

Talking About the Resurrection with a Thai Chinese Buddhist

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I have been having conversations lately with a Thai Chinese fellow who is a real thinker. That's hard to find around here. Many folks are happy to not think about (or at least not discuss) difficult or controversial issues. Thai culture places a high value on non-confrontation so it is tough to really engage people in discussion about any issues of significance. But not this guy.

Mr. Mon and his wife own a trucking business and one of their employees is a Christian lady whom my wife discipled (she does housework, not truck driving, if you wanted to know). One night as we were trying to get our kids into bed, I answer a call from her on my wife's mobile phone. "You have to come over here right now. We're watching the movie you lent us and he has all these questions and I don't know the answers. You have to come now." She was desperate and a bit impatient. "Well, okay" I replied, "Let me talk to my wife for a second. We're putting the kids to bed.. hang on..." and before I could talk to my wife, the voice on the other end of the phone said, "Okay, I'm waiting for you. You're coming now. Bye." Twenty minutes later, after I made sure my wife had the kids under control, I was sitting down with Mr. Mon, his wife, and their Christian house helper who had called us.

"So if God could have kept people from sinning, why didn't he? Sure, Adam had freedom and is responsible for sin, but couldn't God have just made it so there wouldn't be sin? Can't he do that?" And with that we were off to a fascinating discussion. "Why did God kill everyone in the flood? That's a lot of killing. And why'd he kill all the animals too?" Years ago Mr. Mon did some Bible studies through the mail with the Catholics and thus knows some about the Bible and Christianity.

For a couple hours, we talked about his Bible questions, the basis for belief, and the difference between Buddhism, Christianity, and Chinese traditional religion. We tackled the origin of the world but he objected that no one really knows how everything started. "The Buddha didn't teach about the creation of the world," he said. "It all depends on what your personal belief is." We discussed Jesus and I brought up the resurrection. "If Jesus rose from the dead, then it proves the claims that he made about life, death, and the origin of the world," I asserted, proceeding to give some evidences for the reasonability of believing that Jesus rose from the dead. But again I got the same response, "It all depends on what your personal belief is." Mr. Mon then went on to explain that it didn't really matter if the Buddha existed as an historical person. "The Buddha doesn't matter. Was he real or not? Who knows? It doesn't make a difference. It is the body of teaching, the Dharma, which really matters." This was his way of saying that whether or not Jesus rose from the dead, or even existed, is irrelevant to our discussion.

However, the validity of Christianity stands or fall upon the resurrection of Christ. The Apostle Paul said,

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1Cor. 15:14-19 ESV)

If Christ did not rise from the dead, then I am a complete fool for talking with Mr. Mon about Christianity. Buddhism already has a system of ethical teaching, and Christianity without the resurrection is nothing more than another ethical system. Thai Buddhists don't need another ethical system or another set of moral rules. They already have that. What they need (and what we all need) is forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with the God who made us. And if Christ rose from the dead then that forgiveness and reconciliation is assured for all who turn to Him in faith and repentance. But the resurrection only matters if you are interested in forgiveness of sins.

As our discussion went on, Mr. Mon correctly observed that in Buddhism there is no forgiveness of sins, but in Christianity there is Jesus who redeems sinners on the cross. The differences between the two religions on this point was very clear in his mind. "So, are you interested in forgiveness of sins?" I asked him. "If you are, then Jesus should interest you greatly. If you don't need forgiveness of sins or if you have your own system worked out to escape from sin, then never mind. Jesus doesn't have anything for you." Mr. Mon did not have anything to say about this and the discussion went in another direction after a moment of silence.

I am not sure whether Mr. Mon's questions are just out of curiosity or whether he really wants to know. Is God slowly changing his thinking or does he just enjoy a good discussion? He seems to be thinking though, and mulling things over. He is an avid reader and has read some (all?) of the tracts and booklets that I have given him. His wife has read them too. As Mr. Mon and I go back and forth, she sits there the entire time, quietly knitting a bag. But she is listening. And her Christian househelper reports to my wife and I that she seems interested and open to what she is hearing.

Concerning Mr. Mon though, I don't think that getting satisfying answers to thorny intellectual questions is the key that will unlock the door of faith for him. If God opens his eyes to see the horrible burden of his own sin and the certainty of God's judgment, then the other pieces will fall into place. And then all of a sudden, the resurrection will matter a great deal.