

Christian Buddhists? A Tale from Thailand [Part II]

[This is the second installment—the last of three letters—from Ken Dobson in Thailand. For biographical info on Ken, see last week's

posting: <https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur102308.shtml>]

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A Compelling Reason to Chant

Let's be frank, it is obvious that what Buddhists do and what they intend to do is to worship and elevate the Buddha into the highest rank of veneration. They say so quite clearly, "We reverently adore the Blessed Lord. We give highest adoration to that Blessed Lord." This confession is usually reinforced by body language that is equally unequivocal, palms of their hands together, bowing foreheads to the floor (if conditions permit) toward an image of the Buddha enthroned on a stack of tables or platforms adorned with splendid items and elaborate flower arrangements, candles and incense.

The key affirmation of the devout is a pledge of faith: "We worship and reverence the Lord Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha ... in order that benefits and happiness may come to us all to the end of time."

The primary chant is called the "Namo", the worship. It goes like this:

Na-mo ta-sa bha-ga-va-to ara-ha-to sam-ma-sam-Bu-dha-sa

The plain meaning of this mantra is, "We worship the Blessed One, Arahant, Supreme Lord Buddha."

So where is there room in this sort of veneration for a Christian excursus?

What I propose to do as I begin to participate in this type of ritual is to add a layer of understanding to the proceedings, private at first, as though I have a special insight or knowledge that is not yet understood by the rest of the people in the room. I know as I join in chanting "samma sam Buddhassa," that there is One still higher than the one we are saying is Supreme in Enlightenment. I am giving the Arahant, the self-enlightened one, his due as a teacher with supernal wisdom. And I will reserve until later a more thorough exposition of the teachings of Jesus compared to the Dharma of the Gautama. Were this understanding of Christ which I bring to my veneration of the Buddha to be widely accepted, who knows, it might have an impact on the way the chanting is done or the way the temple is outfitted, sometime down the road. But for now that is not on the horizon.

Admittedly I have to go out of my way to do this. I could stay home. I don't have to go to the funerals or the temple services. And if I go, I could just be sociable. I don't have to participate. I can just be there. Nobody will think my closed mouth is defiance. They'll think it is a sign of stupidity – well, a lack of background and training. This would wear thin as a rationale, though, before long, just as people became impatient with my stumbling attempts to speak Thai after I'd been here a while. But if I choose cultural isolation for the sake of what the Christians might think, then I will have lost one of the main values and opportunities I have in being here. No, that's not an option.

The options are two. I could take the traditional Protestant approach and find something religiously neutral to do here to warm up the community to my presence. I could teach English. The

earlier missionaries brought medicine and education. I could teach. Then I could exploit every opportunity to "share the Gospel" and "proclaim the Word." The goal would be to start a Church out here.

The other option hasn't been seriously tried here in Thailand yet, as far as I know. That is to find a way to penetrate into the very heart of the village culture as a full-fledged participant. However, the rhythms of life in this village are orchestrated to a Buddhist tempo. The center of village life is the temple. The houses surround the temple, the fields and orchards surround the houses. To reject the temple and its role in people's lives is not only counter-cultural, it is futile. The Catholics have been here in Thailand 400 years and the Protestants nearly 200. The statistical results aren't impressive. Maybe it is time to try the second option.

Still, this sounds like I plan to be devious and hide my real agenda like the cult of Sun Yung Moon does. The Moonies don't tell new converts right away that the Rev. Moon and his wife are greater than Jesus. That surprise comes later, after the thorough indoctrination and the mass marriages. Professor Saeng of Chiang Mai University, a Buddhist philosopher and sincere critic as well as an admirer of Christian theology, has often accused Christians of similar insincerity and duplicity in their inter-religious dialogue and "studies" of Buddhism. "Your real agenda is always conversion," he charges.

Is that my hidden agenda, too? I will guard against it. My goal is not to change Buddhists but to add to Buddhism, to fulfill it, to fill it out. Sound familiar? Not to me. I am not Messianic in my aspirations. It is the role of Christ to fulfill the Dharma. I am simply on a mission to extend care, concern and compassion to a group of people to whom God told me to minister. And they are here spread throughout these villages, installed

here by birth, functioning here in every community endeavor. If they were marginalized or a ghettoized sub-culture our campaign would be to get them into the mainstream. Praise God! We don't have to do that here. But if I am to be here for them, with them, of them, I have to join the mainstream. I will become as much a part of the mainstream as an alien like me can. I'll stick out like a sore thumb and sound like a foreigner, but I'll be here. Whatever is going on I'll be here.

What then? All right, when the chance comes I will carry the dialogue to another level. I have entry level good news: "You don't have to reject the main themes and central focus of being a Thai villager in order to accept the fact that God is, and that God can be most clearly identified in Christ Jesus with whom He is One. There is second level good news after that: after this life on earth there is life eternal in heaven, by invitation from Christ Jesus. Bringing this good news is how I may help to fulfill or expand Buddhism. There are more levels of good news. It's good news from now on. But let's settle on this first.

I think this is a personal undertaking. I neither require nor request the official church to validate or approve it. I don't even care if they know or not, although I prefer they don't make a fuss.

Nevertheless, I realize I can't have it both ways. I can't slip entirely quietly out of the Church's camp into the camp where the temple is central and expect to retain my relationship with people in my past. I can't risk the loss of the love and support of Christian colleagues, family and friends without trying to explain what I am doing from a Christian perspective. After all, this personal agenda of mine has the acrid smell of a critique (one friend called it a "trashing") of traditional Christianity and missionary strategy in which some of my friends have

invested their lives. Whereas, I no longer feel officially connected to an organized church or congregation out here, and I don't anticipate undertaking the task of trying to recruit members for one, I do value the comradeship and association with my dwindling circle of Christian friends and family. So, for them, I will try to explain.

What I imagine I am doing is somewhat apostolic, but minimalist. I think I am finally purged of triumphalism. At least I am trying to be. I have lost my crusading spirit, no longer "marching as to war." I simply want to see how little one needs to reject of this host culture and its core values in order to live as an authentic Christian in its very center.

This is a "before that" apostolic plan. In the Book of Acts as well as in very many Old Testament stories there are momentous events that resulted from God's ambassadors going to new cultural arenas. But before that, what? What was it like for the ones newly arrived into Greek lands, over into Roman Spain, out into the dangerous Caspian Sea principalities, up into the Black Forest of Germania, down into Ethiopia, over into India? They tried to set up churches, but what before that? Did they come with a full-frontal attack on the cultural traditions, folk-ways and customs? Once in a while it came to that, as with Paul the pugilist in Ephesus, but apparently not everywhere. Most of this is blank in scripture. Luke skips it until he gets to the exciting parts. But before that the Christians lived there absorbing the culture, integrating into it, being born in it, melding, changing little unless a confrontation was forced. That's my plan, to go through as much "before that" quiet living as possible. And here in this context it is going to involve chanting.

Finally, what is my rationale for chanting the "Namo"? That's really what this essay boils down to. What explanation do I give

for joining in a declaration of worship to the Buddha?

Let me begin with an application of I Corinthians 8. In this chapter Paul argues that some weak Christians will see and misunderstand if he eats food bought in the market after previously being offered to the gods in the Greek temples. In that situation all the meat in the market was first ceremoniously cycled through the temples. But he could eat it if it weren't for the fact that the new Christians might not understand and could be offended or lapse back into paganism if the line between the two lifestyles were blurred. Paul argues that the fact that the meat was offered in a temple is nullified by the fact that the gods in the temple had no effect on the meat, the gods being of no effect; from Paul's point of view, they do not exist.

If I were to substitute the phrase "chanting worship to the Buddha" for "eating food offered to idols" what would this passage say to me? Here's my edition; the italics are substitutions to fit my context, the brackets are additions to amplify the meaning. Compare it to the New Revised Standard Version of this passage.

Hence as to chanting worship to the Buddha, we know that "no idol in the world really represents God, and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so called gods in heaven and on earth – as in fact there are many gods and many lords – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we live, and one Lord over all, Jesus Christ through whom are all things and through whom we have life eternal. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so acculturated to idols [and religious symbols] until now, they think of the chanting of worship to the Buddha as offered to the highest god; and their conscience, being weak, is deceived. This chanting will not bring me close

to God. I am no worse off if I do not chant, and no better off if I do. But [I need to] take care that this liberty of [mine] does not somehow become a stumbling block for [those who see me do it]. For if others see [me] who do not understand what I am doing, chanting worship to the Buddha, might they not, since their understanding is limited be encouraged to the point of also chanting worship to the Buddha [but believing that he IS the highest god]? So by [my] doing what I do because I have a so-called deeper understanding those others for whom Christ died might be misled. This would be a great tragedy.

Paul's advice is against eating meat. He saw no compelling reason to eat meat in Corinth, fish and vegetables presumably being an option. If his advice were about chanting in temples in Corinth Paul would probably also have been against it.

But I do not see the danger of weak Christians out here lapsing out of Christian faith because of seeing my participation in temple rituals and the life of the village. There aren't any Christians out here. The ones who would take umbrage are the conservative Christians who insist their faith is strong and healthy, and they are miles away. The only ones really watching me are Buddhists and their potential for faith in Christ is in danger only if I refuse to connect with them at the religious intersection where we come together. These Buddhists aren't going to be repelled if I join in their chanting, their circumambulation of the temple on holy days, and their festivals. They aren't going to decide, "Well that's settled. There is no need to think about Jesus because Ken's a Buddhist now."

Rather it would be because I have a high regard for Buddhist culture and obviously know and care about it that people, beginning with the abbots in the temples themselves, would begin to inquire, and wouldn't back off if I were to say, "That

reminds me of a story of Jesus.” For, from my perspective, I am just about the only chance they have to hear the stories of Jesus and catch a glimpse of the living God in a universe expanded beyond countless rounds of reincarnation, completely enmeshed in a legalistic system of karma and merit.

I take this as a compelling reason to chant.

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