

The *Christus Victor* Atonement Motif Applied to Evangelism among Folk Buddhists in

Mainland Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The thesis of this paper is that the ancient *Christus Victor* atonement motif is more relevant to the worldview of folk Buddhists in mainland South East Asia than the penal substitution view of the atonement. Many modern evangelistic presentations are based almost entirely on a penal substitution view of the atonement. Often these gospel presentations are also used in a mainland South East Asian folk Buddhist context. Folk Buddhists in mainland South East Asia incorporate many animistic beliefs in their worldview. The *Christus Victor* atonement motif emphasizes that Christ's death on the cross and subsequent resurrection resulted in victory over Satan and the demonic powers. Evangelistic presentations which have a more holistic view of the atonement that include the *Christus Victor* motif would be more relevant to the worldview of folk Buddhist in mainland South East Asia.

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Introduction

I have been a missionary, mostly among Buddhist peoples, for more than thirty years, but it was not until I came to Wheaton Graduate School last year that I became aware of the *Christus Victor* atonement motif. It seems that in the stream of evangelical Christianity, where I came to faith and where I became involved in missions, the penal substitution theory of the atonement has been by far the prevailing view. The *Christus Victor* atonement motif emphasizes that Christ's death on the cross and subsequent resurrection resulted in victory over Satan and the demonic powers. The thesis of this paper is that the ancient *Christus Victor* atonement motif is more relevant to the worldview of folk Buddhists in mainland South East Asia than the penal substitution view of the atonement.

Slow growth of Christianity in mainland South East Asia

Protestant missions have been working with Buddhist peoples in mainland South East Asia since Adoniram Judson went to Burma, which is now Myanmar, in the early nineteenth century. Theravada Buddhism is the majority religion of the South East Asian countries of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The gospel in general has made little progress among the Buddhist peoples of these countries, where presently only a very small percentage of the people claim allegiance to Christ. In general, the gospel has not been met with opposition, but with indifference. Stephen Bailey, in his article on *World Christianity in Buddhist Societies*, gives a good synopsis of the present situation where:

Admittedly there is more response to the gospel among the Thai, Khmer, Lao and Burmese Buddhist today than in the past but the pace at which these people are entering the Kingdom of God is at a crawl when compared to China, Indonesia, the Philippines and Sub-Saharan Africa. (De Neui, 2006, p. 106)

Perhaps a reason for the lack of effectiveness in these Buddhist countries is that the gospel has most often been presented in a way that doesn't address the worldview of the people.

My personal experience sharing the gospel in mainland South East Asia

Many Western gospel presentations like the *Four Spiritual Laws*, which I used extensively in my campus ministry work in Thailand and Cambodia, are mainly centered on the issue of sin and our relationship with God. However, most of the Buddhist students with whom I shared the gospel did not seem to have a sense of personal sin and no real concept of God. Most Buddhists in South East Asia don't actually follow pure philosophic Buddhism, but are practicing folk Buddhism.

My own observation from living in Thailand and Cambodia for more than two decades is that folk Buddhist practices are prevalent in both urban and rural areas of these countries. I see spirit houses, spirit altars, and spirit shrines everywhere. I see most people wearing amulets, or spirit strings tied on their wrist or around their waists. Many men have magical tattoos for protection. I see much evidence of strong belief in the spirit world with corresponding practices. My understanding is that there is great fear of the spirits. They are often seen as the cause of sickness and misfortune. It seems to me, that to be free from the power of malevolent spirits would be much more of a felt need for folk Buddhists than forgiveness from sin.

Often, in both Thailand and Cambodia, people tell me that all religions are good in that they teach people to be good. But they are then quick to add that their religion is Buddhism and that Christianity is the foreigner's religion, or a Western religion. I get the impression that they don't see Christianity as being relevant to them and their context. Perhaps if the gospel were presented in a way that was more practical to their worldview, there would be greater interest in it.

Many evangelistic gospel presentations are based mostly on a penal substitution view of the atonement

Just recently, I watched two popular Christian movies which included evangelistic messages in them. These messages were entirely based on a penal substitution view of the atonement. This is also true of the *Four Spiritual Laws* and many other modern evangelistic presentations that I am aware of. I think that it tends to be the default view in presenting the gospel. The book *Pierced for our Transgressions*, encapsulates the typical modern evangelical view that “penal substitution emerges as a central aspect of God’s redeeming work in Christ, integrating fully with God’s justice and truthfulness, and safeguarding God’s simplicity by preserving the harmony of his attributes of justice and mercy, holiness and love.” (Jeffery, Ovey, & Sach, 2007, p. 147) It was the view presented with the most detail in the text *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, which I read for my graduate school Christian Theology course that was written by the Christian theologian Millard Erickson (2001). Personally, I was unaware of any other view until I came to graduate school.

Since most Buddhists don’t have a conception of personal sin against the holy creator God, the penal substitution view of the atonement is almost completely irrelevant to their world view. I am not suggesting that we completely forget penal substitution. But why should we make it our initial point of contact? I think it would be better to first address the felt needs of their worldview which includes a strong belief in the spirits. Perhaps evangelistic gospel presentations which have a more holistic view of the atonement that includes the *Christus Victor* atonement motif would be significantly more relevant to their worldview. It seems to me that freedom from the malevolent spirits, which they fear so much, would be an attractive and liberating message in the context of folk Buddhism in mainland South East Asia.

Worldview Issues

Worldview of folk Buddhist in mainland South East Asia

The peoples of mainland South East Asia were originally animists. Then the early rulers of ancient empires brought Hindu or Brahmanistic influences. Today, Brahmanism is most closely associated with the royalty. Buddhism though, has become the dominant religion of the people in the region. Alex Smith (2009), a missionary scholar who served for many years in Thailand, says that, “while Westerners and some Buddhist scholars may separate out pure Buddhism from the influence of these other religions, folk Buddhists would see the syncretistic mix merely as facets of the Buddhist religion.” (p. 9)

Several cultural anthropologists have done studies and developed theories on the religious syncretism between Buddhism and animism in South East Asia. Tambiah (1970) referring to the relationship of animism to Buddhism in a North Eastern Thai village setting says, “in actual fact its relationship is not simple but complex, involving opposition, complementary, linkage, and hierarchy.” (p. 263) Spiro (1978) summarizes:

That Buddhism, in both its Theravadi and Mahayani forms, is never the exclusive religion of its lay devotees can now be accepted as a truism. Wherever it is found, Buddhism is accompanied by some other religious (using “religious” very broadly) system. In Burma and in other countries of Southeast Asia, the later system comprises a folk religion which postulates the existence of “supernatural” beings, and which includes a set of rituals relating to them. Whether Buddhism and its companion religion (which is usually termed “animism”) are distinct and mutually exclusive systems, as some authors believe; whether animism is the “basic” religion, while Buddhism is a mere veneer, or whether animism has been superseded by Buddhism, the former persisting as a “survival”

– these, and still other controversies can be profitably discussed and analyzed. (Spiro, p. 3)

Spiro (1978) in the introduction to the revised edition of his book, which includes a response to Tambiah, writes that, “the peoples of Southeast Asia have retained the spirit cults despite their strong devotion to Buddhism and despite the fact that these two religions are often in conflict.” (p. xxxvi)

In Myanmar, the cultural anthropologist Spiro (1978) informs us that, “the cultus of the Thirty-Seven nats enters into almost all facets of public and private life.” (p. 108) Muang Htin Aung (1962) who is a Burmese university professor explains that, “a Nat was a spirit that had some dominion over a group of people or over a certain object or objects.” (p. 2). Brian Morris (2006) in researching the Nat Cults in Burma writes that, “the third system of Buddhism Spiro refers to as Apotropaic Buddhism, which is essentially concerned, like the Nat cults, in protecting the individual from existential problems – illness, droughts, snake-bites and other misfortunes.” (p. 58) Spiro (1978) indicates that Burmese folk Buddhists fear these spiritual beings when he writes, “although ghost, witches, and nats may cause various kinds of suffering, they are especially feared as agents of illness and death.” (p.144)

June Nash (1999), an anthropologist from Yale University who studied the nat cult in a Burmese village, observes that:

Misfortune resulting from failure to meet the responsibilities to the nats which the villager inherits or acquires by virtue of being a member of a family and living in a village meets with little sympathy from his fellow man, for this is felt to be a basic obligation. (p.132)

She also records, “the words of one informant, ‘When we do something for Buddha, we do it for the next life, and when we do something for the nats, we do it to help us in this life.’” (Nash, 1999, p. 132)

Paul DeNeui, in his article *Contextualization with Thai Folk Buddhists*, explains the context in Thailand that, “following the Thai tradition of accommodation, animistic practices, Brahmanistic beliefs, and Buddhist foundations have all combined to make a complicated and sometimes contradictory conglomerate, one that can be labeled Thai Folk Buddhism.” (Lim, 2003, p. 123) Insor (1963) in his analysis of Thai society noted that, “in the country the Buddhist religion itself is little more than a veneer on popular beliefs and supernatural fears.” (p. 58) Kingkaeo (1968) found in her research of oral traditions in a central Thai village that, “Buddhism regards supernatural agents as natural phenomenal part of the general scheme of the universe. Therefore, the villagers feel free to incorporate in their belief a large number of gods and spirits.” (p. 7) She also found that, “spirits play a highly significant role in the psychological and physical welfare of the villagers. Some contribute to their strength and happiness, while others contribute their emotional derangement and insecurity” (Kingkaeo, 1968, p. 26)

Brian Morris (2006), who writes from a religious and anthropological perspective on Buddhism and the Spirit-cults in Thailand, observes, “that the phii spirits are two types, the guardian and the malevolent phii, each with its own complex of rites and specialists.” (p. 62) Tambiah (1970) in his anthropological study in a Northeastern Thai village writes:

As verbal categories the words *thewada* and *phii* are habitually used by villagers to refer to certain supernatural agents or personifications. The two categories are in their general reference opposed: the *thewada* (*devata*) are divine angels, benevolent in nature, living in

heaven (*sawan*); the *phii* are malevolent agents, either free-floating, localized in the world of human beings, or condemned to hell (*narog*). (p. 59)

It seems that the *phii* or spirits are the most feared spiritual beings by Thai folk Buddhists and they appear to be everywhere. Kingkaew (1968) writes that, “many trees are associated with spirits, mostly malevolent ones.” (p. 43) She also informs that “it is believed that each house has a residing spirit called *phi ruan* or, ‘spirit of the house.’” (Kingkaew, 1968, p. 38) Tambiah (1970) reports that the Thai belief in “the *phii* as a general category are highly differentiated and their attributes extend from benevolent and disciplinary guardianship to extreme capricious malevolence.” (p. 61) He explains:

But when one propitiates or placates *Chao Phau* or *Tapubaan* villagers explicitly consider the transaction to be a *bargain*, an offering made to gain a particular favour, generally to remove an affliction caused by the *phii* because of an offence committed (*pid phii*). (Tambiah, 1970, p. 264)

The Thai folk Buddhist have a belief system that gives them an opportunity to manipulate the spiritual world through offerings. However, these offerings seem to have limited and mixed success.

Although none of my research specifically covered the beliefs of the Lao, it is my understanding that Thai and Lao language, culture, and folk Buddhist practices are quite similar to each other. Actually, both Tambiah and DeNeui worked in a North Eastern Thai context where the people speak a Lao dialect called Issan. I believe it would be safe to assume that their observations on worldview beliefs in the Thai Issan context would be very similar to the belief system among the Lao.

Alex Smith in his introductory article on *Buddhism and Cambodia* describes folk Buddhism in Cambodia as a religion that “incorporates guardian and nature spirits (Neak Ta) ancestral spirits, Brahman deities (devada), ghosts (khmaoch, preiy) and other animistic practices.” (Cambodia Research Network, 2010, p. xiv) May Ebihara, an anthropologist, who studied Buddhism in a Cambodian village context, summarizes that:

While Buddhism can explain more transcendental questions such as one’s general existence in this life and the next, the folk religion can give reasons for and means of coping with or warding off the more immediate and incidental, yet nonetheless pressing, problems and fortunes of one’s present existence.” (Nash, 1999, p.190)

The book *Folk Buddhism in Southeast Asia* found that in Cambodia:

To the extent that they are animistic, Khmer people believe that physical objects – trees, fields, streams, boulders – are homes to spirits whom they must appease in order to live. The supernatural beings most universally in the Cambodian countryside are the *neak ta* (lit., ‘person grandfather’). Each village’s *neak ta* is considered to be its founding and guardian god, exercising power over soil, forest and lakes. (Senapatiratne, D., Allen, S., Bowers, R. H., & Sarasmut, N., 2003, p. 51)

Cambodian folk Buddhists also have documented animistic beliefs. These animistic beliefs have also been my observation as I have lived and traveled in Cambodia for more than a decade. I have observed that most Cambodians fear the spirits and try to protect themselves from the spirits in a variety of ways, like giving offerings at shrines, or wearing amulets, etc.

Worldview of folk Buddhism contrasted with a Western worldview

The countries of mainland South East Asia are predominantly Buddhist. Buddhism is the official state religion of these countries. The Buddhist temples, which are inhabited with saffron

cloaked monks, are seen throughout these countries giving evidence of their Buddhist heritage. On the surface the majority of people appear to be strong Buddhists. However, the situation is similar to folk religion in many parts of the world where, “despite the spread of formal or high religion and modernity, folk religious beliefs dominate around the world.”(Heibert, Shaw, & Tiéno, T., 1999, p.77) As discussed earlier, a closer look reveals animistic folk elements in the worldview of most people living in mainland South East Asian countries.

Most modern western cultures have a naturalistic worldview which separates the spiritual, from the natural world. Heibert (2000) informs us that:

The Western worldview has been shaped since the sixteenth century by the Cartesian dualism that divides the cosmos into two realities: the supernatural world of God, angels and demons, and the natural material world of humans, animals, plants and matter.

(p.116)

In the western worldview there is a gap between the supernatural and the natural material world which is what Paul Heibert referred to as the, “excluded middle”. The animistic folk religionist has a very different worldview where, “their worldview is wholistic, in that it envisions a seamless continuum between natural and spiritual worlds.”(Senapatiratneet al., 2003, p. 3) There are spiritual forces that are very active in the material world. This difference in worldview often comes as a surprise to the western missionary. Cohen (1990) observed that, “in Thailand, one of the most salient problems facing missionaries was the reality of the spirit world which constitutes such an important component of the world view of the native people.” (p.347)

High religions including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism tend to be more concerned with ultimate and eternal truths. Burnett (2000) informs us that, “what characterizes ‘folk religion’ is its practicality in seeking to meet the basic needs of the people themselves.

They are more concerned with the question ‘Does it work?’ than, ‘Is it correct?’” (p. 239) Folk religionists are attempting to manipulate spiritual power to meet their needs. They often in their efforts have only limited success over these powers. Senapatiratne et al. (2003) observed that “folk Buddhism is utilitarian in that it practices rituals and allies itself with spiritual forces that it believes prove effective in meeting daily needs.” (p. 4) Folk religion tends to be very practical and helps to meet the daily needs of the people. It seems to me that Jesus intended that his followers seek him for their daily needs. He did teach us to pray, “give us today our daily bread.” (Matthew 6:11 ISV)

Much mission activity has been done with a Western worldview

I have had many Thais and Cambodians tell me that Christianity is the foreigner’s religion. Heibert et al. (1999) makes the comment that:

This importation of practices from outside has led people in many lands to see Christianity as a foreign religion, and has alienated Christians from their own peoples. It is the foreignness and not the offense of the gospel that has often kept people from following Christ. (p. 20)

It has been my observation that most churches I have attended in Asia do seem to be quite western in both appearance, and practice.

Many modern evangelistic gospel presentations are centered on having a personal relationship with God, and the problem of a person’s sinfulness which affects their relationship with God. But Smith (2009) sees a gap in understanding for, “Buddhists who deny the existence of Creator God, sin does not have any consequence before a holy God. Buddhists are only accountable to themselves and their own karma, as opposed to Christian thinking of sin as rebellion against God.” (p. 59) It seems to me that this kind of evangelistic message has little

relevance to a Buddhist's worldview. Yet this is the kind of message I have seen frequently presented in both Thailand and Cambodia.

Many missionaries have a Western worldview that doesn't take into account the reality of spirits, and demonic powers at work in this world. Van Reenen, (1991) a former missionary to Africa and a seminary professor, says that "reflecting their Western heritage, almost all missionaries exclude the middle realm and, consequently are ill-prepared to communicate the gospel in animistic contexts where this realm is emphasized." (p. 54) Hiebert et al. (1999) made a similar observation that western missionaries "had no place in their worldview for invisible earthly spirits, witchcraft, divination, and the magic of this world, and found it hard to take people's beliefs in these seriously." (p.19) It was also my experience when I came as a missionary to South East Asia, that I was quite ignorant of the spirit world. I whole heartedly agree with Hubbard (2000) who affirms that "there is a need to increase the missionaries' awareness of the reality of the spiritual realm and to help them see that the Bible accepts its existence and provides information and answers that can be helpful when dealing with this reality." (p. 11)

It has been my observation that it is often national Christian believers who are better prepared to deal with these realities. Guthrie (2005) notes that:

Non-Western churches are sometimes more open to spiritual solutions to problems than Enlightenment drenched westerners. While there are probably several reasons why God seems to perform more miracles in the non-Western world, perhaps one is that our brothers and sisters in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are simply more open to this expression of God's sovereignty. Certainly many of the fastest growing of God's

worldwide church are more supernaturalistic than we are, and we can learn from them.

(p.101)

Hubbard (2000) warns us that a “lack of knowledge of what the Bible teaches about the spirit world has been the source of much confusion on how to deal with the spirits and their power.”

(p. 12) It seems to me that we need to look to the scriptures to see what they have to say about the spirits and demonic powers so that we can develop a biblical worldview in the area of spiritual conflict.

Spiritual conflict in a Biblical worldview

The secular anthropologists like Spiro and Tambiah, whose books I read, did not seem to believe that there were actual spiritual beings or powers, but that they were just a part of the belief system of the people they studied. The scriptures, however, give a very different perspective. There is a theme of spiritual conflict against Satan and demonic powers that runs through both the Old and New Testaments. Hubbard (2002), who did a study of spirits and their power in the Old Testament, says:

It is also clear that the beings who exist mainly in the spiritual realm are able to interact with the physical realm. They also have capabilities that exceed ours which are used either in the service of God or in opposition to him. (p. 100)

Spiritual conflict is an important element of the biblical worldview which is clearly taught in the scriptures. Clinton Arnold (1997), a seminary professor and a biblical scholar, in his book on spiritual conflict says:

I soon realized that one cannot engage in a biblical study of the power of God without simultaneously exploring the opposing sphere of power – Satan and his principalities and powers. The Bible from beginning to end highlights this theme of conflict with the

powers of evil. It is integral to the biblical worldview. Those of us who see the bible as our authoritative and reliable guide to faith and practice need to take this aspect of the biblical message seriously. (p. 30)

The biblical record on spiritual conflict is in direct contrast to the modern western scientific worldview.

Traditional religions on the other hand do believe in the existence of spiritual beings and powers. David Burnett (2000), a former missionary to India and a seminary professor, in his book on folk religions says:

This creation consists of what the Bible calls the ‘visible and invisible’ (Col. 1:16), or in other words, there exists a reality beyond the empirical. These beliefs have profound effects on the way that Christians seek to understand the nature of traditional religions. For example Christians do not merely assume that spiritual beings are the cultural constructs of another community because their own belief-system means that such entities may have inherent existence. The nature of this existence may be subject to cultural interpretation, but the possibility of their reality may not be discarded. (p. 25)

Wheaton professor Scott Moreau (2008) in his book on spiritual conflict says that “the Bible clearly teaches that demons are both real and a real source of problems.” (p. 15) The modern scientific western worldview does not have space for spiritual beings and powers being active in the world, but from a biblical worldview they do exist and are active.

Heibert (2000) in his article on *Spiritual warfare and worldviews* says:

“A biblical view of spiritual warfare points to the final establishment of the kingdom of God throughout the whole universe. When we focus too much on the current battle, we lose sight of the cosmic picture in which the real story is not the battle, but the eternal

reign of Christ. That vision transformed the early church, and it should be our focus in ministry today.” (p. 123)

God is establishing His kingdom and we believers, as members of His kingdom, are inevitably involved in spiritual conflict. It is part of the biblical worldview.

Jesus equipped his disciples for spiritual conflict when “He appointed the Twelve, whom he called apostles, to accompany him, to be sent out to preach, and to have the authority to drive out demons.” (Mark 3:14-15 ISV) Spiritual conflict is not just something from the biblical era, but it is also part of modern day ministry. Moreau (2008) says that “we also participate in his work of binding the enemy by sharing the Good News and setting people free from demonic control.” (p. 161) It would be most appropriate for the gospel message that is shared with animists to include the power to deliver people from demonic influences which blind and bind.

Atonement Motifs

What is the atonement?

Speaking of biblical atonement history, Park (2009) says:

In ancient Judaism, atonement was done through the rituals of sacrifice in the temple.

However, the Jews thought they were saved because they were descendants of Abraham.

Through the rituals of atonement, only their transgressions were forgiven. In Christianity,

atonement meant salvation by the work of Jesus Christ. It was for both the forgiveness

and the salvation of sinners. (p. 1)

The atonement in theological terms refers to “the saving work of Jesus Christ”. (Beilby & Eddy, 2006, p. 9) In the New Testament the atonement is a central aspect for the salvation of believers.

“By his grace they are justified freely through the redemption that is in the Messiah Jesus, whom God offered as a place where atonement by the Messiah's blood would occur through faith.”

(Romans 3:24-25a ISV) The theological concept of the atonement refers to the work that Jesus accomplished in his incarnation, life, death on the cross, and resurrection which resulted in our salvation that reconciles us to God. There have been different views of the atonement in the two millennia of church history.

Why is the atonement important?

The atonement is at the core of the Gospel. It is the work that Christ accomplished on the cross which also has cosmic consequences. It had the effect of reconciling all things back to God. The Bible says “Through the Son, God also reconciled all things to himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, thereby making peace through the blood of his cross.” (Colossians 1:20 ISV) The cross is where Satan received his fatal blow which was a fulfillment of the first prophecy in Genesis. "I'll place hostility between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring. He'll strike you on the head, and you'll strike him on the heel." (Genesis 3:15 ISV) The atonement is central to the gospel message preached by the Apostles of which Acts 2:14-41 is an excellent example.

Even though the atonement is so central to the gospel message, Mc Kim (1998) informs us that “before Anselm of Canterbury (1033?-1109) wrote *Cur Deus homo* (1097-98), there was no systematic account of the atonement.” (p.75) From the research I have done on the atonement, I found three main historical motifs which are the Ransom/*Christus Victor* motif, the Satisfaction/Penal Substitution motif, and the Exemplary motif. In this paper the discussion will be mostly concerned with just two of the historical motifs which are the *Christus Victor*, and the penal substitution views of the atonement.

***Christus Victor* atonement motif**

The *Christus Victor* motif is found in the writings of the early church fathers, and is the predominant view for the first millennium of the church. Gustaf Aulen, a Swedish theologian, who in 1931 wrote a historical study of the three main types of the idea of the atonement titled *Christus Victor*. He says “it was, in fact, the ruling idea of the Atonement for the first thousand years of Christian history.” (Aulen, 1988, p. 6) And so he refers to it as the classic theory. It is sometimes called the Ransom view because in this view “Jesus became the ransom by which God redeemed humanity from Satan’s power.” (Beilby et al., 2006, p. 12) The early church fathers got this from the saying of Jesus, “because even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many people.” (Mark 10:45 ISV) They could not see why God would require a ransom, so they postulated that the ransom was paid to Satan who had dominion over mankind because of the fall. A twist on this was another idea that Jesus was the “bait” that God used to trick Satan which resulted in Satan’s destruction.

Aulen (1988) says that “the background of the idea is dualistic; God is pictured as in Christ carrying through a victorious conflict against powers of evil which are hostile to His will.” (p. 4) Some scriptures used to support this view are found in 1 John “the person who practices sin belongs to the evil one, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason that the Son of God was revealed was to destroy what the devil has been doing.” (1 John 3:8 ISV) and in Hebrews “so that by his death he might destroy the one who has the power of death (that is, the devil).” (Hebrews 2:14b ISV) It seems to me that the early Church fathers probably had a better understanding of spiritual conflict. The church was expanding and coming out from, and up against, pagan cultures. There was, perhaps, more of an awareness of the conflict between God’s kingdom and the kingdom of darkness where Satan has dominion.

Gregory Boyd, an American theologian and pastor looks at the *Christus Victor* view from more of a biblical perspective in a couple of the chapters of his 1997 book *God at War*. Boyd (1997) says that “the tendency of the Western church has been to focus almost all its attention on the anthropological dimension of the atonement, usually to the neglect of the cosmic dimension that is central to the New Testament.” (p. 240) Many modern western evangelistic presentations tend to have a narrow, man-centered message emphasizing “what Christ has done for me.” But Boyd (1997) points out that “Christ’s achievement on the cross is first and foremost a cosmic event – it defeats Satan.” (p. 240)

The theme of spiritual conflict appears in the first words God spoke to Satan, just after the fall of man in the third chapter of Genesis. God said, "I'll place hostility between you and the woman, between your offspring, and her offspring. He'll strike you on the head, and you'll strike him on the heel." (Genesis 3:15 ISV) It is also found in the book of Colossians, where the apostle Paul teaches that Christ’s death on the cross resulted in victory over spiritual powers. Paul says, “and when he had disarmed the rulers and the authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross.” (Colossians 2:15 ISV)

Penal substitution atonement view

The Satisfaction motif was first written about by Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century in his book *Cur Deus homo? (Why God became Human)*. He wrote from a feudalistic worldview, where if a medieval Lord lost honor, there needed to be satisfaction for that lost honor. He explains “how Jesus’ death satisfies the demands of God’s honor.” (Beilby et al, 2006, p. 16) Aulen calls this view the Latin type. The emphasis of the Latin view of Atonement is that Christ’s death on the cross satisfied God’s justice which is the legal requirement that is there as a result of man breaking God’s law. Christ, who was a sinless man, received God’s

judgment in our place. Later the Calvinistic reformers further developed this view into the Penal Substitution motif. Erickson (2001) gives a good definition of this view:

Obviously, of the several theories examined in the proceeding chapter, it is the satisfaction theory which best expresses the essential aspect of Christ's atoning work. Christ died to satisfy the justice of God's nature. This view has been commonly called the penal-substitution theory. By substituting himself for us Jesus actually bore the punishment that should have been ours, appeased the Father, and effected a reconciliation between God and humankind. (p. 263)

Erickson also gives his opinion that the penal substitution atonement theory is the most appropriate view, which in my experience is most typical of modern evangelicals. The penal substitutionary view of atonement is what I see presented in most modern evangelistic presentations. There is strong scriptural support for this view of the atonement. In Isaiah, there is a prophetic messianic passage, "and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6b ISV). And the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, "God made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that God's righteousness would be produced in us." (2 Corinthians 5:21 ISV) and again in Galatians, "The Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, 'A curse on everyone who is hung on a tree!'" (Galatians 3:13 ISV)

***Christus Victor* is relevant to the worldview of folk Buddhists**

Folk Buddhists have strong animistic elements in their core beliefs system. Van Rhee (1991), wrote in his book *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* that:

The great message to the animist is that God has mightily broken into human history in the ministry and death of Christ to break the chains of Satan. Christ has disarmed the

“powers and authorities” (Col 2:15). Thus to the Christian in animistic society the cross signifies *liberation* - liberation from the demonic forces against which he is fighting, deliverance from the rules and regulations which these powers attempt to project upon society, and freedom from sin that has alienated his people from God and disharmonized society. (p. 303)

In his later book *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies*, he states that “this liberation metaphor is the classical doctrine of the atonement that was reintroduced to Western theology by Gustaf Aulen in *Christus Victor*.” (Van Reenen, 1996, p. 131) The *Christus Victor* view of atonement is very relevant to those who live in an animistic culture or any culture where there are strong beliefs in the demonic.

Paul Omieka Ebhomielen (1982), a Nigerian Pastor, who wrote his PhD dissertation on *Gustaf Aulen’s Christus Victor View of Atonement as it Relates to the Demonic in Africa*, suggests that “the victory motif in atonement means that the African believer has an ally in Christ in the fight against the evil forces of the world.” (p. 305) Paul DeNeui in his article, *Contextualization with Thai Folk Buddhists*, suggest an unintended consequence of not dealing effectively with folk religionists involvement with the power of the spirit realm is that “there are many folk religionists who remain enslaved to spiritual powers, even within our churches all throughout the world, because issues of power have never been fully addressed.” (Lim, 2003, p. 123) The *Christus Victor* view of atonement gives a good emphasis on God’s victory over demonic powers, and our liberation from those powers as believers. It gives believers from a folk Buddhist context a framework to address demonic power and to be liberated from those demonic powers. The *Christus Victor* motif takes a broad sweeping perspective of God’s victory over the devil and evil, which not only has significant implications for us as individuals, but for all

creation as well. The *Christus Victor* view of atonement, I believe, is more relevant than the penal substitution view of the atonement, to the world view of folk Buddhists in mainland South East Asia.

Problems with the penal substitution view of the atonement and the worldview of folk Buddhists

My own experience of doing evangelism with Buddhists in South East Asia is that they don't seem to have a personal sense of sin. Alex Smith (2001), who is a veteran missionary to the Buddhist world, makes the observation that "to a Buddhist, sin does not have any consequences before a holy God." (p.25) Penal substitution is completely irrelevant to the Buddhist worldview.

However, there is still a felt human need for dealing with sin or wrongdoing. John Davis in his article *The Good News and Doctrinal Black Holes in Buddhism* makes the argument that since there is no God in Buddhism, there are no mechanisms for forgiveness of infractions of moral law, but that "this belief system cannot satisfy the average Buddhist; he is still aware of wrongdoing and sacrifices are made not to God, but to demons." (Lim, 2005, p.67) Since Buddhism doesn't have a way to provide for the forgiveness of our sin, folk Buddhists then turn to their animistic beliefs to try to fulfill their need for dealing with wrongdoing. However, their mechanism is completely twisted. The penal substitution view of the atonement does address the guilt of sin that Satan uses to accuse humanity, but it does not directly deal with Satanic and demonic powers which are of greater concern to the folk Buddhist.

***Christus Victor* and penal substitution atonement motifs are not mutually exclusive**

In Christian theology, some positions are mutually exclusive, to hold one means that you can't possibly hold the other. But this is not the case with these historical views of the

atonement. Even the book *Pierced for our Transgressions*, which is written on penal-substitution, says:

We agree that a comprehensive doctrine of the atonement must include other themes besides penal substitution. But then again, we have never read a proponent of penal substitution who claims that penal substitution is the *only* motif connected with the atonement in the scriptures.” (Jeffery et al., 2007, p. 210)

Boyd argues “that the *Christus Victor* model is able to encompass the essential truth of other atonement models. Indeed it is able to do so while avoiding some of their potential difficulties when they are considered alone.” (Beilby et al., 2006, p. 43)

The arguments in the books I read seemed to me to be more about what is the predominant view of the atonement in scripture, and not the correctness of the different views. Both are scripturally valid views. It seems to me to be more of a question of emphasis. I am not suggesting that we not mention sin and the need for redemption when we evangelize folk Buddhists, but a message that puts more of an emphasis on deliverance from evil powers will be more relevant to their worldview.

It will probably best be told in a narrative. The story of spiritual conflict with man and Satan begins in Genesis:

“The LORD God told the Shining One, ‘Because you have done this, you are more cursed than all the livestock, and more than all the earth's animals, you'll crawl on your belly and eat dust as long as you live. I'll place hostility between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring. He'll strike you on the head, and you'll strike him on the heel.’” (Gen 3:14-15 ISV)

It is not finally concluded until in Revelation John records, “and the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were. They will be tortured day and night forever and ever.” (Rev 20:10 ISV)

A more holistic view of the atonement

Former Wheaton professor Webber (1999) suggests that it would be more appropriate to hold the historical atonement views together when he says that:

There are three main interpretations of the work of Christ in Scripture and in history: His work is (1) a sacrifice which (2) won a victory over the powers of evil and (3) left us an example to follow. These views should all be held together. However, the church in this or that paradigm of history has emphasized one aspect of the work of Christ, but has seldom presented all three views as a whole. (p.43)

Most evangelistic presentations that I am aware of only incorporate the penal substitution view of the atonement and don't really consider the other aspects of Christ's work on the cross.

It seems to me that both penal substitution and *Christus Victor* views of the atonement are evident in the scriptures. For example, consider this passage from Colossians:

Even when you were dead because of your offenses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with him when he forgave us all of our offenses, having erased the charges that were brought against us, along with their obligations that were hostile to us. He took those charges away when he nailed them to the cross. And when he had disarmed the rulers and the authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross. (Colossians 2:13-15 ISV)

In this passage I see both substitution, and *Christus Victor* views of the atonement with God forgiving our sins through Christ's death on the cross, and having a triumphal victory over the

powers. To me, it seems better to have a more holistic view of the atonement which incorporates these historical views.

A more holistic view of the atonement that emphasizes Christ's death on the cross as having victory over Satan and the demonic powers would be especially appropriate in spiritual conflict situations, which is often the case in sharing the gospel with folk religionists. Heibert (2000), in his discussion on spiritual conflict, sees that "the cross is the victory of righteousness over evil, of love over hate, of God's way over Satan's way. If our understanding of spiritual warfare does not see the cross as the final triumph, it is in error." (p. 122) Professor Moreau (2008) informs us that the cross is at the center of God's victory over Satan, when he says "at his crucifixion, rather than pursuing Satan's violent destruction, Jesus submitted to Satan's violence. He then demonstrated his power over Satan, when he rose from the dead. " (p. 40) Clinton Arnold (1997) states:

We share in Christ's kingdom authority over the demonic realm. This means we can now resist demonically inspired temptation. It means we have power to command an evil spirit to flee if it manifests its presence to us at night. It also means we can make known the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in a powerful way. (p. 41)

A more holistic gospel message is about forgiveness of sin and a restored relationship with God that also includes the message that Christ's death on the cross gives victory over Satan and the demonic powers. The latter is what I believe folk Buddhist in mainland South East Asia would find more relevant.

Application

The often told evangelistic message of God's love, forgiveness of sin, and a restored relationship with God does not do a good job of addressing the Buddhist worldview. However,

the *Christus Victor* view of the atonement is more relevant to the worldview of folk Buddhists in mainland South East Asia. It would more adequately address their felt need to overcome the spiritual powers which they so fear.

Hiebert et al. (1999) state that “our thesis has been that understanding the religious manifestations of the folk (common people in any socioreligious context) can itself be a means to lead to appropriate ministry meeting people’s felt needs and issues.” (p.392) It is clear, from both the research and my personal experience, that folk Buddhists in mainland South East Asia have a strong belief in the spirit world. The *Christus Victor* atonement motif would more adequately address their beliefs in the spirit world, and offer deliverance from some of their worst fears.

Engaging folk Buddhists in their animistic beliefs could be more strategic

Cohen (1991) writes from a Thai context and argues that:

the relative success of the missionaries were due to the fact that they employed a strategy of ‘contest of power’ when approaching folk Buddhists and the hill tribe people; i.e. a strategy which is formulated on the “pre-axial” level itself, and thus attacks and overpowers those elements in the religion of the people which are most crucial to their daily existence and concerns – rather than its basic “axial” presuppositions. (p.129)

He felt that the missionaries in Thailand were less successful when they tried to directly confront the Buddhist beliefs, which he calls “axial” beliefs of the Thai people and were more successful when they confronted the animistic folk beliefs, which he calls “pre-axial” beliefs of the Thai and hill tribe people.

Alex Smith (2009) a long time missionary to the Buddhist world says that:

many Buddhists live in fear. Fear of spirits, ghosts, the afterlife, hells, the impact of their karma and its effect on their personal security and prosperity. Presenting Christ as the one who has authority over these areas can be extremely powerful. (p. 93)

It seems to me that the message that Christ's death has freed us from Satan and the demonic powers would be a very liberating message.

Chronological Bible Story sets that include the *Christus Victor* atonement motif

Generally speaking, Chronological Bible Story telling is proving to be an effective way to communicate the gospel, particularly in majority world contexts. Harper (2001) says that "*Christus Victor*, among all the main historical models of the atonement, expresses its theology through story. Its perspective includes Christ's incarnation, life, death, and especially resurrection. Other views tend to focus more narrowly on certain aspects of the story." (p. 8) The *Christus Victor* view of atonement should be a theme about which to build a story set that would probably resonate well with folk Buddhists.

I am not aware of any story sets that have attempted to incorporate the *Christus Victor* view of atonement. I would suggest that this story set should include stories of creation, the first people, their disobedience and its consequences framed in the theme of spiritual conflict with Satan and demonic powers. It should also include gospel accounts of Jesus' victorious encounters with the demonic, including his own personal temptation by the devil. The story of Jesus' death, and resurrection would also be framed in the *Christus Victor* view of atonement. It would be important to recount some of the stories in Acts that demonstrate that Jesus' followers continue to be victorious over Satan and the demonic powers. The story set would conclude with John's vision in Revelation where Satan is thrown into the lake of fire, the final judgment, and the new heaven and earth.

Conclusion

Historically, the gospel has had a limited response among folk Buddhists in mainland South East Asia. Perhaps a reason for the limited response is that the message of the gospel that has been presented emphasized aspects of the gospel that were not particularly relevant to them. As folk Buddhists, they have many animistic beliefs, and practices that involve the spirits and spiritual powers. Generally, they live in fear of these spirits and powers and use many means to try to propitiate them. These means often have just limited success. The *Christus Victor* view of atonement emphasizes Christ's victory over Satan and the demonic powers which is the ultimate victory. For animists this is a message of liberation. Chronological Bible Story sets that have a more holistic view of the atonement, which includes a greater emphasis on the *Christus Victor* view of atonement, should have greater relevance to worldview of folk Buddhists in mainland South East Asia.

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