

Penetrating Buddhism

Ambivalence. Not quite the response one wants when preaching to the unreached. I heard it at a recent conference of mission leaders who were discussing fast growing movements to Christ. I had asked one field trainer from South East Asia whether the movements had touched the Buddhist areas. He said, “Well, the Buddhists are really ambivalent.” It seemed his greater success was among strictly tribal peoples.

Those cultures historically impacted by Buddhism continue to present a distinctive challenge to mission efforts. Each region that has absorbed Buddhism—whether Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan or the countries of Southeast Asia—each seems to have its own Buddhist texture, its own religious currency, with its own unpredictable potential. One dare not assume anything, especially after centuries of Western secularism and brutal communism. We’ve been amazed at Mongolia, where movements to Christ have grown over two decades. No ambivalence there, it seems. But then there’s the anomaly of Tibet, where an almost totalitarian Buddhist culture remains a thorn in China’s side. The differences make you wonder how we should define Buddhism.

Finally, there’s the Buddhist challenge across Southeast Asia, best captured in the well-rounded interpretations of SEANET, a network whose annual meetings have generated consistently insightful publications.¹ They model for us a broad religious interpretation, one conversant with the traditional hold of Buddhist ways, the warping realities of tiger economies, the persistence of family, and the unfortunate blight of modern decadence and vice. These forces, which can either marginalize or propel traditional Buddhist institutions, certainly compel us to look again at our settled assumptions about the Buddhist world. Does an inextricable bond of Buddhist religion and culture really foster ambivalence to the gospel? The answer may require a better interpretation of Buddhism.

Two articles herein take a fresh look at two dimensions which always confront us in Buddhist Southeast Asia: first, the overall consciousness of *religious belonging* and, second, the traditional grip of *religious ritual*. Any ethos of religious belonging seems directly related to the hold of rituals which surround those shrines that still dot the Buddhist landscape. Kang-San Tan has an indigenous grasp of this issue of belonging, and he makes the daring suggestion that the globalization of religions may force us to consider a religious “dual-belonging.” He does not surrender to

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syncretistic mushiness, but he does stretch our view of the religious canopy we call Buddhism.

Daniel Baeq's article focuses on one species of tree in Tan's forest. He examines the role of a certain Buddhist shrine, the *Rean Theivoda*, and its potential use in contextualizing the gospel. Aren't these religious shrines the antithesis of the gospel? Aren't we trotting down the sterile paths of those anthropological studies of religion, with their plethora of religious symbols, rituals, shrines and temples, and never discerning a darkened fetish? On the other hand, our usual discernment of religious darkness might be too quick and reactionary. Enter Baeq's *critical* contextualization and how God has used the temple form to communicate his purposes. Might the discerning use of a shrine penetrate the ambivalence of a Buddhist mind? Could it actually help unravel the enigma of Buddhist unresponsiveness?

Some may wonder if these articles seem a bit over-reaching. Is there any legitimacy to exploring religion in these terms? Harold Netland, tenured

professor of religious studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, seems to endorse the venture. He calls for a missiology that suspects our preconceived notions of religion. He is well aware of the struggle over religion in the academy (which we reviewed in our previous issue²), and he respects how globalization is wrinkling religious worlds. Broad demographic shifts of religion are happening across the globe, trends that represent strategic implications for the missionary enterprise. Albert Hickman and Todd Johnson report on some of the macro-religious trends they have identified through their database at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity. Such trends raise important questions about religious consciousness, religious belonging and the traditional grip of religious ritual.

Notice a common thread stitched into these articles. It even extends into Doug Coleman's response in our book review section. Tan, Netland and Coleman all speak from the discipline called the "theology of religions" (Baeq and Tan have both studied in Netland's religion department at

Trinity). It's a discipline that no longer assumes a clear *theological* encounter between religions. Religion always imbeds itself into cultures, and it's this interpenetration of religion and culture that Netland calls us to restudy. This journal welcomes a theology of religions with an eye to its broad cultural canopy. It just might help us penetrate that perceived ambivalence in the Buddhist world.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ SEANET is the Southeast Asian Network whose publications are available through William Cary Library publishers.

² See H.L. Richard's review of religious studies, "Wrestling with Religion: Exposing a Taken-for-Granted Assumption in Mission," *IJFM* 28:4, Fall 2011, p196f.

The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: *The World Consultation on Frontier Missions* and the *International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions*. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.