

Reaching People with a Buddhist Worldview

Insights and Field-Based Strategies for Sharing Christ

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The Challenge of a Buddhist Worldview and Gospel Communication

Alan R. Johnson

In the late 1990s, I was asked by the regional leadership of the Assemblies of God World Missions to develop a training for our cross-cultural workers going to countries with large Buddhist populations. They invited me to help design training not because I had great success in my labors in Thailand, but because I spent a lot of time talking with Thai Buddhists about Jesus and asking tons of questions. As I started pulling together materials and organizing my thoughts, I realized I needed to talk with both cross-cultural workers and local Christians in places with significant numbers of Buddhists. I was not prepared for the responses I received.

In general, my explanation that we were developing training for workers going to the Buddhist world triggered a response that the people they worked with were not really Buddhist, or that they were "cultural" Buddhists or "folk" Buddhists and thus not "good" Buddhists or "serious" about their faith. The conclusion was always that since the people were not serious Buddhists—thus not "real" Buddhists—cross-cultural workers did not need to learn about Buddhism, nor did Buddhism need to be on the radar when engaging in ministry. Local Christians always tended to see an interest in thinking about Buddhism in order to share the gospel in a clearer fashion as a "foreigner thing." The feeling was they knew about it already, having grown up in it or in a society where it was present, and thus there was no need to learn more about it. In other cases, people felt that Buddhism was not relevant to the way they communicated the gospel, so again there was no need for reflection on potential issues posed by a Buddhist worldview for gospel proclamation and discipleship.

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Later when Mark Durene founded Change The Map as a ministry to raise up intercessors for the Buddhist world, he discovered how difficult it is to get an accurate assessment of Buddhist religionists in the world. The vast variance in the numbers, ranging from the low end of 350 million to the high end of 1.6 billion, reflects the assumptions about what defines a Buddhist by those doing the counting.

Thus, both on the ground with missionary practitioners and local Christians and at the macro-level of defining Buddhism in order to document religious demographics, a widespread unwritten assumption is that strictness of practice and adherence to doctrinal and textual Buddhism is central to what it means to be Buddhist. Our observation is that this view among local Christian leadership and cross-cultural workers discounts the influence of Buddhism on how people respond to the gospel, leading to unfruitful ministry practices, methods, and approaches, and to propagation of local churches that tend to look and feel foreign to local non-Christians. Because Christians both local and expatriate have not paid attention to the influence of Buddhism, those who do come to faith are taught how to follow Jesus with very little reference to their religious past. This attitude toward Buddhism is then reproduced and passed on through generations of disciples, disabling believers from clearly communicating to Buddhist friends and family members or even acknowledging the possibility that a Buddhist worldview may be influencing people's responses.

What Is the Purpose of This Book?

We want to challenge the assumption that Buddhism does not matter when proclaiming the gospel and making disciples. The historically slow response to the gospel among Buddhists across Asia makes it difficult to maintain that Buddhism is not at all implicated in the reality of very small numbers of Christians in these places. Kang-San Tan argues that Christians have not done a good job at communicating the gospel to those who are committed to Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, evidenced by the relative ineffectiveness of evangelistic approaches among these major world religions.[1] The idea that people are not good Buddhists also ignores the realities of national

1 Tan, "Contextual Frameworks," 6.

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and personal identity around Buddhism in nation-states with large Buddhist populations. A number of Asian peoples can only conceive of their ethnicity as tied to being Buddhist. Thus, when a member of their society becomes a Christ follower, it is tantamount to no longer being part of that ethnic group.

While there is a vast amount of literature on Buddhist doctrine and history in the fields of anthropology and sociology, there is very little from the Christian mission perspective that reflects on the significance of the lived experience of Buddhists for the purpose of communicating the story of Jesus and living as his disciples. There is also writing on Buddhist-Christian dialogue at scholarly levels, but it remains disconnected from the nonacademic world and life of the common person in these societies.[2] Popular level books that encourage Christians to share their faith with Buddhists are helpful for those with no background, but because they are written to Western audiences in Western contexts, they cannot address challenges posed by language and culture in specific non-Western places.

In this volume we reflect as missionary practitioners on how the everyday life experiences of Buddhist peoples impact gospel communication and discipleship. We are following a path advocated by Japanese missionary and theologian Kosuke Koyama who made the point that while Christianity and Buddhism as religious systems do not communicate well, Christians and Buddhists do.[3] Our goal is to encourage global workers to take the influence of Buddhism on local people seriously, to seek a deeper understanding of the people's worldview, and to adjust ministry approaches accordingly. We want to move the discussion away from Buddhism in the abstract as a religious system to a discussion about concrete people with social relations, a history, and a worldview who identify themselves as Buddhists or are in some way influenced by Buddhism.

In the remainder of this chapter we explain how we count the number of Buddhists in the world, which illustrates the problem of

2 A few examples of scholarly work across a spectrum of positions as it relates to the notion of dialogue are Bowers, *Something or Nothing?*; Fleming, *Asian Christian Theologians*; and Gross and Muck, *Buddhists Talk*. See the bibliography for this chapter for further reading on dialogue.

3 Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 209–10.

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defining who a Buddhist is. We then lay out how we define what it means to be a Buddhist or influenced by a Buddhist worldview in terms of belief and practice. Next, we challenge a conventional perspective on Buddhism that influences the attitudes and practices of cross-cultural workers. This is followed by observations on why it is important to take a person's Buddhist worldview seriously as we seek to proclaim the gospel and help people become disciples of Jesus. The final section recommends what we believe are some more fruitful ways of understanding Buddhism as it is practiced by Buddhist people.

Who Counts as a Buddhist?

It turns out that it is much more difficult than one would expect to define who is an adherent to a particular religion, making counting the members of any religion challenging. Largely, this issue is rooted in the problems involved in trying to define the term *religion* itself.[4] In the social sciences there is disagreement over whether religions should be defined by their substance, meaning their formal doctrines that are believed by members, or how the ideas and rituals function personally and socially.[5]

Christians, rooted in the Old and New Testaments where God reveals himself both in speaking and in action, believe that what we have in Scripture is special revelation that cannot be discerned by human reason alone, and so generally use a substantive definition for their faith. From the Christian perspective, belief in and obedience to what God has revealed becomes the criteria for whether one is a follower of Jesus or not. Evangelical Christians go beyond confession of faith in biblical doctrines to affirm that true belief leads to spiritual rebirth and a life that is transformed by the work of the Spirit. Substantive definitions, in part because of the influence of Christianity in the West, are often used when counting the adherents of any religion, particularly in demographic work done by Christians related to Christian world missions.

Counting religionists is also an exercise with political implications. Nation-states often create a history in order to build a national

4 See Stark, *Why God?*, 1–11.

5 Van Gaalen, "Functional and Substantive Definitions."

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identity and will often use shared religion as one of the connecting factors. Everyone in that nation-state is then considered to be part of the primary traditional or historical religion, regardless of what they believe or practice. In these instances, numbers for religionists are inflated. In other cases, a political doctrine influences who gets counted as being part of a religion. For example, in places where atheism is the official state position, numbers of religionists will be reduced to align with party doctrine.

Both substantive definitions and political factors are at play in creating the radically different numbers that are proffered when trying to count how many Buddhists there are in the world. The lower numbers of 350–534 million[6] lean more heavily on substantive definitions and come from nation-states where people are either born into Buddhism because it is the state's official religion (Cambodia and Bhutan) or the preferred/favored religion (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Laos), or because it is the traditional or historical religion of an ethnic group and to be part of that group means that one is assumed to be Buddhist (Thai and Tibetans).

There are also significant numbers of Buddhist adherents among certain ethnic groups or castes that see themselves as Buddhist, such as groups in Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, and neo-Buddhists in India.[7] In all four of these cases there is generally a broader societal adherence to and participation in Buddhist rituals and practices, and often a sense of ethnic or national identity as well. When asked, "What is your religion?," most people in these countries or ethnic groups would identify themselves as Buddhist. Among places and peoples like this a person is born a Buddhist. When distinctions are made, they address the level of strictness of one's practice, and not whether a person considers themselves a Buddhist or believes Buddhist doctrines.

Others suggest much higher numbers for Buddhist adherents, arguing that there could be upward of a billion Buddhists in the world. This is the number used by Change The Map and other ministries that focus on Buddhists. The difference between the high and low estimates can be explained by how Buddhist adherents are counted in China

6 The number 534 million comes from Johnson and Zurlo, "Status of Global Christianity, 2024."

7 Wikipedia, "Buddhism by Country."

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