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MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF BUDDHISM IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Introduction

Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world following, in order, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Sources vary as to the exact number of adherents, but a reasonable figure is about 350 million.¹ If you were to add to the number of Buddhist believers those following Chinese folk religion who practice some elements of Buddhism (about 380 million²), the total number of Buddhists more than doubles and nears the 760 million Hindus found worldwide. Along with the renewal of Buddhism in some parts of Asia, Buddhism has a strong missionary presence in Europe and North America. The 2½-3 million Buddhists in North America are more than double the number of Hindus living there and about half the number of Jews.

Too often this vital and important world religion has been misunderstood and neglected by Christians. Probably one reason for this is the formidable challenge the religion presents to the Christian missionary who wants to share the message of Jesus. What are the specific challenges that Buddhism presents to Christian missionaries, and how can we meet them? The remainder of this paper is an attempt to answer these two questions.

¹*The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2000* (Mahwah, NJ: World Almanac, 2000), 695.

²*Ibid.*

The Practical Challenge

Christianity has converted few Buddhists in any country, with the possible exception of South Korea. Most Buddhist societies have fewer than 1-2 percent of their populations practicing Christianity.³ For example, there are about twenty thousand Adventists in Myanmar, but fewer than sixty come from the twenty-six million Burman Buddhists, and none from among the one million Shan.⁴ The biggest impact of Christianity among Hinayana Buddhists has come in Thailand. Among fifty million Thai Buddhists, we have about two thousand Seventh-day Adventist members converted from Buddhism. We must remember that this is after decades of intensive work, and that most of these converts are from rural areas where Buddhism is mixed with a heavy dose of animism.

Whatever one might say, it seems only honest to agree with Clifton Maberly when he states, "The fact is that disproportionately few Buddhists have become Adventists."⁵ Whatever we have been doing has not worked very well. The fact is that in most cases we have not truly focused our attention on specific approaches to Buddhism.

The Challenge of Understanding

It is not easy for someone from a Christian (and in particular a Western Christian) background to understand Buddhism. One reason is diversity. There are three major branches of Buddhism, which are more diverse in belief and practice than the major branches of Christianity—Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism:

1. Hinayana (or Theravada), found mostly in Southeast Asia
2. Mahayana, practiced mainly in East Asia
3. Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism, originating in Tibet

These three main branches of Buddhism are further divided into hundreds of sects. While certain general things can be said about Buddhism, much of what needs to be known to truly understand Buddhists must come from a very careful study of the environment, specific practices, and beliefs of each respective region.

Buddhism as a religion is open to change. It evolves over time with cultural change. At least one scholar argues that a new way of classifying the presently emerging Buddhism is more accurate than the traditional threefold division. This new classification is true particularly for the West, but is becoming so also in

³Clifton Maberly, "Buddhism and Adventism: A Myanmar Initiative," in *Adventist Mission in the 21st Century*, ed. Jon L. Dybdahl (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1999), 230.

⁴Ibid., 233.

⁵Ibid.

Asia.⁶ These three new proposed divisions he calls Global Buddhism, Enlightenment Buddhism, and People's Buddhism. Global Buddhism is the form of Buddhism which rapidly adapts its outward forms to the increasingly homogeneous popular global culture. This Buddhism has weekly religious meetings rather than using the lunar calendar. It uses mass media to market itself. It even has bumper stickers asking, "What would Buddha do?" Enlightenment Buddhism focuses on the here and now and promotes practices and values important to peace and thoughtful everyday living. Personal and social ethics are valuable. People's Buddhism focuses on the grassroots local culture and specific religious practices. It is a counter to the forces of globalization. It focuses on the private devotion of meditation and other religious practices. In short, these differences and changes make it a real challenge to understand Buddhism.⁷

Contributing to the challenge of understanding are the vast differences in basic worldview and outlook. Christianity is at heart about God. Buddhism is agnostic or non-theistic, and in some cases atheistic. Revealed religions begin with an absolute revelation. People are to listen and obey. Buddhism focuses on searching and discussion. Buddhist adherents never expect to find absolute truth, and they could not be sure they found it if they stumbled across it anyway.⁸ Historic religions like Islam and Christianity tend to be exclusive, while Buddhism, like its fellow Eastern religions, tends to be inclusive. While historic religions seek to convince and overcome, Buddhism seeks to accommodate and absorb.

While briefly and simply stated, these differences represent a huge barrier to understanding and affect encounters between Christianity and Buddhism at all levels.

The Theological Challenge

I believe that Adventism (and most of Christianity at large) has not taken seriously the theological challenge of Buddhism. The wide recognition that fundamental shifts in outlook and worldview are taking place in Western culture permeate the media and intellectual world. Some of these shifts are clear from religious polls and relate to Christian-Buddhist theological issues. As long ago as 1982 the Gallup poll showed that one in four Americans (25%) believe in re-incarnation. The number was almost the same among Protestants (21%).⁹

⁶Terry C. Muck, "Missiological Issues in the Encounter with Emerging Buddhism," *Missiology* 28 (2000): 35-46.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Maberly, 234.

⁹James C. Stephens, "Looking at Buddhist America: A Key to World Evangelization," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 10 (July 1993): 106.

A Barna poll points out that 64 percent of Americans agree that Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists pray to the same God. Forty-six percent of evangelicals believe that also!¹⁰

What these polls make clear in numbers becomes even more obvious as one looks at popular television programs and movies that glorify Eastern religions and promote the philosophy of Buddhism. Os Guinness's words are true when he says that "the subtlety of Eastern religion is that it enters like an odorless poison gas, seeping under the door, through the keyhole, through the open window so that the man in the room is overcome without his ever realizing there was any danger at all."¹¹

The concept of God as an all-pervasive impersonal force, of reincarnation as a fact, of meditation as self-culture and a way to discover God inside, and of Buddhist enlightenment, as are seen in movies and on television programs. These concepts are being accepted by more and more people all over our world and present a major challenge to the heart of Christianity and its theology.

Spiritual Challenge

While Christianity emphasizes doctrine and teaching and puts great stock in creeds, confessions, and statements of belief, Buddhism puts stress on the practice of religion and, in particular, meditation. *The National Catholic Reporter* of 3 December 1999 headlines an article, "Buddhism's Path to Enlightenment Walked by Growing Numbers of Catholic Seekers."¹² The thrust of the article has to do with the large number of Catholics and other Christians who have found meaning in Buddhist methods of meditation, in this case particularly, Zen meditation. In some cases Christians see their faith as overly intellectual and lacking in direct religious experience. They find Buddhism can help them.

In traditional Buddhist countries, sincere Buddhists are at times disturbed by Christians who seem to them irreligious because their lives are void of regular times of worship and devotion. In this sense Buddhism challenges Christianity to not just teach a series of beliefs but lead people to experience the Divine, in a life-changing daily devotional practice. In this case Buddhist devotion can challenge activist Christians to keep their connection with God alive.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Os Guinness, quoted in Stephens, 106.

¹²Pamela Schaeffer, "So Ancient and So New: Buddhism's Path to Enlightenment Walked by Growing Numbers of Catholic Seekers," *National Catholic Reporter*, 3 December 1999, 29.

The Social Challenge

In most countries where Buddhism is strong, the religion is closely connected to social and cultural ties. For many, the power of Buddhism is the strong sense of community which adherents feel as they join with fellow Buddhists in the practice of their religion. The Christian church in their midst is not only often seen as foreign, but its small numbers make the sense of a sharing community hard to create. The strongest challenge in many areas is not strictly religious beliefs but sociological ropes which bind people strongly to traditional ways. This challenge must be taken seriously in any attempt to evangelize Buddhist peoples.

Basic Attitudes to Meet the Challenge

I propose a two-tiered response to the mission challenge of Buddhism. First, I suggest there are three basic attitudes or outlooks that should govern the way we relate to Buddhists. Building on these three basic outlooks, I detail six specific things that I believe should be part of any evangelistic approach to Buddhists. What the individual evangelist in any specific culture should do is let these suggestions mold the strategy designed for the local people group.

Attitude 1: While completely committed to the Christian faith, we must have the attitude of learners willing to see good in Buddhism.

A Western proverb says more bees are attracted by honey than by vinegar. People rarely enter a dialogue with one who, from the outset, condemns and emphasizes the negative things in their heritage. Buddhism has been a force in many countries for ethical behavior and for peace. It does not hurt us to recognize that God has used Buddhism to bring order to some societies. Not only is emphasizing the good a valid evangelistic policy, it is important for an even more basic and valuable principle—Jesus emphasizes love. Jesus loves people and wants us to love people, and a negative attitude of criticism is rarely seen as love.

This attitude not only implies seeing the good, it emphasizes knowing and understanding. We have not earned the right to share until we have listened. Listening implies learning all we can about the beliefs and practices of others. It means visiting homes and temples, observing and asking questions. It implies dialogue with Buddhist leaders and people.

Attitude 2: While obviously competing with Buddhism, we must also learn to cooperate where we can.

The essence of the gospel is sharing the good news of Jesus. We cannot withhold that from people. That teaching is in essence different from Buddhist Dharma (teaching).

On the other hand, there are areas where we can cooperate. Caring for the needy, feeding the hungry, and working for community development are areas where we can work together. Issues that have to do with good government, the benefit of people, and peace within and between communities are places where cooperation is helpful. Christians who want to love others as Christ urged must show that love in tangible ways, not always asking first who gets credit and what label is on the hand working next to us.

Attitude 3: We must work on the promise-fulfillment (Judaism to Christianity) model rather than on a search and destroy (Yahweh vs. Baal) model.

This point is the crux of my paper and perhaps the most controversial. Let me explain. It seems to me that the typical mental model most often used by evangelists in Buddhist areas is what I call the “search and destroy model.” In this model Buddhism is a false religion; people must be taught its error and called to reject it as wrong, if not evil. The biblical model for this would be the OT struggle between Yahweh and Baal. The OT message is that the Canaanite religion represented by idolatrous Baal worship should be sought out and destroyed. It must not contaminate the followers of Yahweh, the people of Israel, with its pagan worship.

The NT furnishes a different model—the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The Jews are seen as forerunners of Christians. Christianity is the natural outgrowth of Judaism and builds on it. Jews are not taught that their religion is totally evil and must be destroyed, but that their own prophets looked beyond themselves to Jesus.

While this analogy may not fit in every case, I believe the Adventist-Buddhist relationship should follow the fulfillment model rather than the Yahweh-Baal model. Ideal Buddhism has been a contributor to peace, ethics, and good government in many Asian countries. It encourages right behavior and condemns bloodshed. Theologically, I believe, it prepares the way for Jesus.

The basic Buddhist teaching concerning human nature is that all people suffer. This suffering stems from desire, which must be controlled or, better yet, eradicated. For me this Buddhist teaching begins where Christianity can begin—the human condition. Believing, as Buddhists do, that all humans suffer comes very near to the Christian idea that sees all people as sinners. While Buddhism’s solution to suffering is different from the Christian’s answer to sin, the insightful views of Buddhism on human plight clearly open the way for the proclamation of a gospel answer to the human cry for a way of escape.

I do not deny the fact that evil can be present in Buddhism. Adventists have long taught that the clever serpent, the devil, can devilishly warp and mold even Christianity into demonic forms. No religion is entirely devoid of deception and falsehood, but that deception should not blind us to the grace of God which also manifests itself in diverse ways.

If this fulfillment attitude would become prevalent, our approach to Buddhists would not only change, but I believe it would become more Christ-like and more successful.

Specific Suggestions

Based on these three underlying attitudes, I propose six specific suggestions that I believe will prove helpful in Buddhist evangelism.

1. Build on Similarities

The common analysis of human suffering and brokenness has already been mentioned. Other specifics that could prove helpful are the emphasis on purity and moral behavior. Most sincere Buddhists would agree with Adventists that much of modern entertainment portrays corrupt morals and should be avoided. High ethical standards are something we can agree on.

While most Buddhists do not practice vegetarianism, it is an ideal Buddhist behavior. Again, while a minority of Adventists are vegetarians worldwide, vegetarianism is clearly seen as the better way.

Most Buddhists are also pacifists. They are urged not to kill others. If drafted into the army, many will try to, as far as possible, shoot trees, not people. Our noncombatant stance is well received by Buddhists.

Building rapport with Buddhists on these similarities can foster a relationship of respect, paving the way for deeper discussion.

2. Make Clear the Basics

The core of Christianity is God's grace freely given, which forgives us and saves us in spite of our sin. The message of salvation by faith alone is very difficult for Buddhists to understand. One Bible study, two sermons, or three conversations is rarely enough. In Thailand a colleague and I spent one whole quarter during Sabbath School lesson time teaching this good news to people who were already Christians, and the light was only just beginning to dawn at the end of those three months.

One reason for this is that Buddhism, like Hinduism and other Eastern religions, is at heart, for most followers, a religion of saving oneself. By discipline, study, kindness, meditation, and ceasing of desire one makes one's own way to salvation.

Most Buddhists understand Christianity as operating the same way that Buddhism does as a religious system. The rules are slightly different, but the system works the same way. Christianity, for them, is just a Western way of self-salvation. To get the unique Christian message across takes time, careful cultivation, and the miracle of the Holy Spirit. Only when this is truly done can we

move on to other things. If this is not understood and practiced in our evangelism, all that happens is that our few converts swap Buddhist rules for Adventist rules, and the whole pre-existing, underlying system of salvation by works/merit remains untouched.

3. *Emphasize Prayer and the Spiritual Life*

As mentioned earlier, Buddhist people are often devout and religious. Meditation, offerings at shrines and temples, prayer and worship at special places in nature as well as at holy places are all important. For such people, many forms of Christianity seem dry and secular.

I have never had a Buddhist refuse the offer of prayer for them. From the beginning we must show ourselves as spiritual people of prayer. We must pray for them in person as well as in private intercession. If they agree to have us teach them, teaching them how to pray should be one of our first tasks. Our evangelistic series must not only teach people the importance and method of prayer, but should also offer times when people can receive prayer. Answered prayer is taken by Buddhists as a key argument for the truth or value of Christianity.

4. *Be Sensitive to Underlying Spiritual Issues*

Most Buddhism in Asia—especially in rural Asia—is mixed with animism or belief in spirits. While pure, idealistic Buddhism is scandalized by this, many Buddhist temples in Thailand have spirit houses on their compounds which recognize local spirits. In times of crisis many Buddhists still seek out spirit help. I can remember visiting the grounds of Chiang Mai University at exam time. The lovely Buddhist temple at the end of the drive was virtually empty, while the spirit house just in front of it was thronged by students praying and burning candles and incense, seeking help in their time of scholastic need.

In such an atmosphere, the Christian must be sensitive and wise. No fun or jest should be made of their practice, but the simple assurance that Jesus has more power than the spirits must be carefully but clearly proclaimed. Such cultures often have examples of spirit possession as well. Adventists must be willing to deal with such situations and must recognize that spiritual warfare is real and a key part of a ministry to Buddhists who suffer from Satan's oppression.

5. *Don't Forget Community*

To win and hold Buddhists, the church must create and maintain a strong sense of community and fellowship. A meal or an afternoon of friendship and conversation is evangelism for a Buddhist youth facing ostracism for a growing interest in Jesus.

A sense of care and community from fellow Christians is not optional for a Buddhist family facing social rejection for their faith in Christ. Doctrine and truth lose their grip quickly if not accompanied by the warmth of real human companionship and support.

The early church was known for the love manifest among believers. If we are not known for that, our evangelistic success rate among Buddhists will be very low.

6. *Contextualize All Elements of the Faith That Are Not Supracultural*

The fancy theological term “contextualize” simply means to *adapt*. The truth is not abandoned, but it is adapted to fit the culture of the people we want to communicate with. Many simple things make a difference; sitting on the floor rather than on pews; allowing men and women to sit on different sides of the church; using a local language other than English.

Some issues become more challenging: singing to a local tune; chanting; using local musical instruments; shaping a church architecturally like a temple. Such things are more difficult for a cultural outsider to accept and promote.

For Adventists, the biggest challenges come when the questions become theological. Must we change the order of subjects in our typical evangelistic series? Should we preach the state of the dead in the same way? How much must a Buddhist understand to be baptized? Easy answers are not always available, but the questions must be asked and discussed and prayed over. Unless they are, we can never say as Paul does: “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. . . . To those not having the law I became like one not having the law . . . , so as to win those not having the law” (1 Cor 9:20-22 NIV).

Conclusion

The Buddhist challenge to Christianity and to Adventism in all its aspects will increase rather than decrease. In the past we have worked for Buddhists, but generally our methods and materials have been largely borrowed from North American sources. The time has come when, for the sake of God and His kingdom, we must become serious. We need to pour sufficient resources and our best minds and workers into this challenge. Adventism is uniquely positioned to reach Buddhists in large numbers, but that will not happen unless we allow God to lay this burden on us and we passionately and intelligently pursue this mission. My prayer is that God will help us begin to do that today.