

Bridging Buddhist-Christian Worldviews:



Photo by Maritha Mae Photography: www.marithamaephotography.com

COMMUNICATING IN CONTEXT FOR A THERAVADA BUDDHIST BREAKTHROUGH

*W*e have a dream that soon we will see an historic movement of Theravada Buddhists coming to know Christ as Savior. Is this also your dream and your heart's desire?

What's hindering such a movement and limiting response from Buddhists despite decades of effort? Some say that working among Buddhists is like sowing on rocky ground. Some are convinced there are not enough committed Christians working and praying. Others think our methods are wrong. For example, using a literary mode when most Buddhists prefer oral-visual means of communication.¹

REV. DR. BANTOON & MRS. MALI BOON-ITT

Dr. Bantoon and Mali Boon-itt, are a husband and wife team serving to improve the communication of the Christian message and making it comprehensible and relevant to Thai Buddhists. Rev. Dr. Boon-itt has written various papers and a dissertation related to this topic. He is the Senior Pastor of 4th Church Suebsampantawong, Bangkok, Thailand.

Contact:
mily.boonitt@hotmail.com

THE PROBLEM: MISCOMMUNICATION DUE TO THE DISPARITY BETWEEN BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEWS

I asked myself two questions: 1) Why is it so hard for Buddhists to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior? 2) Why, even though I preach and teach in Thai, do those who come from a Christian background appreciate my message but non-Christian Thai friends do not? As a Thai pastor, I needed to get to the root of this problem. With this conviction and these questions in mind, for ten years I sought to identify the problem by researching the development of Buddhism and Christianity in Thailand and the interaction between the two religions. I found that, being a Christian, it was hard to work through the many different types of Buddhism that are practiced in Thailand. I discovered several issues.²

The main issue is that the message Christians are so enthusiastically pushing toward Buddhists is incomprehensible, unattractive, and irrelevant. It struck me that just as I find it extremely difficult to take off my Christian glasses and put on Buddhist glasses, it must also be hard for Buddhists to see the Christian viewpoint. The root of the problem is that we have not been communicating effectively because we have not realized

that miscommunication will naturally occur due to the disparity between Buddhist and Christian worldviews. We Thai Christians have not grasped the need to learn to understand Theravada Buddhism. Key Christian words and doctrines are generally expressed by Christians in terms that are incomprehensible to Buddhists. An in-depth understanding of Buddhism will help Christians to appreciate why this is so.³

ANSWERS FOUND IN THE BIBLE

Examples from the Bible show that we need to let the context of the listener guide our use of vocabulary, methods, and illustrations to explain about God, what Jesus did on the cross, and His resurrection. Paul

Key Christian words and doctrines are generally expressed by Christians in terms that are incomprehensible to Buddhists.

changed the way he presented the gospel according to his audiences.⁴ New Testament writers used words and even religious terms from the local context to explain what God did through Christ. Unfortunately, instead of learning from these biblical examples and presenting the gospel in the local Buddhist context, Christians expect Buddhists to comprehend our Christian message the same way as we do, without realizing that a Buddhist's interpretation will be according to the Buddhist worldview. Thus our good news is not good news to Buddhists. Thai Christians need to make the mystery of the cross relevant to Thais where the language of atonement, sacrifice, redemption or adopted sons seems to fail in communicating any relevant meaning.

We see from the Bible that message contextualization is a crucial issue on the way to bring a breakthrough among Theravada Buddhists. This means explaining the significance of what Christ did on the cross to Buddhists in carefully selected terms that they can understand and are meaningful in their lives. It does not simply mean taking Buddhist terms to replace Christian terms. Doing so will be negatively perceived by Buddhists. The Thai language reflects the Thai worldview which in turn is underpinned by Buddhism. One cannot just translate words from one language and expect them to carry the same meaning and nuances in another language with a different worldview. For example, several Christian terms do not even exist in the Thai language outside the church. For the word fellowship, Thai Christians use the



combination *sa mak kee tham* (literally, teaching regarding unity). A non-Christian Thai will not understand that this word means “gathering to get to know and help support one another, sharing food, singing, praying and studying the Bible.” Similar difficulty applies to other key Christian terms, including: God, love, faith, sin, repentance, redemption, sanctification, justification, righteousness, glorification and so on. Many of these terms do not exist in the Buddhist worldview. Even with the terms that do have a Buddhist equivalent, Christians will need to take the time to explain the similarities and differences between their meanings in their two different worldviews. Let me explain a few:

The understanding of the word “God” for a Christian is very different from a Buddhist’s understanding. For a Buddhist, “god” can mean several things but the most common understanding is that “god” means one of the many deities who occupy the different heavenly realms.

The goal of life for a Buddhist is to reach *nibbana* but for a

deeds (*kamma*), but for Christian “heaven is the kingdom of God” whereas “hell is eternal separation from God.”

Sin: in Buddhism there is no such concept, only bad

Thus our good news is not good news to Buddhists

deeds, *bap*—that is black actions (*kamma*), which in Buddhism is action that is unskillful, *akusala*, hampering one’s attainment of *nibbana*. For a Christian, sin is disobedience to God, falling short of God’s standards. Since in Buddhism there is no such concept of a creator God as in Christianity, the understanding of sin as offense against creator God is meaningless in the Buddhist worldview.

With these differences it is not surprising that Buddhists misunderstand Christianity and find Christianity incomprehensible and not relevant to their lives. There

are several areas where words Christians use do not communicate to the Buddhist what

Christians believe they are

communicating. It is when Christians know the Buddhist worldview and learn about Buddhists’ perception of Christianity that we understand what we are actually saying. Learning about Buddhists’ perception of Christianity has exposed an injudicious introduction of the Christian message to Thai Theravada Buddhists.

It will not be easy for the established Thai church to change the terms that they have used for nearly two hundred years.

Christian it is to realize the kingdom of God in their lives. This can be perceived by a Buddhist as a self doing things for the benefit of the self to reach heaven and be with God. Heaven and hell for a Buddhist are hierarchical heavenly and hellish realms where beings receive the results of their





Clearly, this means that the Buddhist worldview and terminology need to be understood by the Christian communicator. Without having first grasped the Buddhist worldview one does not appreciate or understand the roots of Buddhists' misperceptions of Christianity. Trying to understand Buddhists' perspective brings the realization that it is Christianity that has failed to communicate. A Christian response to Buddhism can be developed more effectively after grasping their worldview and realizing how Buddhists comprehend our message. Only through trying to understand Buddhists can Christians effectively communicate Christ to them.

Christians may not realize it, but core Buddhist doctrines are intricately interwoven and expressed in the Buddhist way of life: in language, law, morality, belief, culture, tradition, art and architecture. Therefore, we need to understand the core of Buddhist doctrines because they determine people's worldview and way of life. Though the majority of folk Buddhists may not know the Buddhist terminology or be able to explain the Buddhist doctrines, their way of thinking, practice of Buddhism, and the way they view the world have a Buddhist foundation. We need to understand the foundation of classical Buddhism to help us appreciate and understand the various expressions of Buddhism found in the world today. As a comparison, consider how we need to learn the principles and theories of mathematics in order to apply them to mathematical problems. If the basic understanding is weak, solving mathematical problems becomes difficult and even impossible.

A sound knowledge of both Christianity and Buddhism

is needed in order to communicate effectively. The words that we choose need to carry the full Christian theology. Take for example, the challenge of communicating sin to Buddhists. Thai Christians use the word *bap* (as explained earlier). We need to understand what the word *bap* means in the Buddhist worldview and whether it carries the full meaning of sin in the Christian worldview. The word *bap* for sin that Christians have chosen to use currently carries very different meanings in the two different worldviews. Thus, we see that the challenge comes down to choosing the right words—creating concepts and methods of explaining Christian theology in a way that a Buddhist person can comprehend. Perhaps by using a group of words or coining new terms from words that exist in Thai (or the language of that particular Buddhist country) we will be able to communicate without being misinterpreted. All human language has limitations. It is not possible to explain fully the mystery of God or the mystery of the cross. What can be done is to facilitate people coming to Christ, so that they can have a personal relationship with Him and become more Christ-like.

This task requires the cooperation of people from many disciplines such as linguistics and theology. In the Thai context it requires those who understand the Thai worldview (Thai language and culture), those who understand Buddhism, and those who understand Christianity.

The repercussions of message contextualization will be extensive. The Bible societies, Christians and evangelists in Thailand will need to change some terms that are

used in the Thai Bible. The established Thai church will need to change terms with which they are familiar but which Buddhists misinterpret. It will not be easy for the established Thai church to change the terms that they have used for nearly two hundred years to terms that can better communicate to Buddhists the message of the cross.


What if we do not find better terms to communicate the significance of what Jesus did on the cross in a way that is meaningful and relevant to Buddhists? We will continue to experience very little response from Buddhists for many more decades to come. Buddhist friends who hear our message will not understand, even though we use oral (not written) means of communication. What is heard will not connect with the real needs of our Buddhist audience. But if we communicate the message of the cross with cultural sensitivity, in terms to which the Buddhist audience can relate to and be transformed by, the terms will be of deep significance for evangelizing and for discipling. Thai Christians need to be able to pass the gospel on clearly to others. They need to grow in understanding of the two worldviews in order to be able to “gossip the gospel” beyond simply saying, “It’s my experience, just believe.”

AWARENESS: THE FIRST STEP TOWARD BUDDHIST HEARTS

Awareness of the problem of communication across worldviews is the key step to communicating Christ in a way that can touch Buddhist hearts. This is key for the gospel message to Buddhists in Thailand and applies in other contexts as well. While Judaism, Christianity and Islam have many obvious points of contact in their worldviews, this is not so obvious in Hinduism, Confucianism and the various strands of Buddhism (Theravada, Mahayana, Shintoism, etc.). To emphasize, if I am not aware that when I speak Thai with Thai Buddhist friends, they may not understand what I wish to communicate and I may have the impression that they are hard-hearted, or that the message has fallen on rocky ground. Instead of analyzing how I’ve presented the message, I can be lured into thinking that all I need to do is pray more and ask the Holy Spirit to melt their hearts. Their worldview, and my understanding of it, determines their understanding of my message. When I am aware that I am communicating Christ across worldviews, I will be more conscious of how I am communicating. I will be more careful in my choice of words and method of

communication, and double-check that the person has really understood what I have wanted to communicate.

We urgently need to find an effective way of communicating Christ to Buddhists so that what is communicated can really touch their hearts. To make Christianity comprehensible to Buddhist friends will require great acumen as the Christian ideas and concepts are so foreign and so very different from Thai Buddhist ideas. Therefore we need to apply the Christian message into the Buddhist context to help Buddhists understand Christian beliefs. Buddhists may then realize that the Christian message is not entirely foreign to them and they may gain some new insights and realize that there is an alternative response to human suffering or *dukkha*.

It is our dream that the Buddhist community will embrace the gospel message within their cultural context and ignite a breakthrough among Theravada Buddhists. 

- ¹ For an explanation of the differences between these types of communication, see www.ask.com/question/difference-between-oral-and-written-communication
- ² For instance: the church has failed to encourage and equip Christians to be salt and light in the Buddhist society; instead we pull them out and put them in totally new surroundings with new Christian friends, vocabulary and Western Christian traditions. Thai society perceives Christianity as a foreign (Western) religion. Thais who become Christians have lost their Thai identity. New converts are not given guidance as to how to relate to Thai society as a Thai believer in Christ. Converts discover they have to cut themselves off from their family and former society. No effort is made to build up the Thai Christian identity so that Thai Christians can be perceived as Thais who have not given up their “Thainess” but still remain truly Thai. We rush them to accept Christ even though they have not understood the significance and implications. It is like giving them vaccination against Christ; they think they already know and have been saved. Premature birth gives them less chance to stand firm in their faith.
- ³ Three good sources for understanding the problem are found here:
 - Boon-Itt, Bantoon. 2011 “What is being communicated to Buddhists.” In *Suffering: Christian Reflections on Buddhist Dukkha*. Paul De Neui, ed. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1-22.
 - Boon-Itt, Bantoon. 2007 “A study of the dialogue between Christianity and Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand as represented by Buddhist and Christian writings from Thailand in the period 1950 – 2000.” Ph.D. dissertation, St John’s College, Nottingham, United Kingdom.
 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=_B_kVieeqSQ
- ⁴ See Acts 13, 14 and 17