

The New Buddhists
By Banpote Wetchgama

It is inevitable. As soon as a person has converted and believes in Jesus Christ he or she will be labeled a Christian. This person has suddenly entered into a global category of people who follow what is known as Christianity. The word “Christian” appears only three times in the New Testament and was never used by Christ’s followers during his lifetime. It was meant as an insult by non-believers to refer to this new emerging group inferring people against their own society outside of the norm who did not believe as others did. Within the community of faith the believers did not use this term but instead referred to themselves as saints¹ or children of God.² Later, those who believed in Christ accepted the use of the term and referred to themselves and others followers around the world as Christians. When it was first adopted by believers they interpreted the meaning to be those belonging to Jesus Christ but when people from other languages and cultures started adopting this term the meaning changed as will be explained in this paper.

In Thai history the use of the term Christian began in the days of the Ayutthaya kingdom during the reign of King Rama T’ibodi II (1491-1529 A.D.) when, in 1511, a group of Portuguese merchants came to trade with the Siamese kingdom (Hall 1970:937, Smith 1999:9). Along with their products they also brought their religion Roman Catholicism that included Western cultural traditions and rituals as expressions of the gospel. The Portuguese pronounced the word Christian as *Khittang* therefore Thai people refer to those who follow Roman Catholicism as *Khittang*. Later, during the reign of Rama III (1824-1851 A.D.) in the Rattanakosin period, the first Protestant missionaries arrived in Thailand (Smith 1999:14). These missionaries pronounced the term “Christian” in their own English (and German) accents. Thai people understood this to be a separate word from *Khittang* and referred to those who followed the Protestant religion as *Khris-tee-yeen*. Those who followed Catholicism were still referred to as *Khittang*. In reality both of these terms

¹ The term “saints” appears forty five times in the NT, and is always in the plural. It is first found in Acts 9:13 and last mentioned in Revelations 1:8. The term saint in the Thai Bible refers to the followers of the truth and referred to all believers. It was not limited only to those of special merit as sainthood has been defined by the Roman Catholic Church.

² [The term “children of God” appears nine times from John 1:12 to I John 5:19].

have the same meaning; they are simply different pronunciations of the same word Christian. If we believe that both Catholics and Protestants are children of God, and that both believe in the grace of God we should refer to both as *Khristachon* or *Khrista-sasanikachon* followers of Christianity.

When a Thai believer uses the term *Khris-tee-yen* to refer to him or herself it has a very narrow meaning understood to refer only to those who follow Protestant Christianity and does not include Catholics. In reality both *Khittang* and *Khris-tee-yen* depend upon the grace of God. The calling of oneself as a *Khris-tee-yen* indicates that such a person believes that only Protestants are children of God; Catholics and Orthodox are excluded. This is extremely narrow. *Khris-tee-yen* and *Khittang* if they both follow only the outward forms are merely following the cultural expressions of the western church. Going to the church each Sunday, that is one who is depending on one's own good religious works but not depending upon the grace of God does not make a person a child of God. Such a person has left the grace of God already (Galatians 5:4). This is the same as Jews who have been born into the Jewish race but who do not believe in the grace of God but rather depend upon their own actions. These people are not real Jews. They are cultural Jews only. The real Jews are those who have the same belief as Abraham (Romans 2:28-29).

As stated above the word *Khris-tee-yen* has an origin that is negative in meaning. It has continued to develop narrow connotations even into our own present time. In Thailand and in the northeastern region in particular this word brings the following connotations to the hearts and minds of Isaan people when they hear it:

1. A person who follows the foreigner's religion.
2. A person who works for foreigners.
3. A person who has sold out his or her own nationality to foreigners. Isaan people like to say, "Our religion is fine. Why do you need to follow the ways of foreigners?"

For Thai people three things are of primary importance: the monarchy, the nation, and the religion. The religion referred to here is Buddhism. When we follow another religion it is felt that we have sold out our nationality to others. Thai people everywhere believe Buddhism to be the national religion.

4. A person who has leprosy. The first Thai people who came to believe in Jesus were lepers. Ordinary Thai people felt no need or desire to change their religion. They did not believe in God. The missionaries in those days had projects to help lepers and these people who responded to Jesus entered into Christianity.

Since the term *Khris-tee-yen* is a problem and a barrier for Thai people keeping them from believing in God we no longer use this term. We are using a different term which is *Luk Phra Chao* which means a child of God. This term is not original with us. We have a model of this term in the actions of God himself when he allowed his immortal being to be incarnated as human flesh in the Jewish culture. He did not bring a new religion as a set of new external forms from outside (John 1:14-18). Instead, God brought the word (Logos) into the world born as a Jew, using the cultural forms and rituals of the Jews that were in accordance with God's word. The cultural forms and rituals that the Jewish religious leaders (Pharisees) or the Jewish ancestors created and that were not in accordance with the word of God, Jesus protested against and denied the use of completely. God was not alone in operating this way. When the Apostle Paul began his mission to the Gentiles he did not bring the culture of the Jews with him in his message to the Gentiles. The most important Jewish ritual that Paul did not force upon the Gentiles was circumcision. This ritual had nothing to do with salvation from sin and therefore was not required of the Gentiles (Refer to Acts 15:1-21).

People from the East, and especially Thai people, believe that when they are born they are born as followers of the Buddhist religion. According to their house registration and census records they are Buddhists as were their ancestors in the same way that Jews were Jewish as were their ancestors. There are very few Thai people who truly follow the heart of the teachings of the Buddha. Buddhists in Thailand actually follow an amalgamation of beliefs including animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. These three are all melted together to become one set of beliefs. Thais who refer to themselves as followers of Thai Buddhism actually follow all three religions. None of the three are denied. However, when Christianity enters into the society they attempt to add it on to the other three. Rev. Dr. Nantachai Mejudhon has described it thus:

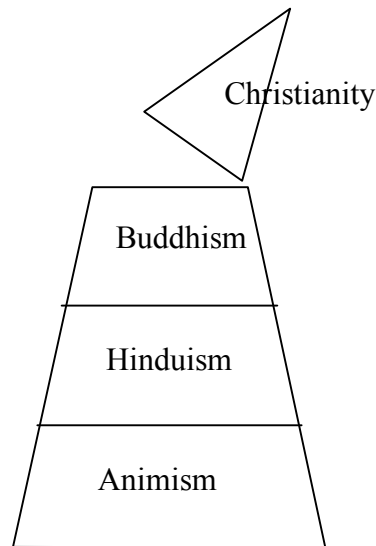


FIGURE 1

ADDING CHRISTIANITY TO THE RELIGIOUS MIX

(Nantachai 2002:10)

The reason that Christianity is not able to be extended on top of the belief systems of the Thai people is because Christianity has its roots in the cultural forms and rituals of western civilization which are not compatible with that of the Thai people. Protestant missionaries came to Thailand over one hundred and seventy-five years ago. Catholicism came much earlier than that. However, total membership from both groups is only 991,600 people (Thai National Statistics Office 2542). The reason for this is because Christianity cannot be accepted by Thai people. They revere their own traditions and they cannot accept others' religions. They believe their own religion is fine. To change is to insult one's own ancestors. If Thai people follow the religion of other nationalities they feel it insults their own society. Thai people can accept western culture in certain aspects willingly but not in the area of religion. Western culture that Thai people can follow without any shame include the following, birthday cake and blowing out of candles, the exchange of gifts at Christmas (without any emphasis on Jesus), and decorating with Christmas trees. Top hotels throughout Thailand will decorate with Christmas trees. The Christmas tree has nothing to do with Jesus and

there is an obvious absence of anything that points to the one who is the whole central focus of the event.

The way that Thai people can be freed from their sins through Jesus without building any barriers is dependent upon a change in the way evangelism is done. Instead of presenting merely the externals of Christianity (i.e. western Church forms), the presenter should follow what God and the Apostle Paul suggested in scripture namely, allow the word (the Logos) to be the main point of religion which is composed of three stages of salvation which Jesus has already provided. The message of the gospel must be reborn or re-packaged in the best forms from Thai culture that are in accordance with the message of the gospel itself. Thai people will believe in Jesus without a need to change religions or without believing in Christianity (no need to follow merely the external forms). They can still be Thai Buddhists as before. They can still follow the traditions of their people that are in accordance with the gospel. Thai people who follow Jesus in this way can be called “New Buddhists” not *Khris-tee-yen* since that word carries a negative connotation.

The reason for using this term is because Buddhism in and of itself is incomplete. Those who are followers of Buddhism have not received salvation from their sins. The foundational principle of Buddhism teaches that we must depend upon ourselves for everything. Buddhism teaches, “Human life is full of suffering.” The only way to be released from this cycle of suffering is to follow the teachings and lifestyle of the enlightened Buddha himself. The most important teachings of Buddha are the Four Noble Truths which are birth, aging, illness and death. This is the cycle of suffering. The only way to be released from the cycle of suffering is to follow the teaching of the Buddha in every detail because Buddha taught that each person is his or her own place of dependence according to the often quoted Pali saying, “*Attahi attanoh, nah toh.*” [Each person is his own source of dependence]. All Buddhists know that they cannot keep this but attempt to do it anyway with a personal understanding that attempting a little is better than doing nothing. A little at a time will help them become a little bit better. When they are completely better then they will reach enlightenment. As an eager new Christian observing my mother’s faithful devotion to Buddhist tradition I mentioned the futility of her good deeds. “Never mind,” she said. “The monks told me

that if I did as little good as an elephant wiggling his ear or a snake flashing his tongue I will go to heaven.” Very few people would be willing to say that they in themselves have done enough to reach that stage of enlightenment known as nirvana. The problem is the uncertainty as to whether the owner of nirvana (whom I believe to be God) will allow that person to enter or not.

When we know this problem of Buddhist we can bring the heart message of Christianity to people. This compares to the Bible teaching that says all have sinned³ the same as what is said in Buddhism that all human life is suffering. There is a Thai saying that warns that “What is mine is mine and is the source of suffering.” It is important to release all of these desires for possession. This alone will allow a person to be released from suffering. The problem with people is that in their own power they are unable to make this disconnection. Looking out only for oneself, a desire to be greater than God himself, holding onto what is mine as mine is the root of sin. The Bible does not teach that to do wrong is to sin but teaches that doing wrong is the result of sin. Buddhists are not willing to accept that they are born with sin. However, if we give reasons and examples, we can show that humans are sinful from birth. The fact that people may or may not repeat the wrong things they have done indicates this in-born tendency towards to sin because people are inherently self-centric and desire to be great. This is why humans are the enemy of God and ultimately encounter death. Death, therefore is suffering as in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha. How can we be released from death? Buddhism teaches that we must follow and obey the teachings through our own efforts. Within Buddhism there is no one to assist in the release from sin, there is no Messiah. The Buddha taught that he was the one to bring the word of enlightenment to others because he himself experienced enlightenment. Whoever desired to be released from sin (suffering) must follow his teachings personally. The Buddha cannot assist anyone in the process.

The Bible teaches that all humans are sinful, sinful from birth and from personal actions after birth which leads to suffering. No person has the individual potential to do enough good or to follow the teachings of Buddha perfectly enough to escape death and suffering. God therefore, did it in

³ Romans 3:23.

place of humans who were unable to do it themselves. God came and did everything according to the law including the teachings of Buddha as well. Jesus died and paid the debt of sin and suffering to God because the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ (Romans 6:23). Jesus was victorious over death in the place of all humans. Anyone who believes in this way will be released from sin and suffering. There is no need to change the external forms or religions. This is the completion of what is unfulfilled in Buddhism itself. These believers are still Thai people according to rituals and customs as they were before. If we were to make a diagram of new Buddhism it would appear like this:

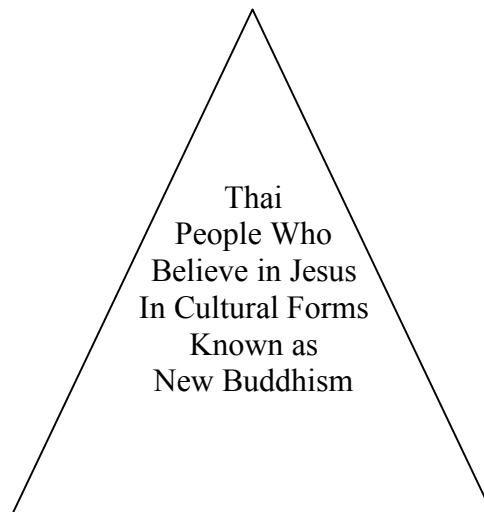


FIGURE 2

THAI NEW BUDDHISM
(Banpote Wetchgama 2004)

If we compare this diagram with that of the first diagram, we can see that there is no change in cultural forms. Both are pyramids. The things that are not in accordance with God's teachings are not included, for example: animism. Belief in Brahman ceremonies (Hinduism) can be used if the meaning is already good. However, if the meaning is not congruous with the gospel then it must be changed for example: weddings that use string-tying. The string is a symbol that can be used to express the love of God. Teachings of the Buddha that are incomplete must also be replaced with

scripture for example: the teaching of the dependence upon self in order to reach nirvana will be replaced with the scriptural teaching that says that humans are not able to depend upon themselves; that no one has the personal potential sufficient to keep the teachings of Buddha completely in order to reach the stage of nirvana because humans are sinful and therefore human life is suffering. Humans are born with a sinful nature; humans are weak. The natural tendency is to do evil more than good. Therefore the efforts of humans to do good is insufficient to reach nirvana. To use the terms used in Christianity, the good efforts of humans are insufficient to reach God himself therefore it is necessary to find a new way. The new way to reach nirvana or God himself is Jesus Christ who is the Eternal Dhamma, the Logos. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one can reach the father (nirvana) except through the way of Jesus (John 14:6).

Therefore, those who believe in Jesus in eastern societies, particularly Thai society, do not need to change the external forms of their religion or replace them with western external religious forms because Christianity in and of itself cannot save people from sin. Jesus is the only one who can do this. He is the Eternal Dhamma (the Logos); he can be in any cultural form or expression because all cultural forms come from the creator God himself. In order to clarify this meaning let me give the example of laundry detergent. The brand name of the detergent is not able to wash clothes at all. It is only the powder in the box that can do the real work. The same is true in regards to religion. The name of a religion is not able to save anyone. The real power of religion is all that can save (release from suffering), and this power is found in only one, the Lord Jesus Christ. In regard to religion this is the same. Christianity is unable to save anyone from sin or release them from suffering. Only Jesus, the real power of religion, is able to save people from sin and release them from suffering.

If we want Eastern people, or those outside of Christianity in its western expression to understand and accept the real heart of the gospel without any barriers we must allow the scripture, or the good news, or the dharma be reborn in the forms and cultural expressions of eastern people. In the Thai Buddhist context, we can easily explain the meaning of the release from sin, which is the way of suffering, from the teachings of Buddha himself. We don't need to be concerned about

western expressions of Christianity. When there are people who follow Jesus according to the cultural expressions of Thailand, they can be called new Buddhists, not Christians.

I have never told someone who did not know beforehand that I was a Christian or that I followed Christianity. Instead, I have told people that I am Buddhist of a new denomination, or a new Buddhist. I do this because if I were to say to people that I am a Christian who follows Christianity I would be insulted by others even if not face-to-face. People would have no further interest in pursuing a friendship with me or spending time together with me. Opportunities to share with them what it means to be released from the result of sin and suffering would no longer be available. However, if I say that I am a new Buddhist they will wonder what I am talking about and will ask, “How does this differ from the old Buddhism?” I then have an opportunity to explain what the difference is between the old and the new Buddhism. In the old Buddhism I had to depend completely upon myself according to what Buddha taught when he said, “*Attahi attano na toh.*”⁴ New Buddhism means complete dependence upon God and his grace as expressed through his son Jesus Christ. Even if we say we are Christian (or Jew) and we believe in Christianity, if we depend completely on ourselves in order to be released from the bondage of sin, or to please God in order to be able to go to heaven (nirvana) this would be similar to the vast majority of Christians who believe and do exactly this. We would not differ from the old Buddhists. If we depend upon the grace of God, even if we say that we are new Buddhists, we will receive salvation from our sins. We will be released from our suffering to reach nirvana or to reach God.

The word “Buddha” means “the Enlightened One” or “The Joyful One.” This is in direct contradiction to popular Thai superstition which is the Thai proverb that says

Non lahp mai ruh, non khuh mai hen.

Sleep and you don’t know anything; face down and you can’t see.”

Therefore, the person who is a new Buddhist is a person who knows, or in other words, knows God. That person knows that the source of life is God himself and that they will go to see

⁴ This Buddhist proverb is spoken in the sacred language of Bali and means “You are your own place of dependence.”

God in the end free from suffering. Aside from this, the person is awake and conscious of what is happening to them. The person being awake refers to one who does not fool themselves with any animistic practices, whether it is fortune telling, star-gazing, or any other kinds of divination (Galatians 4:8-9, Colossians 2:8,10). Blind belief or belief without any foundation of reason is an animistic form of belief. This is not the belief of the Buddha. Belief in the Buddha, or in the “Awakened One,” was taught in his sermon *Kalama Sutra* (Teaching Principles of *Kalama*⁵) which delineate ten circumstances in which the faithful are not to base their beliefs:

1. Do not believe merely because it has been spoken repeated.
2. Do not believe merely because it has been done repeatedly.
3. Do not believe merely because the entire city is discussing it.
4. Do not believe merely because someone said it was written down.
5. Do not believe merely because you thought of it yourself.
6. Do not believe merely because you calculated it out yourself.
7. Do not believe merely because you concluded it yourself.
8. Do not believe merely because it fits with your thinking.
9. Do not believe merely because the teacher is trustworthy.
10. Do not believe merely because the Buddha himself has spoken (Gingkaew 2520:29).

The mean of the term “Enlightened One” means the one who is pleased to gain this knowledge, not one who receives it as a burden. The person is happy, joyful even if life is full of difficulties; there is still a happiness from inside because of the knowledge that the person is no longer in debt to their sin. He is released from suffering. When this life is over that individual knows that they will go and be with God (nirvana) even as Paul shared in Philippians 4:4, “ Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.”

SUMMARY

⁵ *Kalama* refers to the name of a city in India in Buddha’s time whose residents believed everything that was taught. The Buddha developed these principles to specifically correct the misunderstanding of this group of people.

Buddha sought and found the Eternal Dhamma (the Logos) and taught it to other people but was unable to present a full completed message because he used people themselves as the main source of salvation to find release from sin and suffering. The problem which Buddha overlooked was the factor of sin that remains in the heart of every person. The natural tendency for all people is to hold on tightly to all that is their own. There is a natural inborn tendency to grasp for mortality, to be self-centric, weaknesses that drive people to serve only themselves. There is no potential to fulfill all the excellent teaching that has been given in religion in order to reach nirvana. Therefore it is crucial that we remove the various obstacles that stand as barriers between those who are seeking God. One of these barriers is being a *Khris-tee-yen* or following only the external elements of western Christianity and not being a Thai. Following the ways of the new Buddhist gives an opportunity to receive salvation to be truly Thai (truly free). This means complete dependence upon Jesus Christ who is the source of salvation from sin. He is the way for freedom from suffering for all of humanity. He is the final word of religion law and he is the completion of every religion in this world (Romans 10:4).

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