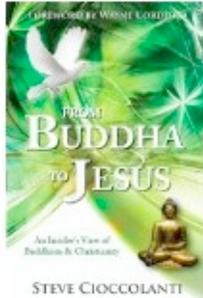


From Buddha to Jesus: An Insider's View of Buddhism & Christianity, by Steve Cioccolanti (Sweet Life International, 2007, 240pp.)

—reviewed by Larry Dinkins



You wouldn't expect a pastor of an International Church in Melbourne, Australia with a name like "Cioccolanti" (Italian for "chocolate") to claim an inside track to the mind and worldview of Buddhists. However, his claim to an insider's view of Buddhism is substantiated by his Thai upbringing and exposure to a very religiously diverse extended family. Besides his Thai Buddhist roots, Steve has added to that a broad education in America and Europe which allows him to address Buddhist issues from both an oriental and occidental viewpoint.

The word "Insider" is emphasized in the title because most apologetical literature on Buddhism is written from the standpoint of "Outsiders" who can claim field experience as missionaries or special skill in the study of comparative religions, but have not been personally steeped in Buddhism from their youth. Hearing and observing first hand how a relative or friend articulates and practices his or her faith is much different than what is portrayed about Buddhism in Hollywood or in scholarly textbooks.

Buddhism has recently experienced an upsurge in popularity due to media exposure as well as its perception as a "tolerant" religion in a world of religious violence and intolerance. The worldwide popularity of the Dalai Lama as a globetrotting ambassador for Buddhism has only added to its luster. Cioccolanti has seized on this fact and has written a popular treatment designed for both thinking/seeking Buddhists from the East as well as anyone from the West who may be dabbling in eastern mysticism. Academics will be disappointed by the lack of original sources and careful scholarship, yet the book was not designed as a textbook for seminary, but a practical book designed to clarify and demystify certain misconceptions about Buddha and his teachings as well as bridge the cultural gap between eastern and western mindsets.

This book has already prompted a strong reaction both in Thailand and especially among Western converts to Buddhism who object to what they view as simplistic explanations of the Buddha's teaching and a false caricature of their faith. There have been numerous books written on Islam and Hinduism, which have spawned similar controversy, yet such a treatment on Buddhism is a rarity. For this reason, those who minister to the estimated one billion who are touched at some level by Buddhism should at least be aware of this book.

A strength of this book is the conversational tone and illustrations along with stories that act as conversation starters when one tries to dialogue or discuss the gospel with a Buddhist. Buddhist often have stock answers, which tend to kill further discussion. Claiming the universal goodness of all religions or conversely the foreignness of western religions such as Christianity is an effective way of deflecting more probing

questions. Cioccolanti's knowledge of Buddhist semantics, parables, prophecies and stories helps defuse the common barriers that are often erected when engaging in conversation with Buddhists.

The author recognizes the important place of semantics and language in his treatment. Most all major doctrinal words such as God, sin, salvation, belief, heaven and hell must be redefined for a Buddhist to grasp their true biblical meaning. Cioccolanti has recorded over fifty footnotes in his book all related to the definition of familiar Thai words. Added to this are numerous references to both Pali and Sanskrit, the ancient languages of the Buddhist scriptures. Inclusion of these key words serves as a good reminder to all evangelists who tend to speak "Christianeze" instead of the heart language of the target group.

The typical gospel presentation to the Thai has stressed the positive aspects of the love of God, His plan of salvation, and assurance of heaven. This approach may fit a western audience, but for the Buddhist it is often more helpful to remind them first of their inability to live up to their own standards or through their own efforts seek to pay for their numerous sins. Cioccolanti does this by using Buddhist analogies and stories like the "Blind Turtle" as well as the five precepts to emphasize these points. His admonition is to prepare the ground by preaching law instead of prematurely emphasizing grace, which more often than not confuses the first time hearer. When a Buddhist begins to understand that he is indeed a sinner under his own standards, then the message of the love, mercy and compassion of God makes much more sense.

Cioccolanti makes numerous references to the sayings of Buddha and yet is honest when he admits that we really don't know the accuracy of those assertions. One cannot compare three hundred years of oral transmission before the Buddhist scriptures were recorded and the eye witness accounts of Jesus that were written in the first century. However, just as Paul quoted Greek philosophers without endorsing all their teaching, it is permissible to quote familiar sayings of Buddha as a bridge to Asian hearts or to answer an objection. This book serves as a healthy reminder of the need to "re-load" certain Buddhist sayings or concepts with biblical meaning in order to avoid syncretism.

Avoiding syncretism is no easy task as those who have tried to "push the envelope" with insider movements will attest. In an effort to be relevant to Thai Buddhists, the author tends to blur the lines at times. Speculations about how Buddha or Jesus might have believed about reincarnation are hypotheticals that no one can be sure of. The idea that God gave revelation to Buddha, Ezekiel and Jeremiah and yet only two of them wrote down that revelation is problematic to say the least (p. 154). The assertion that Buddhism is closer to Christianity than all other world religions including Islam is also an item of dispute (p. 206). Speculation over Buddha's relationship to God (p. 226) and just how far one can press the analogy of Jesus and the coming Buddhist Messiah (p. 237) are topics which scholars will continue to debate.

Another disturbing aspect of the book is the author's propensity to lose focus and address issues that are important to him, but are tangent to the main theme and title of

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the book. It is rather jarring to find in a chapter on “The Last Words of Buddha” an exhortation to speak in tongues. In a treatise on the end times, Cioccolanti inserts a section on Creationism and Darwinian evolution, which may be suitable in a biology class, but could be deemed out of place when the theme is Buddhist eschatology. One could also cite frequent references to Jesus paying for sins in hell during the three days between the cross and resurrection (p. 59, 136, 139). One could have wished that such distractions could have been left out of the book and thus evade unnecessary alienation on the part of some readers.

Overall, the contribution that Cioccolanti makes is his honest attempt to address Buddhist perceptions and worldviews that are often missed by scholars and “outsiders.” I have lived among Thai Buddhist people for over twenty years and was pleasantly surprised to gain new insights from this book, many of which are absent in more scholarly treatments. Most of the illustrations, stories and parables are practical enough to be internalized and used in a winsome way in personal witnessing. There are plenty of starting points for those who are wondering just where to begin a conversation when engaging a Buddhist. This book serves as a reminder that it is a divine work that brings people “from Buddha to Jesus” and yet it is our job to partner with God by being ready to “give an answer for the hope that lies within us” in a culturally relevant way.

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