

Christian Buddhists? A Tale from Thailand [Part I]

Colleagues,

[Pre-script: You should've been there. At the Crossings conference—Monday-to-Wednesday this week—just concluded. Almost too much of a High for this old man. 75 folks showed up. From far away Singapore, Indonesia and Australia (one each), and from closer (?) to home: Alaska, California, Oregon, Washington states on the Pacific rim and New York, South Carolina on the Atlantic – and umpteen places in between. The Crossings web page will soon tell you more—and I might just try to get three of the attenders to review the three Keynote presentations for you. We'll see. But now to this week's topic designated above, a guest presentation from Ken Dobson.]

I met Ken Dobson years ago—previous millennium actually—over in Alton Illinois, 30 miles north across the Mississippi from where we live. He then was pastor of the Presbyterian Church in that town. A group of Thai Christians was visiting the congregation, doing Biblical drama. Dick and Dottie Lyon invited us over to “their church” to witness the Bible “acted out” in ways we'd never imagined before.

Since then Ken has returned to Thailand to serve as a pastor to pastors, leading spiritual life retreats for clergy, for 7 years, and as Assistant to the President of Christian University of Thailand in the Bangkok area for 7 years as director of international relations and director of the Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language program. He retired back to a farming village in Chiang Mai a year ago, and therein hangs the tale.

Ken recently sent me a trilogy of essays that are just too good to be kept secret. So they come to you. Numbers 1 and 2 this week, number 3 (dynamite!) next Thursday.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dobson 1

The Labels are Falling off the Pickle Jars

What is it that defines me as a Christian in contrast, say, to my neighbors and friends out here? That's what I have been struggling with out here on the farm, in between sessions of writing books. I have certain totems, yes, the crosses hanging on three or four walls, Bibles in the book case, a woodcarving of Christ healing the lepers carved by a leper, a couple of pictures of a much younger me got up as a member of the Christian clergy. But these don't make me a Christian any more than the mummies in the British Museum make the museum an Egyptian tomb.

Then there is the fact that our neighbors talk, think and act like Thai Buddhists. That should be convincing evidence they aren't Christian. On top of that they would reject the idea that they are Christians in any way, shape or form. Is that it? If one says, "I am a Christian" then one is a Christian? And if one says they're not, they're not?

Uh, there are large gray areas. According to a Thai government expert on religious groups there are around 2 million people in Thailand who identify themselves as Christian but only 200 thousand are on church rolls. One in ten. Are the other 9 out of 10 not Christian because they aren't Church members? The churches say so. Unless you sign up you aren't one of us, they

say. We don't count you. You don't count.

It isn't that different in the USA. A Christian is a church member in some way, shape or form. But church rolls are notoriously inflated with inactive members, whatever is meant by the phrase inactive members. Here in Thailand the membership lists tend to count real members.

Well, those 9 out of 10 Thai Christians aren't performing as Christians, supposedly. One has to be part of a faith community to be part of the faith. It's even an item of theology that one is an authentic Christian only when one participates in the life and work of the Church. As a theology teacher once exclaimed, "An individual Christian is a contradiction in terms." "What if the Christian were stranded on an uninhabited island?" he was asked. "Then he should start trying to build a boat to get back to a community of the faith."

So, OK. Those 9 out of 10 are out. But then so am I.

After fifty years as a church member I'm not active in a church anymore. Not really. I am, however, as active as ever in Christian ministry. It's just that my focus group and my support base are changed. My focus group, the ones to whom I minister, aren't even nominal Christians, and wouldn't be welcome in any congregation, even if they were interested. And my support base, my community? Who comes running when I am in trouble? It's a mixed group.

Last week I was in the hospital several days. Those who came to visit were 100% family. Those who have visited after I got home: 7 members of our focus group, 3 Buddhist priests, several neighbors and family. Christian Church officials and friends? None so far. None expected now that I'll pretty much better.

I'm not whining, understand. Ok, so I am. But my circumstances

have changed. My community has changed and my theology needs to change. According to my theology up to now, shared with the vast part of the Church universal, if one is a Christian one has something to do with the Church. There's no church within miles and miles of here. But the Buddhist temple is right across the rice field. Yesterday hundreds of our neighbors took highly decorated baskets of food to the temple to be distributed in a raffle. The baskets weren't sold, but the raffle was to assure that a poor family had as much chance as a rich one to have their basket being one of the fourteen chosen for the honor of being presented to a neighboring temple. This respect for the dignity of the poor was a very "Christian" idea, don't you think? I thought so. And I tried to be sensitive to other "Christian" values in that event. Everywhere I looked there were several.

For the foreseeable future, my real community has nobody who wears a Christian label. Yet they are my community, the arena of my ministry, the venue of my life, my resource for solace. If I tried to slap a Christian label on these people because what they do is so consistent with Christian values it wouldn't stick. And for their part they have totems of their own: Buddha images, animist spirit shrines in their yards, amulets around their necks, patterns of speech, activities, and festivals shaped across millennia. They're glad to be called Buddhist. Why am I picking at their Buddhist label?

There are two reasons. First, I doubt the validity of the labels. I know a great many people who wear the Christian label who do not live or espouse Christian values. In fact, whole bunches of Christians have stuck Christian labels on things these days that aren't Christian at all – but I won't get any farther into US politics just now. And, of course, it's only fair to agree that some of my neighbors indulge in some distinctly un-Buddhist activities as well. Their label is coming

unglued, too. And finally, I am labeled a Christian even though I no longer have a church to call home...well, I talked about that.

Second, I worry about the effect of the labels. At the moment there isn't a Christian-Buddhist war going on, unless you count the civil war in Burma that has been slaughtering Christian ethnic minority people for fifty years. But it would be hard to count on one's fingers and toes the number of conflicts involving us and our mono-theistic cousins in Asia, Africa and America. The situation is the worst since the Crusades, and we know who started that. Well, we don't, but no matter. We don't know who started this round either unless the 1947 United Nations Resolution to agree to the State of Israel was the beginning, with the Holocaust in Europe behind that, and the anti-Semitism of the middle ages behind that, and the crucifixion of Jesus behind that, and so on, back to Moses, or maybe Abraham, or that trouble in the Garden of Eden.

What have these labels brought us? Pickles!

So here's what I'm working on: MY WAY OF DESCRIBING GOD'S PEOPLE HAS BEEN WAY TOO LIMITED. I've got to get over the notion that the Christian label describes the contents, it just describes the jar. The brand on a jar doesn't tell much about the pickles. There are pickles just like us in jars with other labels.

Dobson 2

A Christian Buddhist Option

Fifty years ago when I stopped being a central Illinois farm boy and emigrated into the wide world, I came across a congregation of Hebrew Christians, as they called themselves. The Hebrew Christians still adhered to Jewish customs but they confessed

Jesus as the Messiah. Fresh off the farm, I was overwhelmed and distracted by other encounters at the same time: Black Muslims, Waldensian Protestants, African-American Pentecostals (vast tabernacles full of them singing their souls out), Polish Catholics as strange to me as Iban converts to Methodism from cannibalism in Borneo, as well as American Jews of the type who had no traffic with the "Jesus is Messiah" crowd.

So I didn't find out what this congregation of Hebrew Christians thought about the "law and grace" great divide, or other tricky bits of theology. I only knew they were practicing Jews who were believing Christians, and they wouldn't eat bacon. I was impressed with their intensity of devotion, their dangerous and costly shift of home base, and the alienation they confessed to have experienced – all of which exceeded my experience to a factor beyond calculation. It was just the beginning for me, as it turned out. I was soon to encounter the Buddhists.

Now my friend Dr. Ed Schroeder, a classic Lutheran, draws attention to the Hindu-Christians in Chennai, India, and similar strains of Muslim-Christians elsewhere in the world, and I am having a Gospel epiphany.

Ed wrote:

There's a growing literature—as you may already know—in missiological stuff about Christian Muslims, Christian Hindus. E.g., Chennai (old Madras) has some umpteen thousand folks who say "Jesus is my Lord (and Rama is not). I haven't just added him to the long Hindu deity list. He's the only Lord. But I eschew baptism (and thus never get rostered as a Christian) because of the catastrophe that would work in family, etc. AND remove me from any real context to be a witness to that Lord. I continue to practice the Hindu rituals, but do that under the rubrics of I Cor.7:29ff. 'as though not'." It's a 'Yes, but . .

. ' sort of Hindu ethos."

I hear this as good news of a mind-bending type, this idea of living over the edge.

Is it time for the development of a self-conscious category of Christian-Buddhist out here in rural Chiang Mai? These Christian-Buddhists would be practicing Buddhists, participating in community festivals and temple rituals. They would accept the Buddha as the one he said he was: enlightened about the way nature is an integrated entity. But not God. The Buddha declined divinity and announced that the existence of deities was an open question outside the categories of nature about which he was enlightened. So it is theoretically possible for one to be a Buddhist and a theist at the same time. One could even be a Christian theist, for that matter, if one identified Jesus Christ with God as the Gospel of John does.

Up to now the Christians here in Thailand haven't been accepting of the idea of Christian-Buddhists.

Oh, they snicker about the so-called "Christ-a-Buddhs." They are the ones who won't fish or cut bait. They can't make up their minds to get off the fence. Most of them aren't practicing Buddhists anymore but they aren't ready to get wet yet. Church? Sometimes. Baptism? Not yet. To be a Thai Christian – Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical or any other kind – means first of all giving up the mantras, tokens, rituals, festivals and usually even the fellowship of Buddhists. No more active participation in temple ceremonies. It's a cold-turkey cure. It takes a huge amount of courage to take the step into the Christian camp, and those who have risked everything to do it don't take lightly to weaklings coming along behind.

So, as far as I know, there are no Christian-Buddhists who self-

consciously are saying, "Yes, Jesus is the Son of God: He and God are One; and we are practicing the Dharma as received by the Buddha under God, and living our lives in consonance with this Buddhist community and its traditions, in loyalty to Christ."

The Christians wouldn't like it. And the Buddhists wouldn't either.

One reason is that the latter day Buddhists have outdone the Gautama in professions about his divinity. They choose to overlook what he said about the irrelevance of divinities and deities, and have elevated him to the status that leaves no room at the top. If I were to try to say, as Paul did in Athens, "I want to talk about the God the Buddha didn't talk about," they will perhaps listen until I mention that above the Bo tree there is a heaven and in the heaven is the Supreme Being. At that point language is strained. The superlatives are already being used to talk about the Buddha, whether he wanted it that way or not.

What about my friends and neighbors and my support group, my focus group, and my colleagues in saffron robes? Are they closet Christians who know that Jesus is the Christ and the Buddha is not? No, of course not. Do they even have a strong regard for Jesus as one with the Father? Not even that. How do they compare Jesus and Gautama? No contest.

And that's the point. These people don't know Christ. They don't know anything about Christ except a few rumors, mostly scurrilous and false. They've never lived close to any Christian for whom they held any esteem. I've known for months it's time to change that. But only now do I have an active strategy. If I keep on being a Christian in spirit and lamenting my lack of a church home it's going to be a long time before anything changes. I have seen incontrovertible signs that God has been

active in this country over the centuries, and is still active here. But that is a prophetic message I have for those who doubt there is anything worthwhile outside the comfort zone they call home. It's time to move beyond negative and passive strategies.

I'm going to have to become a Buddhist for the people around here to catch a glimpse of Christ.

Once I step over the line I know what to expect from the Church people. But they can't hurt me anymore. Most of the ones who have kept on being my friends up to now will remain friendly anyway.

Why then am I so glad to have brought my old acquaintance with the Hebrew Christians and Ed's brief introduction to the Chennai together with my situation out here in the Buddhist hinterland? Because now I know where what I am going to do fits into the theological tapestry.

I'm going to figure out how to be a Christian right inside this Buddhist culture. The Church has tried insisting that Christians have to remove themselves from Buddhist culture. That is what they mean by "orthodoxy and faithfulness: exclusively Christian, without stain or taint." I won't say it hasn't worked. It is working for a couple of hundred thousand people here in this nation of 65 million. One big problem, among many, is that this being exclusive isn't, well, inclusive enough. We aren't reaching the masses this way. And I'm not passive by nature. I'm not getting any younger either. If anybody out here is going to show how to be a "God-is-in-Christ-believing-practicing-Buddhist" it is going to have to be me.

If it means memorizing some Pali chants I'll just have to do it. It can't be any more difficult than teaching those old Buddhists who become Christian to sing "A Mighty Fortress is our God."

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