

Frontiers in Contextualization of the Gospel Among Tibetan Buddhists

by Paul B. Cochrane (March, 2003)

As in any attempt to bring the Good News to an unreached people group, the evangelist is confronted with the issues of cross-cultural communication. One extremely challenging mega group are those peoples whose religious background is Tibetan Buddhism. This faith is practiced by a diverse group of several million adherents located in 6 countries. It is not just a Tibetan religion. Mongols, Buryats and multiple Himalayan tribal groups across India, Nepal, and Bhutan all have a common faith in Tibetan Buddhist religious practice.

This form of Buddhism has been identified in different ways. Some prefer to call it Lamistic Buddhism because of the key role played by the monks as a guide to enlightenment. Tibetan Buddhism is classified a branch within the Mahayana or "Greater Vehicle" tradition in Buddhism that is prevalent in Korea, Japan and China. However, Tibetan Buddhism should almost be separate category of its own. This is because the practice of Tibetan Buddhism is so far from its counterparts that for years many leaders within Buddhism refused to recognize it as a genuine form of Buddhism. This is no longer the case. The Dalai Lama has formally been involved in meetings of the Buddhist World Federation. The popularity of Tibetan Buddhism has caught the imagination of the Western world and today it is growing and influential. Beyond the debates of how to categorize Tibetan Buddhism within Buddhism in general, there are also several schools of practice within Tibetan Buddhism itself. Then stepping back one more degree, there is the distinction between the folk practice by village shamans and the formal practice found in the monasteries and nunneries.

Attempts to bring the Gospel to Tibetan Buddhists go back to the 4th century Nestorian missionary efforts. But the message about Jesus Christ has not penetrated the heartland of Tibetan Buddhist over the centuries. Today, the remnants of former mission work are almost invisible. The only country to give modern mission efforts a ray of hope has been in Mongolia. At the heart of this dismal missionary history is the question of how to communicate the Gospel cross-culturally. Almost every aspect of the worldview and religious language renders nearly every Biblical concept incomprehensible.

A couple of examples will suffice to demonstrate this challenge. The Dalai Lama speaks often of "compassion". It sounds very Biblical. But the lama's concept of "compassion" means spiritually guiding a person on a path toward enlightenment. It has nothing to do with a practical demonstration of love in which one fellow human being physically helps another in this life. This "compassion" is not focused another human. It has to do with how the lama can direct you to achieve enlightenment. Thus, the Tibetan Buddhist concept of "compassion" cannot be compared to the love of Christ. To speak of the "compassion of Christ" and then go on to an explanation of Christ's love as demonstrated by his death on the cross would totally confuse a Tibetan Buddhist. Christ's "loving act" can only be understood, in their worldview, as someone who has totally missed the way of compassion. A Tibetan Buddhist sees Christ's death as the indication of merited punishment for many sins under the law of Karma. This is proof of his falling from the compassionate way. Thus, instead of embracing Christ's "love" and its related effect of death as "compassion", in Biblical terms, the Tibetan Buddhist would never want to associate with such a bad person.

Another major communication problem has to do with the Christian's concept of prayer. In Tibetan Buddhism, prayer is not communication. It is a means of gaining merit (really to be in

sync with cosmic energy) to offset bad Karma. Every aspect of one's life is under the dominion of one's own Karmic balance. Prayer is just one of many activities that permit a person to outweigh negative Karma. Repeating a mantra with the help of a prayer wheel, prayer beads, prayer walks, or a series of prostrations permits a person to gain merit (weight) on the Karmic scale. Prayer has nothing to do with one's personal relationship to a god. (Indeed this is a totally foreign concept.) It has everything to do with how well you manage the Karmic forces of which you are a part. Thus, to introduce a person from a Tibetan Buddhist background to Christian prayer faces huge challenges within their religious mindset. Just the thought of relating personally to a god is unthinkable. It is beyond the scope of imagination that a human can formulate one's own prayer. Prayers are ancient sacred mantras that are reserved for the lamas to recite ceremonially in order to gain merit on behalf of another.

In just these two examples, it is evident that our Evangelical methods of "receiving Christ" for salvation, faces huge conceptual challenges. To proclaim Christ's love and to teach salvation via a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, our Western theological constructs will never cross the cultural divide without a serious effort to contextualize the message.

Thus, in January 2003, a group of missionaries gathered for a workshop on how to contextualize some elements of the Gospel. In the workshop we identified several areas of communication needs actually encountered by individuals seeking to convey the Gospel message to Tibetan Buddhists. The result of this workshop was a preliminary list of findings that might contribute to an effective contextualized message of the Gospel.

First of all, the lack of a personal God concept means that there is no absolute moral right and wrong within the framework of Tibetan Buddhism. While there are social and religious ethics, this not the same thing as a standard established on the basis of man's existence being formally linked to the existence of one Holy God. Thus, the concept of sin becomes nearly impossible to establish. The workshop participants felt that the key to understanding the concept of sin is to introduce the existence of a personal Creator-God. Whether the concept of sin be established within the framework of shame or guilt, the essential root concept of it must be an offense against a personal Creator-God to whom we are accountable. It is key to laying the foundation of Biblical salvation.

One of the good things in most Tibetan Buddhist cultures is that the average person lives and practices a folk version of the religion. Most people groups have pre-Buddhist influences that are animistic believe systems. The Tibetans actually have a mythology of "creation". Thus a predisposition to receive a new creation story is present in the general folk culture. The legend of origin of Tibetans tells of a monkey falling from the sky and cohabiting with a snow lion. In their mystical view of life, no questions are asked of the origin of those two animals. The idea of being formed from something that existed is present. This acceptance can be a positive factor for the Gospel. The evangelist has grounds on which to provide a "new legend" by telling the story of Creation. Because the Bible's story is as "believable" as the Tibetan's own explanation, the average villager, upon hearing this new story, will listen carefully. Even if it is "new" and "different" they recognize its correspondence with life upon the earth and they tend not to reject it out of hand. Thus, this story begins the process of introducing them to the Creator-God. Now, we are still a long way from establishing the idea of a moral God with standards of right and wrong. However, an understanding of the Biblical standards of righteousness will come progressively as they learn more about the god of the Bible.

Secondly, almost all practices of life (from getting up in the morning to lying down at night) are tied to religious rituals or taboos and are embellished with the use of multiple symbols such as

colored cloth, auspicious objects and rites of social behavior. One example is found in the “*katta*”. It is a scarf that is given to honor a guest much like a floral lei is used in many different cultures. In the history of Tibetan peoples one finds the tradition of giving “*Kattas*” goes back centuries. While this piece of cloth today is made with Tibetan words woven into the fabric and is often blessed by the lamas, it is nevertheless a cultural symbol of respect and honor to all guests. In the days prior to the Chinese expansion into Tibet, this piece of cloth was used as a “visa” or “right of entry” by the Dalai Lama to his special guests. While most observers feel there is spiritual “protection” symbolism tied to this object, many Christians have not seen the need to dispose of this very meaningful token of Tibetan hospitality. In fact some feel this object could be used as a redemptive analogy of being received into Christ. But others object because within the framework of protection, the practice of wearing amulets is widespread. If the “*katta*” is just another form of magical protection induced by the lama’s mantra, how can this be used as a symbol of the Gospel?

For this second group, the workshop provided a framework to understand the function of symbolism in the culture. It was recognized that in a non-oral society, such communication devices are necessary. The workers went away with a determination to find functional equivalents for those aspects of the symbolic folk culture that are not uniquely religious but fundamentally hold good meaning for daily life. It was generally agreed that the “*katta*” and other symbolic objects and social gestures of greeting which function as part of the system of social respect and honor seem to be very “transformable” and potentially useful in contextualization of the Gospel. With more research, the “*katta*” might become a powerful tool for the Gospel.

Lastly, we dealt with the Christian claim to a unique savior in the person of Jesus Christ. There is an amazing ability for the Eastern religions to absorb almost any religious view. Buddhism especially projects itself in the West as being very inclusive. Thus, one encounters the concept of a “Christian Buddhist”. While such accommodations are tolerated in the West, the climate is very different in the heartland of Asia. Buddhist leaders extend very little “western” tolerance to the person in Bhutan or Mongolia who claims that Christ is the only path to salvation. Christ might be marginally acceptable as one type of helping deity (*bodhisattva*). But, the Christian’s message of one unique Savior is not admissible. For those sharing the Gospel, the challenge is to present Christ as unique and yet not block communication with people whose first reaction typically is to reject any concept that is not inclusive.

The participants working on this roadblock in communication felt that the Bible provides insight into presenting the deity of Christ that can be helpful in presenting the Uniqueness of Christ to the Tibetan Buddhist listener. The basic idea taken from the Gospels is that Jesus and the disciples did not really go around arguing a point of “truth”. Jesus lived, died and rose again before their eyes and they had to decide who he was. He made the “proclamation” of his deity through “acts of god”. Thus, the workshop participants felt that telling the story of Jesus in simple lines of dramatic narrative can establish Christ’s unique personhood all on its own. By giving the gospel story, we will describe a person like none other they have heard about. He will be seen as special. As the story unfolds Christ will become in their minds the all-powerful one and only savior. His uniqueness can be left to discovery in terms of the listener’s own encounter with this living God. We do not need to “argue” or “debate” the truth about him. Jesus Christ will stand up in their midst as he always does when he comes to us!