing along the line of these natural trust relationships.

Paramount to achieving the growth of the Christian faith among Buddhist Asians is Christianity's aptitude for affirming the cultural and traditional values of the Asian peoples, while maintaining a distinctly Christian message. Preserving the cultures of honor (notably honoring of the ancestors, parents, and elders) as well as group solidarity and harmony is crucial for maintaining the line of trust relationships where the Christian faith can naturally flow. Also, as Christianity becomes rooted in Asian soils and Asian Christian identity is satisfactorily developed, more trust for the Christian faith will be accorded.

#### *Developing Vibrant Christian Communities*

Despite the fact that the Christian faith has been in Buddhist Asia for many years, Christianity's primary success has been among the peoples who are marginalized or minorities in societies with tribal backgrounds. Meanwhile, those belonging to established religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam, remain unresponsive to the message of Christianity. Truly the demonstration of God's power over sickness and evil spirits coupled with the desire for belonging and national identity are appealing factors for the tribal groups' conversion to Christianity. At the same time, another major factor owes to the cultural values of honor and security that are connected to the group. Being a member of a community of faith—where mutual economic and social support is a tangible reality—can be a major factor Buddhist Asians' decision to convert to the Christian faith. Peter C. Phan points out that "developing a church as a communion of communities" is essential to shaping an authentic Asian face to Christianity.<sup>53</sup> The Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church held in Hong Kong in 1977 echoed this same challenge: "...the decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia will be the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia—Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others."<sup>54</sup> Even Todd M. Johnson, Director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, alluded to the necessity of permanent self-perpetuating

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<sup>51</sup>L. Michael White, "A Sense of Belonging," *Frontline* (April 1998), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/appeal.html> (accessed 23 August 2011).

<sup>52</sup>Saiyasak, 229.

<sup>53</sup>Peter C. Phan, 285.

<sup>54</sup>James H. Kroeger, "LOCAL CHURCH, DIALOGUE AND CONVERSION," 2003, *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*, <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-107.htm> (accessed 12 August 2011).

Christian communities among Buddhist peoples as evidence that gospel penetration has successfully occurred among Asian Buddhists.<sup>55</sup>

John H. Morison, Professor of New Testament Studies and Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Harvard Divinity School, affirmed that the success of the early Christian mission movements was grounded in the establishment of a new community where mutual social support is available for members. Referring to the creation of a new Christianity, Morison stated, "I think that this was probably in the long run an enormously important factor for the success of the Christian mission."<sup>56</sup> Thus, vibrant living communities of faith are essentials for the successful spread of the Christian faith in Buddhist Asia.

### *Enlarging the Kingdom of God*

As the Asian church attempts to contextualize, adapt, and indigenize the message of Christ in Buddhist Asian soils, it must be cognizant that it actively participates in expanding the reign of God, invading the realm of Satan to deliver people from their bondage of darkness. As the Asian church spreads the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Buddhist Asia, it engages in a conflict between the kingdom of God and the power of darkness. The conflict has both present and future implications. George E. Ladd, New Testament biblical theologian at Fuller Theological Seminary, argues:

The mission of the Church is not only that of employing the keys of the kingdom to open to both Jew and Gentile the door into the eternal life which is the gift of God's Kingdom; it is also the instrument of God's dynamic rule in the world to oppose evil and the powers of Satan in every form of their manifestation.<sup>57</sup>

The church as the "community of the Kingdom of God"<sup>58</sup> must deny itself, be rid of its own cultural and traditional stains, take up the cross, and follow Christ, in order to participate in advancing God's kingdom in Buddhist Asia. Peter C. Phan accurately asserts:

It is only by bearing witness to the reign of God and serving it among the Asian peoples that the church will truly become Asian, not by expanding its membership and socio-political influence. To be truly the church, the Asian church must, paradoxically, 'empty' itself in the service of a higher reality, namely, the kingdom of God and cease to exist for its own sake.<sup>59</sup>

Until Asian churches and Christian missionaries are willing to do whatever it takes to root the gospel in Asian soils, cultivating national identity, nurturing a sense of belonging, building trust relationships, establishing living communities of faith and truthfully and humbly advancing God's kingdom in sacrifice and self-denial, Christianity will continue to remain a stranger and intruder to Buddhist Asia.

As a young boy (age 7), the author left Laos as an animist, and became a Buddhist-animist in Thailand. His religious affiliation gave him social status in the Thai community. However, he later became a Christian in the United States. His change in religion brought shame to his parents among the Asian community. As a young man (age 26) in 1992, he returned to visit his Brahmin priest grandfather in Laos, who eagerly received him. However, because of the values he adopted from Western-influenced Christianity, the author refused to participate in the socially and culturally expected ceremony (*baisee sukhun*) of welcoming back a grandson and reestablishing a geographically broken

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<sup>55</sup>Todd A. Johnson, and Bobby Jangsun Ryu, "Christian Opportunities in the Changing Demographic Context of Global Buddhism," in *Sharing Jesus Effectively in the Buddhist World*, ed. David Lim and Steve Spaulding (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library Publishers, 2005), 47.

<sup>56</sup> John H. Morison, "Welfare Institutions," *Frontline* (April 1998), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/appeal.html> (accessed August 23, 2011).

<sup>57</sup>George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 121.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Peter C. Phan, 278.

relationship. The relationship between the two was not restored. On the contrary, the author's visit brought shame to both his grandfather and him, further deepening the rift in their broken relationship.

### **Successful Efforts to Restore Honor**

- **Education and benevolence:** The author's achievements in his own educational endeavors, having earned two doctorates, as well as his attempts in social and community projects benefiting the communities to which he had brought shame, greatly helped to restore his father's honor and paved the way, in 1992, for his father's eventual decision to convert to the Christian faith. The author and his father remain "familiar" strangers to the Lao social and cultural communities due to their religious affiliation and identity with Christianity; however, due to the author's sacrificial and benevolent actions, the dishonor and shame have largely been removed.
- **Recovering a traditional honor ritual:** In 2008 the author and his wife (Pon) reintroduced an old purification ritual of honoring (*hotnam dumhua*), which had been forgotten by non-Christian younger generations of non-Christian Laotians. Christian communities in Laos abstained from the practice, believing it to be inconsistent with Christian teaching. In an effort to restore honor with his grandfather and other family members, the author requested of the family to recover this practice. The purification ceremony was performed publicly among relatives, community members—as well as the author's uncle, a provincial deputy police chief who was suspicious of Christianity. As a result, it significantly restored the grandfather's honor and it reduced the shame resulting from the perception that Christianity was destructive to the highly esteemed values of the society. Shortly thereafter, the author's grandfather and grandmother made decisions to convert to the Christian faith. As for the highly suspicious uncle, his attitude changed from that of foe to friend. He asked that Bible reading and prayer be led publicly among his family members, military officials, and community members. During a subsequent illness, this uncle requested of the author a prayer of salvation. The author had the honor of leading his uncle to become a believer in Jesus Christ.

Integrating the Christian message and adapting it to traditional and cultural values of Lao Buddhist society made Christianity more understood—recovering honor for all involved while reducing dishonor and shame. Christianity is taking root in Asian soil and developing an identity with an Asian face.

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