

Research of Christian Concepts in a Buddhist Context

Introduction

This research project was done as a language module in 2005 and I have given a seminar on this during conference in the same year. Several people have asked me to send this paper to them, but since we have Intranet, I decided to upload it so it is available to everyone.

The paper is a result of interviewing a number of people in my direct neighborhood. This number was limited, so it represents by no means all of the Thai people in all of Thailand. I should also say that I did this module while still being quite 'green' to Thailand, so the findings and interpretations have not been hindered by experience. It would be great if other missionaries could add their insights about the concepts that are discussed, or about other concepts that need discussion.

The interview technique proved to be a great way to get deep conversations with people and can thus be used for building relationships and even evangelism.

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Aim:

1. Find out how certain Christian concepts are understood by Buddhist people.
2. Find out which meaning these Christian concepts carry for Christians with a Buddhist background.
3. Examine suitability of the Christian concepts in reaching out to Buddhist people.
4. Examine availability of suitable alternative concepts.

Interview

Introduction to Buddhist people:

I am doing a research project in order to find out more about the Buddhist religion. I have now been living in Thailand for more than 4 years and I want to get a better understanding of your religion. We as Christians use certain words in our religion and I would like to get an understanding of how you, as a Buddhist, understand these words; what meaning they have for you. So, I would like to interview you about a few of these words and get your comments. Please don't worry about whether or not I will like your answers; it is important to me to find out what your thoughts are!

Introduction to Christians:

I am doing a research project in order to find out more about the Buddhist religion. I want to reach out to Buddhist people with the Christian message and I am just wondering in what way certain Christian words are understood by them. And I am also wondering what certain words mean to you, now that you have become a Christian. So I would like to interview you about these Christian words, what they mean to you and what you think they mean to Buddhist people.

Summary in English

Phracaw

Buddhist respondents:

When asked about *phracaw*, most buddhist interviewees mentioned *phraphuttacaw*, the Buddha. Most spoke of him with great reverence. They direct their prayers and requests mostly at him though they believe he is dead. Also, they pray to other *phra* and to Buddha statues who are representatives of *phraphuttacaw*.

There were a few of the respondents who indicated that the word *phracaw* refers specifically to the God of the Christians, in their opinion.

Christian respondents:

Most respondents in this group stated that in the past the word *phracaw* did not carry any meaning to them. To them, *phracaw* referred to something or someone remote and unknown. When asked what God means to them now, most of them gave answers that reflect how important God is to them relationally: He is a Father, He is close, He is the one I depend on. There were only two people who referred to Him as the Creator and the Savior.

Conclusion: Most Buddhist people have little understanding of who we talk about when we start talking about God. It is important they understand He is the living God, the Creator of the universe and the Savior. Also, it is a good thing to stress the possibility to have a relationship with God. Apparently it means a lot to Thai Christians to be able to enter into a relationship with God. Relationships are important to the Thai and so this is one avenue to show them the attractiveness of the Good News.

However, the fact that only two respondents mentioned God being the Creator and the Savior may reflect the lack of understanding how important it really is that God is our Creator and that He saved us from our sins. When telling people about God I think the starting point should preferably be Genesis 1. We have seen people who, once they understood God was the Creator of their lives, began to understand God's claim on their lives and who were willing to do away with their idols at once.

Khwaambaap/phit

Buddhist respondents:

Many in this group at once referred to the five commandments: don't lie, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't kill (animals), don't drink alcohol. These commandments are quite similar to a number of our Ten Commandments, except we don't have a commandment on alcohol and the Buddhist commandment on killing stresses the sin of killing animals more than killing people.

In addition to these five commandments, quite a number mentioned how terrible disrespect is to parents.

The concept *khwaambaap* is linked to the concept of karma – people often talk about *baapkam*. I also asked them about the word *khwaamphit* and the general answer was that *khwaamphit* is not so bad as *khwaambaap*. *Khwaamphit* may be understood as something bad that was done unintentionally.

When asked about whether *khwaambaap* also includes thinking or not, the responses were not consistent. Some people stated that only the visible act was what mattered, whereas others answered that bad thoughts are also *khwaambaap*.

Christian respondents:

I interviewed a couple of people who had been Christians for quite a few years. They responded that *khwaambaap* is not so very important to Buddhists, they don't understand its weight. And since these respondents had become Christians, they had really come to understand the meaning of *khwaambaap*.

There were also a couple of respondents who had only recently become Christians. They did not think that *khwaambaap* was a light matter to Buddhist people; on the contrary, if one killed an ant, one might be doomed.

This difference in responses is very interesting and one wonders if there is a pattern here: do older Christians generally believe that Buddhist experience *khwaambaap* as a light matter or was it coincidence that the responses turned out this way?

It was encouraging to hear a few Christians explain the meaning of *khwaambaap* in the following way: it is disobedience to God, it is something that originates in our heart (*citcai*) and it hinders our relationship with God. All of these answers are in line with Biblical teaching.

Conclusion:

There are similarities between the Buddhist understanding of *khwaambaap* and the biblical understanding of it, as is reflected by the five commandments all Buddhists know. Those similarities in understanding can be made use of when going into the matter of *khwaambaap*. I do not think that *khwaambaap* is an empty concept to Buddhists. Indeed, it makes them shiver at times because it is so closely linked to their karma, which they fear might turn out bad. This latter point also reflects the fundamental difference between the Buddhist understanding of *khwaambaap* which is so closely tied up with karma, and the way the Bible explains it. So we need to be very clear that *khwaambaap* is disobedience to God and that it is something that destroys everything that God had intended for us and for this world, including our relationship with Him. It is not so difficult to look for the right story to explain this basic truth, it is right there in Genesis 3. We have taught this story many a time to Buddhist people who show an interest in the Gospel and nearly always they grasp the meaning of it quite well. We also need to emphasize the fact that sin is something that starts with our thoughts and is not limited by our acts, only.

Thai/Laang baap

Buddhist respondents

At this point the interviewing invariably got very interesting. It is an area where the ultimate hopelessness of Buddhist teaching shows most clearly and where the glorious news of Jesus' sacrifice stands out most brilliantly.

When asked about the concept of laangbaap the response was constantly the same: one has to thambun in order to laangbaap, but the meritmaking will never be sufficient; there will always be baapkam left. But meritmaking will lessen the baapkam and it will help one to feel more comfortable. Some people stressed that although we do a lot of merit making, merit and sin will always remain separated and so it is not possible to extinguish one (sin) by doing the other (merit). Succinctly put: bunkobun baapkobaap.

How do laangbaap and thaibaap differ, according to Buddhist people? One respondent stated that thaibaap is something you can do for someone else so as to improve that person's karma, but laangbaap is not something someone else can do for you. It would be interesting to find out how widely the difference between the two concepts is understood like this. A couple of respondents gave the example of a cow that is going to be slaughtered. It is then possible to purchase the cow in order to save it from slaughtering. One has paid a ransom, or thaiwua. This is obviously an example that is quite well-known because I heard it a couple of times.

Christian respondents:

It was wonderful to see the joy with which most respondents in this group stated how glad they were that they had found salvation in Jesus Christ. Some of them understood well the tremendous difference between the hope that Jesus gives, and the bleak perspective of baapkam. Yet, there were a couple of responses which showed that not all Christians had fully grasped the meaning of Jesus' sacrificial work on the cross. One respondent thought that every Sunday when one confesses one's sins, God will then wash away our sins; in her thinking laangbaap was a reality primarily linked to the Sunday's worship. It almost sounds like bringing a lamb to the temple to have it sacrificed for one's sins. Another Christian believed Jesus had taken away her sins, but she was very afraid to build up new sins (saang baap) which to me sounds quite similar to building up bad karma. This respondent did not really understand how Jesus has died for all our sins, not just for the sins we have committed until now.

One other respondent did not think we Protestants have laangbaap; it is something the Catholics believe what baptism is about, but since we Protestants do not think baptism washes away our sins, it is something we do not have, we just have thaibaap.

Then, finally, one lady stated the difference like this: thaibaap means that Jesus has died for us on the cross and paid for our sins whereas laangbaap is a daily reality: every time we sin, we bring it to the Lord and He cleanses us.

Conclusion:

Discussing beliefs about laang/thaibaap with buddhist people offers a wonderful opportunity to present the solution God has provided to save us from hell. I was astonished by the frankness with which most buddhist respondents admitted to the hopelessness of their religions' teachings concerning this topic. We can try to use stories like the one about saving the cow from death to teach the truth about Jesus' sacrifice being a ransom.

When teaching the Biblical truths about laang/thaibaap we need to be very clear about what exactly Jesus did for us on the cross. I think it is very difficult for believers with a buddhist background to fully grasp the meaning of that sacrifice. The belief that meritmaking and baapkam are linked is so deeply ingrained. There is no grace in Buddhism and there are no gifts. We need to think about ways in which we can clearly explain that God's salvation is a gift and that no meritmaking or good deeds or sin can add to it or can take away from it.

Phrakhun/phrakarunaa

Buddhist respondents

For the respondents in this group the concept of phrakhun is linked to 'phuumiiphrakhun', or persons who possess phrakhun. These persons are one's parents, teachers and other people who have had a part in raising one. Phrakhun has a very positive meaning, it is understood as goodness and contributing to something good, helping others. Yet, it is quite different from the biblical understanding of grace, because phrakhun is something we need to repay. (for example: every young man becomes a buddhist monk –if only for a short time- in order to thank or repay his mother for the milk she gave him when he was a baby). So the word phrakhun does not refer to a free gift in the thinking of buddhist people.

When asked about the concept of phrakarunaa, most people explained it as pity (khwaammeettaa, khwaamsongsaan).

Christian respondents:

As I expected, not everyone in this group understood the free nature of God's grace. Especially younger Christians seem to have difficulty grasping this. One lady thought she needed to repay God's phrakhun by serving him. How difficult it is to completely explain these truths to people who have believed in meritmaking all their lives! What is the difference between phrakhun and phrakarunaa? One lady explained that we are saved by phrakhun, whereas phrakarunaa means we can ask things from God. She was the only one who made a distinction between the two words like this.

Conclusion:

In teaching the truth about God's grace as a free gift I think we can use the word phrakhun although we need to explain very clearly what it means. We have to seek for ways to explain that it is indeed a gift, not something for which we need to repay the Lord. At the same time new believers need to understand that God wants them holy; although they do not have to do good deeds as a form of meritmaking, God still wants His children to lead holy lives.

I am not sure which word is better: phrakarunaa or phrakhun. Further research is needed to get a better picture of the difference between these two concepts.

Khwaamcheua/sathaa

Buddhist respondents

Respondents in this group generally referred to the teachings that have been taught for generations and which thus have deep roots. Some people summarized those

teachings as follows: If you do good, you will receive good, and baapkam is a reality everyone has to deal with. A few referred to having faith in other people, which means being able to trust others.

All of the respondents thought sathaa was identical to khwaamcheua.

Christian respondents:

When asked about buddhist beliefs, the responses were quite consistent with those the buddhist respondents gave. One respondent in this group said: buddhist people believe in three things: phii, phra and mooduu and they don't really make a distinction between the three.

It was interesting to see that their answers about what faith means to them now contrasted sharply with buddhist beliefs. Whereas buddhist beliefs are taught from generation to generation and is thus collectively shared, faith in God is a 'private matter'. God gives experiences to his children which are not the same for everyone. Faith has its residence in someone's heart, it cannot be seen by others although we need to show it to the people around by our actions.

According to one lady, faith is something you can prove, because God is at work in people's hearts and you can actually notice the difference. One other lady believed she would go to heaven once she had died. Still one more lady believed that God would change her and once she had reached a certain level of goodness, God would give her things that were proper for her to receive.

No one of the respondents thought there was any difference between khwaamcheua and sathaa.

Conclusion:

The answers of the buddhist respondents illustrate how difficult it is for most Thai people to break with a religion they have been taught all their lives, a religion that has been embraced for many generations of Thai people. It is part of the Thai identity to be a buddhist. There must indeed be a very good alternative to stray from the well-trodden path. (Well of course Jesus Christ is the best alternative one can imagine; we just need to present it the right way.) How interesting then to see that for those who have strayed from the buddhist path and found Jesus Christ, faith is regarded as a path God and the believer walk on together that is shaped by individual encounters and experiences. It may suggest they do not feel they are part of a long tradition of believers who all share the same beliefs on God who is the Creator, Jesus the Savior and the Holy Spirit. It might be good to put more emphasis on what we believe about God to make sure the content of one's faith does not become too subjective. At the same time the responses indicate the presence of a living faith: God gives experiences, God changes us from within and so on.

As Thai people say themselves, believing in someone is essentially the same as trusting someone. We could use this insight to explain to them why we believe in Jesus Christ. We do so, because He has done promises which can be absolutely trusted. Our destiny is completely safe with Him. And we can show that throughout the Bible, God acted upon His promises.

It seems like the word sathaa can be used along with khwaamcheua, although I rarely hear Christians do so.

Doncai/Bandaancai

Buddhist respondents

According to the respondents in this group, singsaksit doncai people do certain things, so the spiritual realm inspires people to do things. Bandaan has to do with making things happen. As in: if you make merit, the merit will cause (bandaan) you to have positive experiences – or something along this line. People can ask the Phra to doncai them to do certain things. The inspiration resides in one's heart.

Christian respondents:

There were a variety of responses in this group. Some believers felt reluctant in using these words as they were concepts that belonged to their buddhist past. They prefer using the phrase: the Holy Spirit leads us to...(phrawinjaanborisut song nam raw). Some others feel free in using doncai, but not bandaancai, and the reverse. One lady explained the difference between doncai and bandaancai like this: Inspiration which comes from God (kaandoncai) may cause something to happen one time but bandaan means God leads us on a continual basis. She gave the following example: God made her daughter meet with me (kaandoncai) and after that initial meeting God made us (Marten and I) meet again and again with the daughter and her mother and finally the mother accepted Jesus as her Savior (kaanbandaancai).

Conclusion

There are similarities between the buddhist way of understanding doncai and the Christian way of understanding of guidance by the Holy Spirit. In both cases it refers to guidance or inspiration by a power higher than us. The difference is that the Holy Spirit will always guide us according to the will of the Father, not according to what we want or what happens to be in line with our state of karma. Guidance by the Holy Spirit comes by way of the Word of God, not by making merits or performing religious rites. That said, I think we can use the word doncai when we explain God's guidance in our lives. (it is used in the Thai bible also, 2 Tim.3:16). It can actually be a good opportunity to go into the differences between trusting the leadership of a God who guides according to his perfect will and the guidance Buddhists hope for.

It is no wonder that some Christians are reluctant to use these concepts so I think we must use them with care. The difference between bandaan and doncai is not altogether clear to me. Some people make a distinction, others do not.

Winjaan

Buddhist respondents

The responses were clear: winjaan means phii, or spirit, of people who have died. If you have done a lot of meritmaking in your life your winjaan will go to heaven, if you sinned a lot then you will go to hell, that is, your winjaan. Some winjaan have no place to go to and float on this earth; this is particularly the case with those who have no relatives to make merit for them.

Christian respondents:

In this group the responses were less clear-cut. Most believe there are no winjaan; it is a belief from their past. But one lady thinks there are still winjaan, those are people who have died without Christ. We can pray for them and they will find rest as a result. One other lady defined winjaan as that part of our being with which we can have a spiritual relationship with God.

I asked one lady about what Buddhist people will think when they hear the word: phrawinjaan borisut. She said that Buddhists might think this refers to some godly spirit of some being who has died. She said she was mystified herself when she first heard of phrawinjaan borisut.

Conclusion:

If winjaan is identical to phii in the thinking of buddhist people, one begins to wonder how 'phrawinjaan borisut' is understood. Is it possible people think it is the phii of Jesus after He died on the cross? How about the Holy Spirit who takes residence in the hearts of believers? Would that piece of information be interpreted as the restless spirit of Jesus who seeks a residence to live?

The fact that the responses from the Christian respondents were rather varied shows that confusion can easily arise. The belief that people who die without Christ wander on this earth and can be pacified by our prayers shows similarities to the Buddhist way of thinking.

The response that winjaan is the part of our being with which we communicate with God indicates that it is a matter of terminology also; as we will see, other Christians would not refer to winjaan, but to citwinjaan.

Citcai

Buddhist respondents

Citcai has to do with our thinking, our emotional life, our mood and our beliefs. It is deep within the human being. It characterizes a person. If one has a good heart, one will help others and share with neighbors. The heart of every human being is unique.

Christian respondents

According to all respondents in this group, the heart is that part of our human being where God is at work. God continually changes the citcai by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our way of thinking and our emotions are changed under the influence of God's spirit. One lady said: I ask one thing from the Lord, that He will change my citcai and make it holy.

Conclusion:

Clearly, citcai is what defines the personality of a human being. Citcai dii means you are a charming personality, citcai chua means you are a mean specimen.

It is interesting that all Christians unanimously refer to the citcai as the region where one is changed, spiritually. And yet, they do not think that citcai is the part with which we can have a relationship with God, as we will see later on, or that part which will go to heaven.

Citwinjaan

Buddhist respondents

I got a bewildering variety of responses here. Not one answer was the same. One thought citwinjaan wanders about when we dream. Some others explained that citwinjaan are people who have died but who have not found a resting place, due to the fact that there are no relatives to make merit for them; one other thought it was identical to winjaan, and so forth.

Christian respondents:

When asked what the buddhist people think of this word, some in this group said: they do not know this concept. Two others explained that in buddhist thinking, one's cit will change into winjaan when one passes away. Finally, one lady said that citwinjaan is identical to winjaan, according to Buddhists.

When asked what this word means to them now, now that they are Christians, the responses were somewhat confusing again. Two of the respondents stated that citwinjaan is our duangwinjaan, it is the part of our being which communicates with God. One lady said: for Christians, the cit and the winjaan come together, being citwinjaan. All of the respondents believed that when they die, their citwinjaan will go with the Lord.

Conclusion

Either citwinjaan is an unknown concept to buddhist people, or it is open to interpretation. So I don't think it is a very appropriate word to use in evangelism, unless we find a way to clearly explain what we mean by it. And I don't think this is easy to do.

One thing is clear: every Christian believes that her citwinjaan will go to heaven after she dies. I have also heard quite a number of Christians say that they grow faaicitwinjaan. What exactly do they refer to when they talk about citwinjaan? If it is true that for Christians cit and winjaan come together to form a new spiritual reality, citwinjaan, then why do they still use the concept citcai? Citcai is clearly an important concept in the thinking of Thai Christians, for they constantly refer to it when talking about their spiritual growth. What place does citwinjaan have? And how important is it to clearly distinguish these concepts, when there is no clear distinction in the minds of the people themselves?