

# The Gospel Facing Buddhist Cultures

Alex G. Smith

## INTRODUCTION

Current statistics clearly indicate that the bulk of non-Christian populations are concentrated in Asia among three large blocks of people—the Chinese, the Hindus, and the Moslems (Winter 1977: 123-126.) The Buddhist block comes next. In all four of these populations, only comparatively small numbers have responded to the Gospel of Christ. It is also unlikely that during the last three decades in China, centuries of Buddhist philosophical thinking would be entirely wiped out. Certainly changes have occurred, but a lot of Buddhist conceptualization mixed with spiritistic beliefs probably still pervades Chinese thinking today. Thus the Buddhist peoples may form the largest group of unreached people today. The Chinese alone claim a population of one billion—a quarter of the world's population and one third of the unevangelised three billion today. It is therefore most fitting that thought be given to presenting the Gospel to a Buddhist culture. <sup>NOTE:</sup>

The Christian church among Buddhist peoples whether the Mahayana or the Theravada school is a tiny minority, usually less than 1% of the population with rare exceptions, notable Korea. Consequently the vital theological issues concerning the Gospel and the Buddhist culture focuses around at least three major areas, all of which are somewhat inter-related:

1. The survival of the church facing solid social solidarity and opposition.
2. The development of a sense of belonging or identity within the unfavorable context and climate.
3. The need to communicate Christ acceptably to Buddhists so that the church can extend and penetrate the barriers of social resistance.

Two specific areas for study should be identified: (1) Ethnotheology and (2) Evangelistic Theology and Strategy. Both should progress side by side. The church must be kept from becoming an insular sub-society, which fails to communicate Christ effectively to its Buddhist neighbours. Ethnotheology must therefore take into account communicating the Gospel to the dominant population in its development. My main emphasis will be on this evangelistic communication.

This brief paper will not deal in depth or detail with the many facets of this vast and complicated subject. It will, however, briefly set the topic in perspective. Essential differences between Buddhism and Christianity are highlighted as well as the problem of the communication of the Gospel. The last half of the paper focuses on some strategies and practical approaches for presenting the Gospel to Buddhists.

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## Christian Encounter with Buddhists

In its two thousand five hundred year history, Buddhism has been one of the great religions of the world. The main expansion occurred during the first two millennia. Kenneth S. Latourette observed that its growth among people of high civilizations or advanced religion, did not fully displace its religious predecessors. It was only among peoples . . . “where the prevailing religion was animism, that Buddhism became dominant” (1956:43). Actually even here, it dominated but did not dislodge animism. Buddhism has made no significant advance in the last five centuries.

Christian encounter with Buddhists can be traced a long way back to the Nestorian period. Richard Garbe writes, “Christian influence on Buddhism in Tibet and China has been possible since A.D. 635, for from this year we have evidence of a Nestorian mission that set out for those lands under a leader by the name of Olopan or Alopen” (1959:176).

Despite continual Christian encounters since that time, early Roman Catholic missions followed by Protestant ones produced only meager results in terms of church growth. In fact some of the earlier missions to Buddhist peoples in Asia did not even survive. Three main causes account for the lack of permanent self-perpetuating Christian communities among Buddhist peoples. First is persecution, second in syncretism, and third the failure of the Church to break through the social solidarity of Buddhist communities. These still pose basic problems facing Christian theologians and evangelists today.

Recognizing some historical and doctrinal similarities between Christianity and Buddhism, many people think they are both much the same. Similarities of ethical standards such as the Ten Commandments and the Buddhist Sila (prohibitions) and other observations such as those listed by Paul A. Eakin (1956:27-31) appear to add weight to this. A warning is needed, however, regarding the precise meaning and definition of such concepts and principles so compared. Are they truly equivalent or even similar? Not really!

First, Buddha basically taught the ability of self to free oneself from corruption and suffering, to obtain a state of perfect non-existence, without the help of God. Thus in modern terms, the basis of Buddhism is Humanism, that is, man does not have to answer to a higher authority than himself, and man is basically good and can become good by his own efforts. This he can do without any help from God, or any reference to God. Like other human-initiated religions, Buddhism is a projection of human thinking out to the infinite. Christianity, on the other hand, stems from God’s self-disclosure to man. This divine revelation climaxed in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel is therefore centered in a transcendent God, revealing Himself in terms of man’s own culture and language.

Second, Buddhism rejects the concept of a personal God and for that matter, of any spiritual personality, either human or divine. God in the Christian sense is unknown to Buddhists. In place of a personal Creator they hold the error of Karma—cause and effect—as the exclusive principle to explain the universe. What or who initiated Karma is undetermined. In modern times, God has been interpreted in Buddhist religious terminology. Again the danger of definitions and conceptualization is to be carefully discerned. The following indicated subtle syncretism by taking the Christian form of God into Buddhist writings, while maintaining basic Buddhist meaning.

Bhikkhu Buddhadasa Indapanno, a leading Buddhist scholar, equated God with Karma, rejecting personality in favor of “nature” as cause. In terms of comparison, not equivalents, this is reasonably acceptable thinking, though it begs the question of prime initiation. In gospel terms, God is the final point of orientation for all His purposeful relation to the world. In Buddhism the final cause is the principle of Karma. Indapanno also equated God as creator with the Buddhist term, avija (1967:66-67). This means lack of knowledge or ignorance, the basic cause of evil. Hence God in Buddhist terms is ignorance, being the power of nature which caused all things to exist, and as such caused suffering. Such an interpretation of God is absolutely unacceptable.

Third, D.T. Niles brilliantly clarifies the basic Buddhist doctrines of anicea (impermanence or transitoriness), anatta (soullessness or absence of self), and dukkha ((sorrow, suffering):

If we do not start with God we shall not end with Him, and when we start with Him we do not end with the doctrines of anicea, anatta and dukkha.

The existence of God means the existence of an order of life which is ternal—nicca (permanence). It means that there is a postulated for the soul—atta—an identity which is guarded by God’s sovereignty, and that sorrow—dukkah—is seen to consist, not so much in the transitoriness of things, as in the perverseness of our wills which seeks these things instead of the things which are eternal. The circle of the Christian faith can thus be described as that which starting with God leads man to the realization that God alone affords the most adequate base for a most meaningful explanation of life’s most significant facts (1967:27). (Note: In Pali, the prefix “a” negates, meaning “not.”)

Buddha saw life was meaningless in itself, and set out to rescue men from this meaninglessness. Jesus say life could become meaningful in God, and set out to call men to share that meaning (John 10:10). Furthermore, in Buddhism, death is the final category. In the Gospel, the final category is life (Niles 1967:29, 34, 35). Buddhists seek to shorten life, to escape from the never ending cycle of re-births. The Gospel emphasizes everlasting life.

A fourth contrast shows that true Christianity is centered in altruism. Because Karma encourages preoccupation with self-dependence, Buddhism becomes self-centered. This social difference is significant. The Buddhist social order is dominated by the individual, and there is a lack of sense of relation, man to man, and man to God (Eakin 1965:56, 63). In Thailand, for instance, it is almost inconceivable for the Buddhist to believe that the missionary has come out of pure concern for them without an incentive for personal gain. They often ask the question, “What are you getting out of this? A higher salary? Government sponsorship? More merit? Or what?” The concept of selfless constraining love of Christ for others is foreign to Buddhist thinking.

To the Christian the way up is down, taking the servant role, being a doormat to fellowmen. To the Buddhist the way up is a self-centered preoccupation. To walk over others or use them for your own advancement is acceptable. Of course it can be noted that in all men, even among Christians, such attitudes can prevail, but they are contrary to the biblical Gospel.

Another major difference is in the principle of salvation, or ultimate attainment. For the Buddhist, self-effort and “boot-strap” deliverance through their own human energies and ability, is a cardinal principle. “Depend only on self.”

The Gospel on the other hand declares that dependence on self and confidence in the flesh spells doom. We are utterly helpless apart from the grace of God in Christ alone. Salvation comes through dependence on Almighty God, made operational through the penitent's faith (Eph. 2:8-9, Gal. 2:20, 3:7, Rom. 3:28, 4:1-28).

Furthermore, Buddhist Karma tends to engender fatalism, hopelessness, self-excusing, and pessimism in the majority of the population. Buddhism has no possibility of forgiveness, for "Karma is the iron law to which there is no exception" (Appleton 1958:52). Contrast this with the Gospel of the Loving God who gives forgiveness, hope, and an exchanged life, operating in a spiritual dimension through the power of Jesus Christ's shed blood. Christ's atonement is sufficient for cleansing from the past, power in the present, and hope in the future.

The honest evangelist or theologian settles for neither integrative syncretism, nor a fully indigenised Buddhist gospel. Both would distort the true meaning. An expression of the Gospel in Buddhist cultures must be dynamically equivalent to the pristine biblical core and clothed in meaningful communicative garb appropriate to each cultural context.

In this present time when cultural relativism, situational ethics, secularism, and humanism are flooding the communicative media, pressures are brought upon the church and her emissaries to reduce the uniqueness of Christ, the authority of the Bible, and the necessity of the Christian Gospel, to an "on-par" level with other world religions. Through this the Church is in danger of being swallowed up by a gross life. Unfortunately, sometimes seminaries perpetuate this lie—professors teach it, students believe it. Christians, however, must reject its error. Faithful missionaries, church leaders, and Christians everywhere must resist this unscriptural philosophy.

At the same time a call for sympathetic understanding of the Buddhist in his dilemma is needed. A Christian approach should always be with humility and loving persuasion, backed by the testimony of dynamic personal relationship with Jesus Christ. A living demonstration of the Gospel, not a pharisaical preciseness of evangelical doctrines, is required. Everywhere men are lost in sin, alienated from God their Creator. An increased concern to communicate the Gospel to the Buddhist and renewed zealous evangelism to present Christ the only Savior is urgently needed. The effectiveness of Christ's ambassadors will be proportionate to the dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit and their sensitivity to the cultural concepts of those to whom they go.

#### Effective Evangelism Demands Effective Communication

The contextual barriers to cross-cultural communication are many, particularly to the Buddhists. The social solidarity of the religious overlay is strong. Thai culture itself is deeply steeped in Buddhism. The religious and educational language is heavily infiltrated with Buddhistic terms, connotations, and concepts. The Gospel through its dynamic expansion, the Reformation, and evangelical awakenings established a Christian moral base in many Western nations. Buddhism likewise tied together the fragmented peoples of Asia, particularly those animistic populations in the process of culture change and group integration. Thus theology, learned behavior, and education at home or school, are saturated with foundational Buddhistic teachings. This religious overlay forms the framework or grid in which communication takes place.

Consider some of the hindrances in this communicational dilemma applicable to the evangelist, theologian or Christian medico-social worker. First, many unwittingly believe that communication is what is said, rather than what is heard. How often we hear, "What a clear presentation of the Gospel!" Our main concern should really be, how clear was the reception? In Buddhist lands, the linguistic terms the Christian uses are inevitably loaded with Buddhistic

meaning and often are identical in language terms. The preacher or teacher has in mind a Christian concept of sin, heaven, hell, God, faith or whatever, but as he speaks he uses Buddhist words loaded with Buddhistic connotations. Is it any wonder that Buddhists listening to him often reply, “Oh, if that is Christianity, it is just the same as Buddhism.”

Second, the frustration of the Gospel proclaimer revolves around the problem of meaning. The communicator fails to remember that he cannot transfer meaning. The Christian may encode the message, but the Buddhist must decode it. Therefore the communicator can only transfer “bits” of information. The meaning is then formed in the mind of the receiver in terms of his own cultural grid. This is equally true for the cross-cultural missionary as well as for a Ceylonese Christian speaking to a Buddhist neighbor.

The solution demands action to establish a circle of a communicative process. Communication is not portrayed by a straight line. It is not a verbal echo or rebound of the actual words. Effective communication requires the reflex of the hearer’s understanding the meaning, equivalent to that sent by the encoder. Thus a feedback mechanism is essential for evaluating honest communication. Conversational interchange is helpful here, rather than just the “pulpit announcing” mode.

Listening is therefore a vital part of the process of effective communication, especially for audiences such as Buddhists whose comprehension is based on diametrically opposed presuppositions and premises. The more interchange and feedback to clarify meaning occurs, especially through successive repeated contact, the more likely Biblical understanding is to be conceived.

Nevertheless, while preciseness of communication is a requirement of theological responsibility, it is the Holy Spirit alone who communicated spiritual truth. There are times that the Holy Spirit works, despite the ignorance and blunders of the preacher. However, this is not excuse for failing to make determined efforts to sharpen clear communication of the Gospel.

### Local Flavored Media

In Asian cultures, especially among rural and tribal populations, oral communication forms are basic and tend to predominate. The electronic and print media in such populations usually have a low profile as local communicative media. Studies in ethno-media such as indigenous song, dance, drama, music and other arts are urgently needed in many Buddhist cultures. Research and experimentation with pilot projects should be implemented. Evaluating and measuring the effectiveness of increased communication is needed. Use and adaptation of the grassroots media should be encouraged in all teaching in urban areas and some rural ones too, some Western forms of media such as films have been somewhat indigenised. Christian communicators should carefully study the indigenised principles and process behind the acceptance of such media, and not glibly follow Western mode and psychology in utilizing these media.

Every Christian should be concerned to find meaningful expressions and indigenous illustrations applicable to communicating theological truth. To use a Buddhist Thai idiom, “108” illustrations from daily life are pregnant with meaning, awaiting spiritual application. The evangelist and theologian should constantly be on the lookout for keen historical illustrations, powerful in the minds of the hearers, to apply spiritual truth through them. For example in Thailand, the theological concept of substitution which presupposes someone vicariously giving

his life for another is incongruous with Buddhist religious beliefs. A beautiful historical illustration is the famous Queen Phrastriyothai of the Auuthia period helps open the windows of understanding here. Briefly stated, the Thai King went out to fight the opposing Burmese ruler. Phrastriyothai dressed up disguised as a Thai warrior. Unbeknown to her royal husband, she rode out to the battle. In the ensuing fight the Thai King was losing the advantage. He was about to be cut down. Seeing this, the Queen deliberately drove her elephant between the Burmese King and her husband. She was slain by the long-handled knife wielded by the Burmese ruler, but her husband escaped. He later built a special memorial to her in honor of her bravery and sacrifice. The Gospel application is obvious.

The use of parable, symbol, and analogy is generally more acceptable to the Buddhist mind than strictly focused arguments. Word pictures can be employed to advantage. The Bible is full of rich parables and illustrations. However, missionaries and Christians tend to over-explain these instead of letting the meaning shine forth. Parables or analogy are great ways to get the Buddhist to open up for discussion, thereby helping him evaluate the Gospel's meaning. To large sections of Buddhist populations, the majority of whom are rural, Pauline arguments in strict linear logic form, such as those in the book of Romans, are difficult to follow. Their minds tend to be conditioned more to contextual type logic, similar to the spokes in a wheel pointing to a common hub of meaning. Such an approach is used in Hebrews. Studying the indigenous process of communication and utilizing these principles for proclamation and teaching will probably be a crucial issue in effective evangelism and theological education. This is true both for national church leaders and foreign apostles.

### Some Theological Strategies and Approaches

Many approaches have been suggested and tried in presenting the Gospel to Buddhists. No major breakthrough has been seen through the use of any one method, strategy, or approach. This is not surprising as it is a much better principle to tailor the approach to the individual or particular group being reached. Buddhist beliefs vary dramatically even within one country, so do the people-groups (homogeneous units). Therefore the Christian evangelist and theologian must be sensitive to take this into consideration. Several approaches will be suggested.

(1) The Apologetic Approach. First is the apologetic approach to the thinking Buddhist. Some Christian theologians feel there are many contrasts between Buddhism and Christianity, which are in fact largely opposites in concept. Inconsistencies in Buddhism then form the basis of argument to logically convince Buddhists of the Gospel. Dorothy Beugler concisely listed some of these contrasts and inconsistencies in The Religion of the Thai in Central Thailand.

Paul A. Eakin suggests the most effective presentation of Christ will be made by those who know and sympathetically study Buddhism, rather than the Christian who is ignorant of it. He feels, however, that the Gospel should be presented to the Buddhist mind with the “explosive force of a brand new affection.” He affirms also that the Buddhist will not reach Christ better or clearer through the medium of Buddhist philosophy. His apologetic centers around two main “gaps.” First a challenge to the traditional Buddhist cosmology, using Genesis to convince the truth of God as Creator of world and men. The second focal point of Eakin's approach is the fact of salvation, and the possibility of forgiveness and remission of penalty through Christ (1956:61-62).

Significantly, Daniel McGilvary, pioneer apostle to northern Thailand, gained his first convert, Nan Inta, by predicting the total eclipse of the sun on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1868. Nan Inta, a Buddhist abbot and diligent student of Buddhism, has argued with McGilvary on subjects such as the science of geography, the shape of the earth, the nature of eclipses, and so on. Of course there is much myth in unfounded scientific concepts in early Buddhist cosmology. Finally, when Nan Inta saw the eclipse as predicted, his faith in the old cosmology was shattered. He turned and became a Christian. He was one of thousands to turn to Christ in north Thailand in the next half century (McGilvary 1912:96-97).

Wan Petchsongkram also kikes the apologetic method, and centers his arguements around the person of God and God as Creator (1975:54f, 64f). He also deals with such conflicting interpretations or concepts within Buddhism as vinyaan (soul, spirit) and nipaan (nirvana) (1975:39f, 119f.)

Preaching about God must be done so as not to make God seem evil in terms of Buddhist thinking. A new interpretation of avija must be taught starting not with God the Creator (Gen. 1, 2) but with the Fall of Man (Gen. 3) as the real source of ignorance and consequent suffering.

Another leading elderly Thai apologist, Boonmi Rungruangwongs, argues bluntly in his Thai booklets on God, Desire, and a 22-point rationale for killing animals. He does this, however, in the context of Buddhist thought.

One of the best published approaches presenting the Gospel to the Buddhist is Busshism and the Claims of Christ b D.T. Niles (1967). It is written in a style compatible with the thought patterns of the Buddhist mind, yet from a thoroughly Christian viewpoint. I recommend it.

I have found that the apologetic approach has been valuable in teaching Christians to understand their faith in contrast to the Buddhist way, rather than as a prime strategy for winning groups of Buddhists to Christ. Most of those who take the apologetic approach usually claim their approach is to the thinking, educated Buddhist. However, most Buddhists do not fall into this category.

(2) The “Point of Contact” Approach A second approach is through the use of Buddhism as a stepping stone to Christianity. Ethical and moral similarities are used as the basis for presenting Christ. Some look at the doctrine of Karma as dealing with an incompleteness, rather than an absolute falsehood—an incompleteness which is to find its fulfillment in Christ. In seeking what Don Richardson calls “redemptive analogies” in Buddhism, one becomes quite frustrated. However, in the animistic foundations of many Buddhist societies, careful research may identify some redemptive analogies. God is the God of all cultures. He has allowed certain elements to be placed within different cultures to be used as bridges for the Gospel. For example, among animistic beliefs, the Sawi Tribe in Indonesian West Irian had a custom of the peach child in order to bring about and restore normal relations between warring villages. The application to God’s Peace Child resulted in the establishment of a Church among the Sawi. Similarly, the Yali people had a practice of assigned places of refuge, a beautiful transition to Numbers chapter 35 and the Place of Refuge in Christ. Another tribe has an impressive and symbolic ceremony of the new birth. Sometimes elements such as these have been left without cultures as residual reference back to the original creation and fall of man and to the true redemptive plan of God.

They lay latent waiting for Christian emissaries to apply them as levers or spring boards for preaching and teaching the Gospels.

Three times I have visited Korea, a Buddhist land where a strong Christian movement has taken place since 1907. The Korean Church today (all groups) has grown to about six million, or 16% of the population of South Korea. One key to Korean church growth under the Holy Spirit was a missionary's choice of an indigenous name for God: "Hananim". Once a year the Korean King would go to an island in the middle of the river within the capital to make special offerings to "Hanylmin" who was thought of as a high lofty being in heaven i.e. Hanyl. When early missionaries taught about Hayinim in deeper terms, with a more intimate and authoritative knowledge of him than the Korean King or elders had, the people listened. This was a significant element in turning thousands of Koreans to Christ. Soon "Hananim" (Hana = one), a more biblically accurate term, became widely accepted among Protestants.

One particular Buddhist point of contact that some missionaries have used should be noted. As mentioned earlier, a movement among northern Thai Buddhists occurred between 1884 and 1914 in the days of Daniel McGilvary. Between these years the Church grew from 152 members to 6,900. Usually such growth is caused by a number of intertwining causes. One of these elements, however, appears to have come from a Buddhist point of contact. In 1895 W. Clifton Dodd wrote a brief article "Siam and the Laos" in which he noted "the providential preparation" of the northern Thai Buddhists for the Gospel. He referred to "the preparation of Buddhism" whose "meaningless ritual in an unknown tongue (the Pali)" provided "inadequate answers for either head or heart (1895:8-10). Dodd, a veteran missionary to the Lao as the ethnic northern Thai were then known, suggested that "the more positive preparations are found in the Laos Buddhist books" as against the negative failure to keep the people from worshipping the spirits. Indeed one of the factors which had some bearing on this movement was the Buddhist teaching of a future savior. At least three names referred to this final savior: (1) Phra See An, (2) Phra Ariya Matrai, and (3) Phra Pho Thi Sat. (This last one is also known to Chinese Buddhists.) Part of this Buddhist mythical prophecy says,

Myriads of ages ago a white crow laid five eggs; that each of these eggs was to hatch and bring forth a Buddha; that these Buddhas were to appear in the upper world, one by one; that four have already appeared; and that the last is about to come. The people believed that he will be the greatest and best of all; that he will gloriously reign 84,000 years, and that in his time, all men will become pure in heart (Harris 1906:214, underlining mine).

Dodd also wrote of a widely prevalent tradition concerning Punyah Tum, a kind of John the Baptist:

Its advent is to be heralded by a forerunner, Punyah Tum, who will prepare the way; the rough placed shall be made as smooth as "Temple ground". Then the elder brother of Buddha is to become incarnate as a savior. His name is Alen-Yah Mottai. Only the good shall be able to see him, but all who see him shall be saved. The proclamation to the Laos people of this fullness of time and the completed salvation is predicted to be by a foreigner from the South. He is to be a man with white hair and a



long beard, who will not fly in the air like a bird, neither will he walk on the earth like a beast, but who will come bringing in his hands the true ten commandments (Beach 1902:315).

The impact of pioneer Daniel McGilvary's appearance in the North in the light of this expectation must have impressed many. One of the Christians, a witness to the arrival of McGilvary on one of his northern tours, described him as "a man with long, white beard, mounted on an elephant. When he dismounted he began teaching out of a book" (McFarland 1928:183).

Arthur J. Brown quoted Dodd and Briggs in relation to "a general expectation of another reincarnation of Buddha: (1908:343). Dodd said:

Most of our auditors looked upon Jesus as the next Buddha, the Savior, Ahreyah Mettai. Many lifted both hands in worship of the pictures, the books, and the preachers. Our colporteurs were treated in most places as the messengers of the Buddhist Messiah. Offerings of food, flowers, and what tapers were made to them. In return, they were expected to bless the fivers. They explained that they themselves were sinners deriving all merits and blessing from God, and then reverently asked a blessing from Him. Thus Christian services were held in hundreds of homes.

Dr. Briggs reported of one of his tours:

The message was received with outspoken gratitude and intelligent interest, many of the people remaining long after midnight, reading the books and tracts by the light of the fire and asking questions of the Christians in our company. These people, hungry for truth that satisfies and longing for light, are very anxiously awaiting the coming of the promised Messiah of Buddhism.

Some of the missionaries capitalized on these predictions "pointing to the salvation wrought out by the blessed Son of God." They used this as a starting point of contact within the Buddhist culture to bridge the religio-cultural gap in meaningful communication. They went on to expound the riches of Christ.

Most missionaries, however, were cautious in using this Buddhistic lever as an approach. Many of the finer details were contrary to the biblical account. There was no complete comparison of Ahreyah Mettai and Christ, nor did they attempt to integrate or synthesize the two. It was only a point of contact, an interest awakener. Christian missionaries avoided giving credence and authority to Buddhist writings. They maintained a high view of the authority and uniqueness of the Biblical revelation. They were also careful not to syncretise Christ into the Buddhist structure; they preached a unique Savior, the Lord Christ, in their evangelism.

This illustration may be irrelevant to modern Buddhists today. Nevertheless the sensitive search for adequate points of contact should continue. Meaningful bridges to the people should be explored.

(3) The Shame Theology Approach. A third approach focuses on a theological difference between Shame and Guilt. Among the “losing face” societies of Buddhist Asia, shame rather than guilt is a dominant trait in culture. Theologically speaking, there is considerable room for investigating this theme in relation to the Gospel’s approach to the Buddhist. Lowell L. Nobel has made a worthy contribution here in his anthropological, biblical, and sociological study of shame, entitled Naked and Not Ashamed. He makes some interesting observations on this subject related to Japan, China, and Thailand (1957:46-63). Joseph R. Cook’s recent interesting paper “The Gospel for Thai Ears” also majors on the “shame” approach.

Thus the evangelistic message becomes “sin-shame-Savior” in place of “sin-guilt-Savior”. Actually shame is referred to in Scripture more than guilt. More research and study should be done on the shame approach. A number of problems still need to be clarified. One of the main issues is overcoming the Buddhistic preoccupation with self and an acceptance of accountability to God. Western and national theologians must think this approach through in terms of the conceptual definitions of Buddhistic cultures. Shame in the West is not necessarily identical to shame in the East.

In a “losing face” or shame culture, one can have shame from purely selfish reasons alone, especially in Thailand’s individualistic society. The theological issue is to see in one’s shame a responsibility to others, especially to God. The shame approach, to have biblical basis, must overcome the syndrome of purely revolving around self. There are points where shame does have a wider orientation.

(3) The “Scratch Where It Itches” Approach. Fourth is a “scratch where it itches” theology. Christ always applied His message to the appropriate needs of the individual or group. He was constantly teaching to need, apply the Gospel where the people hurt. Christianity needs to be practical in these days, not just in the demonstration of good works, but also in applying their teachings to the real needs of the people. Evangelists and theologians should observe carefully and listen conscientiously to the heartbeat of the community. Research and surveys are needed to discover the deep-felt needs of various people-groups. We must find out where people are itching and then scratch there with the Gospel. Theologizing divorced from the real needs of people is futile. But so is social service without Gospel pronouncement.

Furthermore, through this incarnation approach to the community, the Gospel minister builds his credibility among the people. He sits where they sit and feels as they feel. He also becomes a living demonstration of the Gospel he proclaims, as he ministers and teaches to those needs.

Patience is needed when working with Buddhist people. A time for diffusion of the message is usually necessary. Gospel saturation helps break the ignorance barriers over a period of time. Few people in Asia know much about the true Gospel, yet the evangelist often expects them to make an immediate decision for Christ. Rather he should evaluate where each community is on

the “scale of awareness” devised by Engel and Norton (1975:45). He can then decide what would be the next most appropriate action to take in leading them towards Christ.

Also one aim should be to locate the receptive families and responsive units of the population. These should be the prime focus for intensive evangelism and teaching. No amount of impersonal approach from a high pulpit will effectively do this. As personal contact at the grassroots defines the needs and hopes of people, then the balm of the Gospel can be applied. As H. Richard Niebuhr concluded in his book Christ and Culture (1956), “Christ is the transformer of culture.”

In the midst of cultural change, innovation, and acculturation, the sociological factors of communities must be taken into consideration in our preaching and our theological approaches. Urban populations today may not be so much Buddhist as secularist and materialist. Nevertheless, the underlying Buddhist assumptions will similar.

A beautiful illustration of “scratching where it itches” is seen in the Thailand Southern Baptists’ approach to the slums. A whole strategy based on sociological surveys of need and practical Christian involvement is helping meet those needs along with the teaching and preaching of the Gospel. Their objective is to establish local house-churches grounded in the local community.

It is significant to observe that much church growth in Buddhist lands has been initiated at the point of human weakness. Man’s extremity has become God’s opportunity for church growth. Henry Otis Dwight, referring to the large blocks of non-Christian populations under Buddhism, Islam, and such, says that these “bulwarks of resistance” loom large before the Church as “great hostile fortresses all long the line of her advance.” Dwight suggests looking for cracks in the resistant walls, or flaws in the stubborn strongholds as “strategic points for effective evangelism.” Thus by locating smaller units of responsiveness, often inconspicuous among the dominant population, missionaries avoid “striking in force at a main center before its time has come” (1905:82-83). Of course the large resistant blocks must not be neglected. Research and various approaches to them must be found. But in the meantime those cracks and flaws must be utilized to the full. The opportunities must be taken. Ripening fields must be harvested.

Many Buddhists who have come to Christ have first come “to the end of themselves”. Many conversions from Buddhism swing on the pivot point of the inability to accomplish perfection by oneself.

In rural Thailand the movement amongst leprosy patients is an example. They found their social, physical, and spiritual needs met through missionary leprosy clinics and subsequently Christian churches. I have described some of that process in the book Strategy to Multiply Rural Churches (1997:134-135). Numerous other people have also turned to Christ because of other medical extremities and their contact with Christians in clinics or hospitals (Smith 1997: 173).

Another point of weakness is the pressure from evil spirit oppression or witchcraft. Many of those who turned from Buddhism to Christ in the early movement in north Thailand did so to obtain freedom from witchcraft accusations and the social ostracism associated with it. I have

met quite a few cases of Buddhists who became Christians to be freed from spirit oppression or possession. They had prayed to Buddha and other gods, made offerings to the spirits, worshipped idols, gone into the priesthood, and still had not release. Frustrated, they met Jesus at the point to their extremity. (Smith 1997: 158)

Others come to Christ out of economic extremity or impoverishment. Disaster, flood, famine have met up with them. Their Karma has overplayed itself. They are fed up, hopeless, frustrated and discouraged. Hearing the Gospel and seeing Christ's love through His servants often turns some to Christ.

Another pointed case is the southeast Asian refugees from Buddhist lands, now over 100,000 in Thailand alone. These were a very receptive people especially in the early days of their freedom. At the point of their exasperation and frustration they sought for someone to truly depend on. Is it any wonder that the Thailand Southern Baptists alone baptized 2,1000 Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees during the last three years?

In all these cases, motivation may differ from person to person. The exact motivation for turning people to Christianity at the point of their extremity is not always clear. Nevertheless, this opportunity to teach, preach, and nurture these people in the ways of God's Word provides an approach to Buddhist people that must never be neglected.

In recent decades most of the major Buddhist lands in Asia today have been through some traumatic experience. Political and military excursions, and in some cases complete takeovers, have challenged the very core of these countries and their religion. In the trauma of today when national crisis, economic chaos, and military clash are prevalent in Asia, one wonders, "Is God bringing the Buddhist nations to an extremity, to an end of trusting in themselves, in order to steer them towards the Gospel of His grace, and to cause them to call out in utter dependence on the One who alone can help?"

Another clue to the frustrations of many relates to the question of death. Many Buddhists fear Hell, death, and the after-life. There is deep concern for all the ancestral spirits and the retribution that will come to those who fail to give obeisance to them. Further research is needed to find out at what point the Gospel truly "clicks" with those deep-seated fears and aspirations of the Buddhist heart's need.

(5) The Power Encounter Approach. Finally, since Buddhist nations have a more modified animism than pure Buddhism, we must accept the possibility that the power encounter element is a most strategic approach. A leading Buddhist scholar writes that from the long distant past "Thai Buddhists have had a god". This is clearly shown in the work phrachao, a truly Thai term referring to "something which one fears and must beseech or latter, an instinct among all thinking beings." Even before Brahmanism or Buddhism came, the Thai people believed in some kind of god in terms of spirit and divine being. The Brahmans introduced the concept of the King as an incarnation of god, hence the original work phrachao was also used for the King. The personal term "I" then became Khaphrachao. (Kha means servant-slave and chao or phrachao means Lord or God.) When Buddhism became dominant, there was a tendency to glorify each king as a Buddha. The first-person pronoun was then changed to

KhaphraBuddhachao, which in its present day use has been abbreviated to Khapachao (Indapanno 1967:61, 63).

Furthermore, Thai Buddhists have a deep respect for phra, an impersonal quantitative supernatural power. Many other beliefs and concepts involve power in holy water, incantations, tattoos, amulets, and miniature phra objects they hang around their necks or other parts of the body (khryang raang khong khlung). Most of these are tied up with the concern for protection, security, and invulnerability, or for power over others especially in economic and love life.

Thus the Gospel should present Christ as the superior Power over all these elements. Using this power approach I noticed increased response in Thailand. The message of power might be presented as follows:

1. God is the original source of all power and perfection. The Lord Jesus Christ is the all-powerful Lord. He is Creator and Governor over all. (John 1:1-3, Col. 1:16-17)
2. God created man in the image of God, and gave him power to govern the world. Man as originally perfect and enjoyed his freedom and power in the presence of God without shame, sin or death. (Gen. 1:26-27, 2:7-25)
3. Man lost that power through his own willful disobedience and rebellion against God. He then came under the power of evil and demonic spirits, resulting in suffering, shame and death. Man thus started the process of Karma and became slave to sin. (Gen. 3, Rom. 5:12, John 8:34, Eph. 2:1-3)
4. The Lord Jesus Christ saw man had no possible way to free himself from the power of Satan, sin, and Karma. Christ came down to break the power of Satan in man's life, to set him free from the power of evil spirits, and to redeem him from sin and Karma. By the miracle of dying in man's place, He bore the penalty of man's sin and shame. The perfect sinless Jesus restores God's power in man's life and gives him a new quality of life connected spiritually to God Himself. (John 1:14, 18, 29)
5. Man can have this power through repentance and faith by receiving Christ as his Lord and Source of constant dependence. God, through His grace, gives this power freely, apart from man's work or merit. God gives this power to man through His Holy Spirit whom His disciples are to obey. (John 1:10-13, 15:26, 16:12-15)
6. Christians must share this Gospel of power and freedom from Karma with their relatives, friends, neighbors, and nation. (Acts 1:8, Ezek. 3:19-20)

Obviously a polemical foundation teaching the existence of God is vital. The power encounter approach still requires time for diffusion, teaching, and saturation. A group movement usually arises from an inside innovator or prophet who takes God at His word. His bold demonstration of breaking with the old way is often the spark that ignited a greater movement.

The Bible abounds with illustrations of power encounter—the challenge of the power of God applied against the power of evil, Satan, and the demonic world. For example, Gideon destroying the family spirit grove; Elijah challenging the population and priests at Mount Carmel; Daniel’s three friends in the fiery furnace; and Daniel proving the power of God in the lions’ den. Truly the superiority of the power of Christ above everything else in our lives is the only dynamic approach that will bring Buddhists to a living relationship with Christ. The challenge of Joshua was a power encounter call: “Choose ye this day whom ye will serve—Jehovah or those other gods? But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:14-15). The social solidarity of the family in this call is applicable to Buddhist lands today. Herein the Church will grow and receive its stability and permanence in the midst of a socially antagonistic society.

### Conclusion

The practical conclusion in terms of reality of the task before us calls for a theology dealing with three basic issues. First the spiritual conflict demands concentrated prayer to break the controlling forces of darkness in the heavenlies. God has and will answer prayer, but the demonic forces may hinder and frustrate His answers being appropriated at times (Dan. 9:3-4, 17-23). Pray God to break down these powers and to free Buddhist hearts to hear the Word of God through the Holy Spirit.

Second is the socio-cultural clash. This solid social coherence comes largely from the religious thinking. To be Thai in most people’s mind means to be Buddhist. To turn from becoming a Buddhist is like becoming a traitor to one’s own nation. What widespread conditions will prepare the Buddhist population for social change in religion? There are signs of such changes at work today.

Third is the bold, though humble, confrontation of the Gospel with Buddhism. A dynamic encounter of the living Lord in contrast to the sleeping Buddha is needed. Let those prophetic advocates arise, like Elijah, to demonstrate power encounters. Many lessons are to be learned. More will be gained through sympathetic appreciation of the people than by cold logic. A cultural sensitivity should be wielded to incarnational evangelism based on a deep biblical foundation. This requires a person-centered approach while maintaining a truth-centered Gospel. To find the best evangelistic approaches to each Buddhist population, much research and careful experimentation should be implemented speedily.

All this calls today’s theologians in Asia to a new practical task of dealing with various grassroots issues in communication so that large pockets of Buddhist population can and will be won to Jesus Christ, and become functional members in His Church now and in the decades ahead.

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