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Presenting Biblical Themes to Buddhists

How does one present the biblical message to Buddhists? Even more important is the question, what message do Buddhists hear when a Christian makes a typical gospel presentation? Can Buddhist religious terms such as sin, heaven, and god, be used by Christians when explaining the meaning of the Christian message? One of the most important tasks for Christian witnesses is to make sure that when they present a Bible study or a portion of the gospel or talk about Christian concepts of salvation that those who listen are hearing the same message that is being given. God's witnesses must always be receptor orientated, constantly asking questions to ascertain that the hearers really are understanding what is being said. Without this careful concern for what is being heard those sharing their faith can completely distort the religious ideas they hope to communicate. Notice the following story:

John and Vivian are Christian workers in a city in Central Asia. They decide to share their faith with a Tibetan lama who lives in their neighborhood. Their meeting might go something like this.

After greeting the lama with a suitable gift, John and Vivian tell their story of an infinite personal God who made the world and everything in it. They speak of the human bondage to sin and death, and tell the lama how God sent his Son to suffer and die for people's redemption. John explains that everyone who turns from sin and believes in Christ can receive God's salvation as a free gift. Sinners are saved by the blood of Christ, and can enjoy eternal life in fellowship with God.

The lama is baffled and offended by such a message, and only his monastic detachment keeps his annoyance from showing. As he explains it to his followers later, the foreign visitors made some very strange statements.

First, they spoke of Buddha, his body, and his word creating the world. This makes no sense, for Buddha taught that the world had no

beginning and was not made by anyone. (Actually, Vivian and John had used a Tibetan word for God, which usually means Buddha. They forgot to explain what they meant by it. To a Tibetan, this word means Buddha, his body, and his teaching.)

Second, these strange visitors said that all men were sinners, which is plainly not so, since Tibetan lamas believe they have no sin. (Lamas believe that they have cancelled all their sins long ago through the merit of their religious practices. John and Vivian had used the Tibetan word for sin, which means something that is a moral fault, but has nothing to do with an offense against a holy and righteous God.)

Third, John and Vivian spoke of God having a Son, which the lama was completely unable to understand. Perhaps they meant that God came to earth in a mystical body, much as all lamas do. Or maybe he was a *bodhisattva*, or a reincarnated saint. But in that case, why had God's Son suffered so much? Had he committed great sins in his previous lives? The question that puzzled the lama was, how could he believe in a religion that was based on such suffering?

Again, the foreigners had spoken of salvation as a free gift. But why follow this strange path when anyone can earn liberation through the practice of religion? Clearly, the lama thought, the end of the Buddhist path and the end of the Christian path are one and the same. (Vivian and John had used a Tibetan word (*nirvana*) for salvation without explaining what they meant. A Tibetan Buddhist would understand the word to mean liberation from rebirth. In effect they had told the lama that he could escape from the endless cycles of rebirth by believing in Christ.)

As Vivian and John left the lama, they gave him a copy of the Tibetan Bible, which they urged him to read. When the lama read it he was shocked to find detailed instructions about the killing of animals, instructions for God's chosen people to go to war, and a God who was described as "angry" and "jealous." When the lama read about the life of Jesus, he found that it was the head lamas who condemned Jesus to death. (The Tibetan Bible translates Matthew 20:18-19 and other passages using the term "head lama" for "chief priest.")

As the lama read the Gospels, he realized that the Christians based their religion on a blood sacrifice, which he found deeply offensive. The shedding of blood for religious purposes had ended long ago in the Tibetan Buddhist world. The lama decided that he could never follow such a strange religion, and closed his Bible for the last time. His two Christian visitors later heard of his comments, and urged their friends to pray for the lama's "hardness of heart." (Adapted from Tsering 1988:8, 9)

There are several issues that are raised by this case study. First, the gospel presentation that was given was too fast and too abrupt. There was no attempt to begin on common ground or to use any cultural bridge to introduce the gospel.

Second, John and Vivian had not taken the time to understand the religious terms they were using and as a result their message came across garbled and misunderstood. They should have clearly explained how they were using Tibetan words like God, sin, and salvation because the Tibetan words for God, sin, and salvation are not filled with biblical meanings.

Third, there was no attempt to understand which issues would be difficult for a Tibetan lama to accept; there was no attempt to sequence the topics in order to build faith. As a result they presented so many controversial topics that they built unnecessary barriers to the gospel.

Fourth, when the gift Bible was given to the lama, no directions were shared that would have allowed a smoother introduction to Christianity. Perhaps John and Vivian could have given a Scripture portion with a study guide and notes that could have helped avoid some of the problems.

Conceptual Building Blocks That Cause Problems for Buddhists

There are many conceptual building blocks that are foundational to Christian faith that need to be understood before a Buddhist can begin to understand the basics of Christianity. Many of these Christian themes are initially viewed by Buddhists as huge obstacles to understanding basic Christian concepts. Several of them will be noted below, followed in each section with suggestions on how to begin the process of communicating these important biblical concepts.

Creation

Buddhism has very little to say concerning creation. Among northern Buddhists in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and China evolution is the commonly accepted view. "When the Buddha was asked how the world started, he kept silent. In the religion of Buddhism [there is no] . . . first cause, instead [there is] . . . a never ending cycle of birth and death. In this world and in all worlds, there are many beginnings and ends. The model of life used in Buddhism has no starting place. . . . It just keeps going and going" (Bhikshu). "According to Buddha, it is inconceivable to find a first cause for life or anything else. For in common experience, the cause becomes the effect and the effect becomes the cause. In the circle of cause and effect, a first cause is incomprehensible. . . . Buddhism does not pay much attention to theories and beliefs about the origin of the world" (Dhammananda 1998:113, 114).

With this view of the incomprehensible nature of a first cause, Buddhists find it very difficult to accept the biblical concept of a God who is self-existent or a personal Creator who exists outside the universe or a God who is holy or who grants forgiveness and grace to unworthy people.

Where is the Christian witness to begin when people hold such views? In Japan and most Buddhist countries where there are high levels of education, the accepted view of how the world came into existence is of millions of years of evolutionary processes. I found in Japan that talking about a Creator God was not the best place to start, so I delayed talking about that initially. Instead, I started with Christ's parables, followed by the miracles of Jesus. If people can accept a miracle-working Jesus it is easier for them to accept a Creator God. However, in Southeast Asia (especially Cambodia) the folk Buddhists there were largely uneducated so had not been indoctrinated concerning evolution. They were interested and open to the idea of a powerful Creator God.

The Concepts of God

Buddhists who are knowledgeable about orthodox Buddhist teachings do not believe in God. Having said that, it is important to remember that most Buddhists are Buddhists because they were born in a Buddhist country so many of them have never studied the teachings of the Buddha. Among folk Buddhists the average lay person holds beliefs in God or gods and a devil or devils. Belief in God also seems to be much higher in Southeast Asia than in the northern tier of Buddhist countries. Notice the response to the question, "So if Buddhists don't believe in gods, what do you believe in?"

We don't believe in a god because we believe in humanity. We believe that each human being is precious and important, that all have the potential to develop into a Buddha—a perfected human being. We believe that humans can outgrow ignorance and irrationality and see things as they really are. We believe that hatred, anger, spite and jealousy can be replaced by love, patience, generosity and kindness. We believe that all this is within the grasp of each person if they make the effort, guided and supported by fellow Buddhists and inspired by the example of the Buddha. As the Buddha says: "No one saves us but ourselves, No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path, but Buddhas clearly show the way." (Dhammika 2014)

If Buddhists struggle to believe in the very existence of God it is equally difficult for them to understand what Christians are saying when a person starts a gospel presentation with a text like John 3:16—"For God so loved the world." Buddhists quickly get hung up on the word "God," since most Buddhists who follow Buddhist teachings would say they do not believe in a god.

Having said that, one of the interesting things I discovered while working among Japanese university students was that 85-95 percent of

them said that they did not believe in God, yet almost 100 percent of them had prayed at one time or another. The type of prayers they offered were for help in times of emergency, like when facing the entrance exams to a university or when they were sick or when they needed a job after graduation or when someone they loved had been in a terrible car accident. This paradox of praying when they said they did not believe in the existence of God offered a possible way to introduce God to them.

Many of the English students attending the SDA English Schools in Japan would also attend the free Bible classes where they had more chances to practice their English. One of the things that I often did was to go around the circle and ask them to tell me one thing that they wanted to change in their lives. They would often mention things like stopping smoking, getting along better with a person at work, or having a better relationship with one of their parents, overcoming some problem they struggled with, or doing well in an exam at the university. I would write down what each of them wanted to change, then I would tell them that I was going to pray right then that God would reveal himself to them through their area of need. They had no problem accepting such a prayer.

The next time we met, I asked each person in the Bible class to pray specifically for the person on their right. They often objected, saying, "I don't believe in God." I told them that that was okay, and to pray something like this: "God if you are there, please show yourself to Sachiko by helping her to stop smoking." It was incredible how many specific answers to those types of prayers we had.

Mrs. Shimmamoto was in one of those Bible classes, and her request was that she would be able to visit her sister who lived in America. The two sisters had moved to the United States just a couple of years before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Mrs. Shimmamoto had returned to Japan late in 1941 to visit her parents and had been trapped there by the start of the war. It was now 1976 and she had never been back to the States to visit her sister. In answer to the question of what one thing she would like God to reveal himself to her in was her request to visit her sister. I prayed for her and each week for several weeks the class continued to pray that God would reveal himself to her by making it possible for her to see her sister again.

Towards the middle of June she came to Bible class bursting with excitement. (In June and December the salaried workers in Japan receive a bonus that in addition to their regular monthly salary equals two to three months additional money given as a bonus.) Her husband, when he had received his bonus, had come home and without any awareness of the little experiment that was going on in the Bible class had said, "Why don't you take my bonus this year and visit your sister in America?" This

faith-building experience was the first step that allowed her to become a committed follower of Jesus Christ.

God is not playing hide-and-go-seek with people. He wants to be known and found. The Bible says, “Seek and you will find” (Matt 7:7), and “you will find me when you seek for me with all your heart” (Jer 29:13). The missionary task in Buddhist lands is to create opportunities for God to reveal himself to Buddhist people in understandable ways. Helping Buddhists have a faith-building experience is usually more productive than trying to present arguments for the existence of God.

Concepts Concerning the Universe

Buddhists struggle with concepts concerning the universe, especially in the area of a God-created universe that has purpose and meaning. In contrast, Christians look forward to a real heaven and a real New Earth. Life for eternity with Jesus is a theme that is often presented in Christian circles. These concepts would seem very strange and even offensive for many educated Buddhists for they believe that the universe is a transitory illusion and that there is nothing that is concrete or permanent. Notice the description offered by a leading Buddhist scholar of our universe:

1. Since creation is an empty void of nothingness, so the nature of the universe and all within it is illusionary, and constantly changing.
2. The Buddha described the world an [an] unending flux of becoming. All is changeable, continuous transformation, ceaseless mutation, and a moving stream. Everything exists from moment to moment. Everything is a recurring rotation of coming into being and then passing out of existence, a continuous movement of change towards death.
3. Nothing on earth partakes of the character of absolute reality. By this law of impermanency the Buddha denies the existence of eternal substances.
4. Both matter and spirit are regarded as false abstractions in Buddhism. What exists is changeable and what is not changeable does not exist.
5. All material forms, including human beings, animals and all gods—everything—is subject to the law of impermanency. All vanishes away. Even perception is a mirage. (Dhammananda 1998:86, 87)

In the Buddhist scheme of things human beings are an impermanent, transient collection of aggregates, whereas Christianity places great value on each human being because each person is made in the image of God. Buddhists look forward to escape from suffering, evil desires, and an endless cycle of rebirths; Christians look forward to eternal life with their Creator and Savior.

One of the things that should be pointed out to Buddhists is that the life with God in heaven is also a life without suffering and death, a life without selfishness, greed, loneliness, and sadness, a life without evil desires—all things the Buddhist is also striving for. I found it helpful when discussing this area with Buddhists to talk about the perfect environment of heaven: no sin, no selfishness, no evil desires, no attraction to material goods.

The Concept of Sin

The Buddhist concept of ethical conduct is based on the *sila*, or moral precepts. These precepts command the refraining from (1) taking of any life, not just human, (2) stealing, (3) immoral sexual behavior, (4) lying, or (5) drinking of intoxicants (Halverson 1996:59).

Many Buddhists practice these five basic laws only occasionally, and when they break them there is no sense of offense against a god. Buddhists believe that humans are neither sinful by nature nor are they seen as in rebellion against God.

I was teaching a Bible class to a group of Japanese college students. We had been studying for several weeks and for that particular night I was teaching about sin. Towards the end of the presentation I made the statement, "We are all sinners, right?" I received a lot of blank looks. Feeling that perhaps they had not understood my question I asked it in Japanese. "*Watakushi takushi wa minna sumibito desu ne?*" But instead of getting the agreement that I expected they all shook their heads, "No." I think we sang a song, and had a quick closing prayer. Then I started to explore what the Japanese understanding of the word "*sumi*" or "sin" meant in their language. What I found out was fascinating.

The typical Japanese Buddhist thinks of a sinner as someone who has committed some terrible offense such as murder, and who has been caught and is now being led off in handcuffs to prison. Thus, sin is often equated with terrible criminal activity. That was their view of sin, so when I said, "We are all sinners, right?" they were totally confused. They had heard me ask them if they were criminals. As soon as I understood the cultural definition of sin I then went on to pour the Christian and biblical meaning of sin into their Japanese word. I taught that the biblical concept included all that the Japanese concept of "*sumi*" entailed, plus selfishness, plus the idea of not measuring up to perfection, plus offence against a Creator God. What we ended up with was a subgroup of people who understood "*sumi*," but not in the traditional Japanese sense. They had added biblical content to the word and now viewed the word in a broader sense with biblical meanings attached.

This is the hard work of teaching and changing the basic building

blocks of a culture and its people. It takes time, but if it is not done then those people will not have a biblically-shaped worldview and will not understand biblical values and principles. Teaching on biblical salvation in the Buddhist world will have to be done by those who are deeply committed to careful and patient teaching if it is to have a positive impact.

Concepts of Salvation

“Self salvation is for any man the immediate task” (Humphreys). Buddhists believe that “each and every person must make the effort to train and purify himself towards attaining his own personal salvation by following the guidance given by the Buddha” (Dhammananda 1998:19). “Reaching *nirvana* relies on one’s own efforts alone, causing the Buddhist to feel that both the present life and future lives depend completely on himself alone” (Smith 2003:47). Buddhists do not rely on an external god, a savior, or even the Buddha. “Nor will prayers to the Buddha or to any God prevent an effect [from] following its cause” (Humphreys). One must overcome one’s own accumulated bad karma by oneself.

This is directly contrary to the teachings of the Bible that stress that salvation is a gift from God. All of a person’s righteous deeds are like filthy rags (Isa 64:6) and can never overcome the radical effect of sin on a person’s life. Salvation for a Christian is rooted in God’s actions through Jesus Christ. Salvation for Buddhists is rooted in their own deeds and thoughts.

Buddhists are self-reliant, believing that they must follow the middle way (avoiding the extremes of both affluence and asceticism—both of which only cause suffering), and rely instead on their accrued karmic merit.

Many Buddhists have a hard time accepting the concept that salvation can be given as a free gift through the actions of someone else. Substitutionary atonement is very foreign to Buddhist thinking.

There are several stories that can illustrate this concept. I will only share one of them. In Chiang Mai in northern Thailand there is a Buddhist stupa dedicated to Pi Ang. According to a famous legend, a king from the south attacked the king of Chiang Mai. Because the king of Chiang Mai did not want to see his city destroyed he met with the king from the south to discuss possible terms. They agreed on a contest between two men, one from each side, to see who could remain under water the longest. If the north won, Chiang Mai would remain free, but if the south’s representative won, the city would surrender to the forces from the south. Pi Ang volunteered for the north. The two men dove into the water and after several long minutes the representative from the south surfaced, gasping for breath. The city was saved, but still there was no sign of Pi Ang. The king sent divers to see what had happened. They discovered that Pi Ang had

tied his leg to the branch of a submerged tree, and had given his life for the city he loved (Smith 2003:49, 50).

Stories like this from Buddhist cultures can be used as stepping stones to introduce people to the concept of a person sacrificing everything for others, and a God of love who sacrificed everything to save human beings from destruction.

Concepts of Personal Improvement in One's Spiritual Life

Everything in Buddhism is governed by the law of karma from which there is no escape. Karma "operates in the universe as the continuous chain reaction of cause and effect. . . . 'A good cause, a good effect; a bad cause a bad effect' is a common saying. In this sense karma is a moral law" (Tusji 2014). Everything a person does creates new karma. If the person causes someone to suffer, the person will also suffer, either in this life or in a future one. If the person brings joy and happiness to others, the person will experience joy and happiness (Thich 2002). Improving one's spiritual life for a Buddhist is totally dependent on one's karma. Because it is so difficult to purify one's inner being from greed, materialism, selfishness, hatred, anger, and the many other vices, Buddhists believe that improvement only comes through countless births and rebirths.

The Buddha, when asked how humans can save themselves answered, "Even though you give alms, observe the five commandments governing everyone, the eight commandments governing the fervent Buddhist, and the 227 commandments governing the conduct of the highest Buddhist officials, even if you join your hands in prayer a billion times, and meditate five times a day, you will not be saved. Even if you do these things every day, you will only receive merit equal to one eighth of a split hair" (Chantavongsouk 1999:24, 25). This is a very pessimistic view of the human ability to escape one's bad karma and demonstrates why Buddhists talk of an almost endless cycle of rebirths before escape and attainment of nirvana is possible.

In contrast to total dependence on one's own karma, followers of Jesus Christ seek regeneration through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The new birth experience is instantaneous, creating within each person a spiritual nature (in contrast to one's carnal nature). A follower of Christ becomes "a new person" (2 Cor 5:17 NLT). The new birth is accompanied by total forgiveness of all past sins because of Christ's substitutionary death. This allows Christ followers to live with the assurance of eternal life and experience a calm assurance that Jesus has provided everything necessary for their salvation. What a contrast—Buddhists must depend totally on what they can do, while Christ followers depend totally on what Christ did for them.

Concepts of Final Destiny

Buddhists believe in a continuity of life after death, often called reincarnation, but they prefer to refer to that process as cycles of rebirth. Physical “death is believed to lead continually to rebirth after rebirth until greed, hatred and delusion are eradicated. For the Theravada Buddhist, one can be reborn into any of five realms: (1) the hells, (2) the animal world, (3) the realm of the hungry ghosts, (4) the realm of humans, and (5) the realm of the gods” (Harris 2005:202).

The goal is nirvana which is much harder to define, is very complex, and a difficult concept to grasp. Some have described nirvana as a dying out of the three fires of greed, anger, and illusion. It is the extinction of undesirable qualities. Some have equated nirvana with extinction, but that is not entirely correct. Nirvana is the end of woe. It is logically inexpressible. Nirvana is the extinction of the not-self in the completion of the self. Professor Dhammananda says the final goal of Buddhism is quite unexplainable, and quite indefinable. It is not nothingness or extinction, nor is it paradise. It is not a place, but is more a state or experience. It is the end of craving which caused all suffering. This is the final goal of Buddhists—a kind of extinction-cum-nothingness consciousness.

Nor is there any resurrection from this state. Buddhists do not believe that one day someone will come and awaken the departed person’s spirit from the graveyards or the ashes from their urns and decide who should go to heaven or hell. So while the Buddhist’s final goal and destiny is nirvana, the Christian’s destiny and goal is everlasting life with the added anticipation of the resurrection. In Buddhism, no one is responsible or accountable to an external higher being. In Christianity we are accountable to God, before whom we shall all stand.

Buddhists do believe that there are heavens and hells—not beyond this world, but in this very world itself. But these are only temporary places where those who have done good deeds experience more pleasures for a longer time and the evildoers experience more physical and mental suffering. But these pleasures or sufferings are only temporary states in the long process leading to the final nirvana.

Buddhists would not talk about God, rather they focus on nirvana, which Buddha described as

a sphere which is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, which is not the sphere of nothingness, nor the sphere of the infinity of space, not the sphere of the infinity of consciousness, the sphere of nothingness, nor the sphere of perception, or non-perception, which is neither this world nor the other world, neither sun nor moon. I deny that it is coming or going, enduring death, or birth. It is only the end of suffering. (Carus, 2004:72)

In contrast to the view that nirvana is an abstract void and the end of suffering, Christians believe in a heaven where God, who is self-existent and changeless, will live for eternity with those who have been redeemed by accepting Christ's gracious gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

Conclusion

There are ways around each of the obstacles mentioned above. However, developing the conceptual building blocks in Buddhist minds takes time and effort. A danger that Christians face is assuming that a gospel presentation can begin in the same way for Buddhists as one would begin for someone who is already a follower of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the sequencing of topics is of vital importance. Eventually the Christian witness must present enough of the gospel so the hearers can make an intelligent decision to accept or reject Jesus Christ and his offered gift of salvation. However, when Christian witness begins without careful study of the culture and religious systems in Buddhist countries, too often the Christian witness has caused more confusion than necessary. So a plea—those who begin to witness to Buddhists should take the time to understand the background and thinking of the particular group of Buddhist people they are working and praying for.

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