

Prospects for Indigenous People Movements in the Buddhist World: A Call for Collaborative Local and Global Theologizing

by Todd Pokrifka

Introduction

For several decades, missiologists have emphasized the importance of people movements to Jesus as a primary way in which God expands his kingdom in the world. More recently, there has been a great deal of missiological and theological reflection and debate concerning one kind of indigenous people movement, namely “insider movements.” These are movements to Christ among those who, in some way, remain identified with a non-Christian socio-religious community. Most of the published discussions on this topic have focused on Islamic contexts, with significantly fewer looking at Hindu contexts. Very little discussion has related to the prospects for insider movements in Buddhist contexts.¹

This article will begin to fill this lacuna by offering theological reflections on the prospects for legitimate people movements and specifically insider movements in the Buddhist world. Buddhism stands in much greater “worldview conflict” with Christianity than does Islam. Accordingly, if insider movements are controversial in Islam, then they will likely be even more controversial in Buddhism. Wouldn’t such movements have to embrace an unbiblical syncretism?

Not necessarily. Our answer to these questions depends on how we define some key terms, on how we assess the degree of truth in Buddhism, and on how we understand the nature of social and religious identity.²

I will argue for two points that are in some tension with one another: (1) *On the one hand, insider movements cannot retain the complete traditional theology and spiritual commitments of Buddhism and at the same time be faithful to Christ and Scripture.* (2) *Yet, on the other hand, one can speak of indigenous Spirit-led movements among those who stay within their Buddhist communities and who critically evaluate and reinterpret Buddhism in light of Christ and our authoritative scriptures.*

As a professor of systematic theology, I am vitally interested in the cooperative theological discussions that must take place in our encounter with Buddhism

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at the grassroots.³ I believe that for faithful insider movements to emerge, indigenous believers from a Buddhist background need to be included in a collaborative venture with missionaries who are alongsiders to successfully develop biblically-based, culturally relevant theology and practice. This joint project of local, indigenous, and intercultural theologizing would be one of the most significant ways that people movements in the Buddhist world could demonstrate biblical discernment, faithfulness and fruitfulness.

Definitions

In this paper, a people movement refers to a communal movement to Christ among a people group. As Donald McGavran first defined it, a people movement is a series of multi-individual, mutually interdependent conversions in which there is a “joint decision” that normally enables the relevant individuals to “become Christians without social dislocation.”⁴ The people in these movements do not experience social dislocation, but they are switching religions by becoming “Christians.”

The term “insider movement” is a kind of people movement that has come to have a fairly specific definition in most missiological discussions. In the words of Jay Travis and Dudley Woodbury, an insider movement is

a group or network of people who follow Jesus as Lord and Savior and the Bible as the Word of God, but remain a part of the socio-religious community of their birth or upbringing.⁵

Some controversial questions in understanding and evaluating insider movements, defined thus, are:

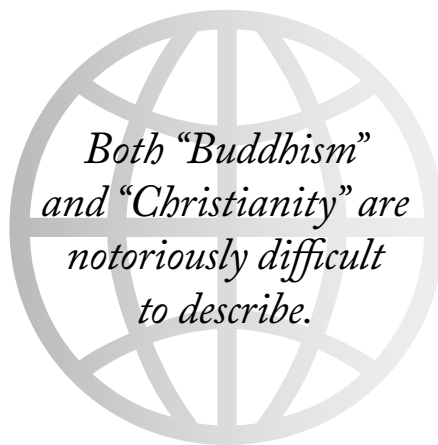
1. What is the meaning of “socio-religious” community? Can or should social and religious identity be distinguished?⁶
2. Who has the right to determine if a particular group of Jesus followers are insiders? Is it the Jesus followers themselves

(“self-identification”) or is it others in their native cultural or religious setting (“other-identification”)?⁷

I will not answer these questions definitively in this paper, but I will show some of the implications of different ways of answering them.

Comparison of Buddhism and Christianity on Basic Worldview Questions

If we are to accurately describe and analyze the prospects for insider movements in the Buddhist world, one of our tasks is to summarize ways in which “Buddhism” overlaps and conflicts with “Christianity.” However, both “Buddhism” and “Christianity”



are notoriously difficult to describe, since each is marked by much internal diversity. There are “Christianities” and “Buddhisms.” There are Theravada Buddhists and Mahayana Buddhists. There are classical Buddhists and folk Buddhists.⁸ And so on. This makes the task of comparing the two problematic.

At the same time, some kind of provisional characterization of the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism is helpful to discern the main challenges that people would face who claim to be both “Christian” and “Buddhist” in different respects, like those in insider movements. What are some worldview factors that need to be considered as such persons negotiate their dual identity?⁹

Worldview Question 1: What is the ultimate reality and what is the nature of this reality?

For Christians, the God revealed in the Bible is the ultimate reality. God is personal, morally good, and eternal. For (classical) Buddhism, the ultimate reality is the realm or state of *nirvana*. This reality is in many ways beyond description since it is completely different than the transient life in this world. *Nirvana* is not understood as a personal divine being (contra all forms of monotheism), although some forms of Mahayana Buddhism affirm a kind of non-ultimate polytheism (or theism). On the question of ultimate reality, Christianity and Buddhism give mostly contrasting—yet possibly complementary—answers. However, both recognize that there is an unchanging reality (God or *nirvana*) that transcends the changing reality that we experience—which leads to the next question.

Worldview Question 2: What is the nature of the “world,” or all that is not the ultimate reality?

For Christians, the world is the good, dependent creation of the one true God. It includes both material and spiritual entities. For Buddhists, the world is made up of various changing and perishable entities that make up the sphere of *karma* (Sanskrit).¹⁰ Most Buddhists, who are folk Buddhists, believe that the *karmic* entities in this world include spiritual beings like the spirits of ancestors and other spirits, both good and evil. On the question of the world and its entities, then, Christians and Buddhists give answers that are partly contrasting (created vs. “uncreated”) and partly similar.

Before I go on to the next worldview questions, let me pause to say that these first two questions concerning the nature of ultimate reality and of non-ultimate reality were not the direct focus or concern of the Buddha. His concerns lay elsewhere. For that reason, he would regard definitive answers

to these questions as speculative and therefore inadvisable. This perhaps is the best one can do with access to only general revelation and without (biblical) special revelation. This observation opens up the possibility of special revelation complementing or even fulfilling the underdeveloped areas of Buddhist worldviews, much as the revelation of Christ and the New Testament does in relation to the limitations of wisdom books like Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament (see below). In any case, we now turn to the 3rd and 4th worldview questions—questions about which Buddha’s central teachings provide some answers.

Worldview Question 3: What is the nature and cause of evil and suffering?

On the question of what is wrong with life in the world, Christians believe that the creation has become corrupted by evil through the sins of humanity and of other fallen agents, fallen angels or demons. The creation and humanity were originally created good, but then there was the fall of humanity—brought about by sinful desire and disobedience to God. This led to various negative effects of sin, including suffering and death. Buddhists believe life is inherently marked by *dukkha*, which is variously translated as “suffering,” “unease” or “dissatisfaction.” “All is *dukkha*” is thus the first of Buddha’s four noble truths.¹¹ All that we can experience in the karmic realm is marked by *dukkha*, a sense of things being both transient and not quite right. Buddhists go on to believe that the cause or origination of this suffering and death is desire or craving, which is the second noble truth of Buddhism. Folk Buddhists also emphasize that many instances of suffering or misfortune are brought about by the curses or malevolent actions of various invisible spirits (including ancestors or demons). There is a large degree of similarity between Christian and Buddhist views of suffering and evil and their causes, while some (important) differences remain.

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Worldview Question 4: What is the remedy for evil and suffering?

Christians and Buddhists both believe that salvation or escape from evil and suffering is possible, but conceive of it differently. For Christians, God graciously acts to save and restore fallen creation. Humans receive salvation by grace through faith or trust in God, which includes deliverance from evil powers (demons) and the transformation of the person. For Buddhists, the remedy to suffering is the cessation of desire (the third noble truth). Cessation of desire is made possible by following what Buddha called the noble eightfold path of “rightness” (the fourth noble truth). This enlightened way of right thinking and living ultimately can lead one out of *karma* and *dukkha* into *nirvana*, a permanent state free of suffering and death. Classical Theravada Buddhism regards this salvation as possible only by self-effort, although folk Buddhists have often thought or acted inconsistently with this belief.¹² In any case, there are strong contrasts between Christian and Buddhist beliefs about the nature of the remedy for evil and suffering.

On the whole, then, although there are some areas of overlap or similarity, there are significant and strong clashes between the basic worldviews of (biblical) Christianity and Buddhism. For someone to follow Jesus but also remain Buddhist, then, would be challenging, to say the least. But is it possible?

Levels of Identity, Insider Movements and Frontier Theologizing

Can a group of people learn to follow Jesus faithfully and still remain Buddhist insiders? The answer cannot be simplistic, since a group of people

can be both insiders and outsiders on a number of different levels. At the risk of oversimplifying a bit, I will talk about two options for how to conceive of Buddhist and Christian identity:

Option 1: When Buddhism and Christianity are considered *as distinct belief systems expressing one’s fundamental spiritual allegiances*, as Modern “essentialists” have usually understood them, then there cannot be authentic, biblical insider movements to Jesus among Buddhists. If one remains committed to Buddhist self-effort and the doctrine of rebirth, then clashes with essential biblical beliefs are just too great.¹³ Again, one cannot follow Jesus without believing wholeheartedly in a Creator, but Buddhism in all forms tends either to deny the existence of such a Creator or at the least to render such a belief insignificant and speculative.

Option 2: When Buddhism and Christianity are considered *as spheres of socio-religious and cultural identity*, however, then there can be authentic, biblical insider movements to Jesus among Buddhists, i.e. among those who remain devoted to a particular community and most of its values and practices. Jesus-following, Bible-believing insiders can retain relationships with Buddhist family and friends, participate in many of the rituals and religious festivals of Buddhist social and religious life—yet with a new way of interpreting them, of course. According to their conscience, then, they could use many of the forms of Buddhist religious culture like worshipping in a temple, giving alms, or using Buddhist language and thought patterns. One could do all these things in a way that expresses one’s newfound faith in and love for Jesus. Of course the believers will reject or revise some Buddhist beliefs or practices, but one

can imagine such people still seeing themselves insiders within the Buddhist community and culture. In some cases, such people might even be considered by the surrounding Buddhists as insiders.

These two distinct ways of understanding Buddhism and Christianity correlate to two different ways of understanding a person's (or group's) identity. The first can be described as a person's "vertical identity, based upon their faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ" and related theological beliefs. The second can be described as the person's "horizontal identity, in which they relate to and share the cultural values in which they were raised."¹⁴ I believe faithful followers of Jesus in the Buddhist world could be horizontal insiders but vertical outsiders. That is, they would inwardly be spiritual-theological outsiders in their core identity, but potentially be social-cultural insiders in their communities (in their social and collective identities).

Are these Buddhist horizontal insiders *religious* insiders also? Yes and no, depending on the way we are using "religious." When we refer to Christianity and Buddhism as "religions," it can be ambiguous. Religion can refer either to their vertical identity or their horizontal identity.¹⁵ If one understands religion as primarily concerned with vertical identity (core spiritual and theological identity, faith commitments and beliefs), then one will likely reject the prospect of Buddhist insider movements. By contrast, if one understands religion primarily as concerned with horizontal identity, then one will likely affirm the prospect of Buddhist insider movements.¹⁶

But the debate about insider movements is not only a matter of arbitrary semantics. We must go on to ask which approach to religion is more *appropriate* to describe the reality of lived Buddhism? Should we see a person's or group's Buddhist religious identity as primarily vertical or horizontal? My

tentative view is that *in most Buddhist cultures it makes more sense to see a person's Buddhist religious identity as primarily horizontal. This inclines me to accept the prospect of Buddhist insider movements, understood rightly.* Why do I incline towards this view? The main reason relates to the observation that the vast majority of Buddhists are folk Buddhists with unreflective, underdeveloped belief systems. Except for a few Buddhist monks and scholars, there are very few actual Buddhists who are devoted to the formal beliefs of higher Buddhism (say, atheism or even the necessity of self-salvation). This does not mean that there will not be a shifting of beliefs and paradigms for the ordinary (folk) Buddhists who come



to Christ, for there likely will be. But it does mean that they would understand Buddhism primarily as a horizontal socio-cultural identity. For example, in Thailand there is a common belief that "to be Thai is to be Buddhist." Accordingly, among the greatest barriers that would keep most Buddhists from becoming a Jesus-follower are social or horizontal barriers, not vertical barriers concerning fundamental theological beliefs about God and reality.¹⁷ The average Buddhist Thai or Lao person, for example, would probably be willing to consider believing in a creator God if they could be confident that such a Creator God could enable them to escape from *karma* and suffering.

Again, a simple folk Buddhist would be open to following Jesus as savior if they experienced his delivering power from evil spirits.¹⁸ However, they would be less willing to convert in these ways if they would have to break relationship with their family and community and become a "Christian"—which they typically view as replacing their old social identity with a basically Western social identity. For this reason, it seems that being open to "insider movements" within the horizontal social world of Buddhism would reduce unnecessary barriers to conversion to Christ.

Of course, by taking this stance in favor of Buddhist insider movements, I open myself to certain risks. There is the much vaunted danger, for instance, that this stance could allow for syncretism, a compromise of biblical truth. Also, it is very difficult to separate the horizontal and spiritual elements of Buddhist belief and practice. However, such tricky problems can be overcome on the ground through appropriate discipleship.¹⁹ Discipleship in contexts in which the gospel is new involves what I call "frontier theologizing."

Frontier theologizing is simply theological reflection and development that occurs on the frontiers of Christian mission. In this case, it would be theologizing that takes place as the gospel advances from reached territories and people groups into unreached Buddhist people groups. Good frontier theologizing in this setting would involve a mutual collaborative partnership between two groups in Christ's body, namely between (a) the cultural "insiders"—the new, indigenous "Buddhist Background Believers" (BBBs), and (b) the missionaries or "outsiders." Missionaries who start as outsiders can become "alongsiders" that rightly aid the developing indigenous church.²⁰ That is, there is a collaboration between the native church's task of indigenous local "self-theologizing" and the missionary church's cross-cultural task of local,

“contextual theologizing.”²¹ In this way, insiders and missionaries can work together in producing complementary aspects of an increasingly global theology. Developing such a theology is part of the growth and discernment process that believers experience in the process of discipleship that follows an initial acceptance of the gospel.

A Strategy for Frontier Theologizing: a Biblical Way of Handling Contradictions Between Local Buddhisms and the Gospel

One important aspect of frontier theologizing in a Buddhist context would be to find a way to understand and interpret the contradictions or tensions that exist between local forms of Buddhism and the gospel. Dealing with such contradictions is a crucial part of discipleship.²²

Contextual Contradictions in the Bible: A Model for Handling Contradictions Between Full Biblical Faith and Other Faiths

Can the Bible itself suggest ways of rightly handling contradictions between local forms of Buddhism and the biblical gospel? Is there a biblical way to allow for a somewhat harmonious relationship between them (avoiding inflammatory “anti-Buddhism”)? I believe the answer to these questions is “Yes.”²³

What if Buddhism were seen as partly true (due to general revelation and/or common grace), or true within a limited sphere of reality, while the gospel and biblical theology were seen as true in a far fuller and more complete sense? If this were the case, then some of the apparent contradictions between Buddhism and “Christianity” would not be substantial or fundamental contradictions but what we might call “contextual contradictions.” In the words of biblical scholar John Goldingay, a *contextual contradiction* is “a difference reflecting the variety in circumstances

Can the Bible itself suggest ways of handling contradictions between forms of Buddhism and the biblical gospel?

which different statements address” but in which one cannot say what the two speakers would say if they were confronting similar circumstances.²⁴

Speaking of contextual contradictions in this sense is a way of handling apparent contradictions between different parts of the Bible, especially between parts of the Old and New Testaments.²⁵ It enables us to explain how some of the Old Testament writings are true within a limited perspective, but not finally or fully true in the same way that the claims of the New Testament are. What if we could treat limited truths in Buddhism in a similar way?

The Role of Ecclesiastes in Scripture Compared to the Role of General Revelation in the Buddhist World

More specifically, let us consider typical Christian approaches to that rather unruly book of the Old Testament that we know as Ecclesiastes. Just as the Buddha made a number of specific statements that would contradict parts of the Bible, so also does the Teacher or Preacher (Heb., *Qoboleth* in Eccl. 1:1) in Ecclesiastes (whether or not this Teacher was the historical Solomon is a matter I will not address here). Consider, for example, the Teacher’s oft-repeated statement that “all is vanity” or “vapor” or “breath” or “everything is meaningless” or an empty “chasing after the wind” (e.g., 1:2, 14). Certainly, Jesus and the gospel are not vanity? Certainly, the Teacher’s statements here would contradict Jesus’ claim to be “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Indeed, if taken as a final statement of truth that applies to all things literally and comprehensively, the Teacher’s statement would contradict his own claims elsewhere in the book (e.g., such as his concluding statement in 12:13 that “the end of the

matter” is to “fear God and keep his commandments.”²⁶

But Christians have generally understood these “contradictions” in a particular way, namely, to say that the statements of the Teacher are true (and even inspired), but only from a limited perspective. The statement that everything is vain and transient (Eccl. 1:2, 14, 2:17, etc.) is true of what life is like when understood *apart from* special revelation of God’s purposes for life and for the afterlife. Although life can seem meaningless and “grievous” (2:17), the Teacher suggests that the best approach is to enjoy the temporary pleasures of life (see 5:18, 8:15 and 9:9) amidst awareness of much suffering. This represents the best that human reasoning can offer, based on a careful analysis of human experience. As such, it only applies to the realm of understanding “life under the sun” (Eccl. 2:17, 5:18, 6:12, 8:15, 9:9).

Accordingly, Christians are able to embrace the partial truths of the Teacher as ultimately compatible with the fuller truth of Jesus. The Teacher’s reflections are true only within a limited frame of reference and need to be placed within the wider frame of reference provided by the Grand Narrative of the Bible that culminates in Jesus Christ and the gospel.

The Teacher’s conclusions are similar to those of the Buddha about the transience of all things and how this leads to suffering and dissatisfaction. One could say that these shared conclusions are partly the result of general revelation and that they both need supplementation from special revelation. Accordingly, without affirming that the Buddha’s writings are inspired or canonical like the book of Ecclesiastes, we can fittingly treat his teachings as a set of partial truths within a limited

frame of reference. The Buddhist scriptures, then, contain wise human observations of how life is, based on general revelation. The situation is similar in Ecclesiastes (or Proverbs too), except that in the Bible we have an element of special revelation at work as well, including the infallible, inspired records of the Teacher's observations, which are based on general revelation.

To clarify, this does not mean that we should regard Buddhism as the "Old Testament" for Buddhists, or that the Old Testament is only relevant to Jews, two beliefs that I firmly oppose.²⁷ But it does mean that there is an analogous way in which incomplete truths of the Buddha and the Teacher of Ecclesiastes (or many other parts of the Old Testament) can be affirmed, "relativized," and "contextualized" within the wider, canonical, biblical truth of God.²⁸ This is one example of the kind of theologizing that alongside and indigenous believers could do together in particular contexts.

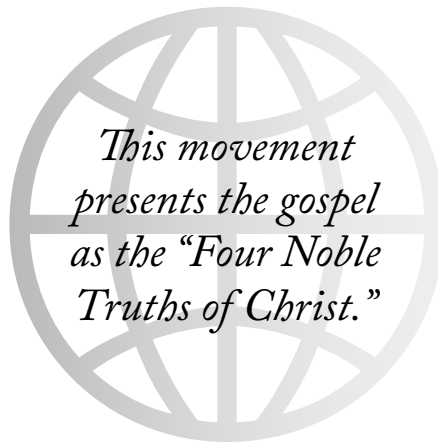
Conclusion: A Call for Collaborative Local and Global Frontier Theologizing

I have argued that indigenous, insider movements are possible within Buddhist contexts, but I am also arguing that such movements can only be faithful with much biblically-based, Spirit-led discernment. This discernment process requires a process of theologizing that takes place on the frontiers of the gospel's advance.

Despite the significant clash of worldviews that exists between Christians and Buddhists, then, there are ways in which authentic indigenous or insider people movements can take place in Buddhist contexts and communities. There is evidence that such movements—both biblically faithful and contextually fitting—are already taking place. In a church planting movement in Myanmar set apart by its indigenous Buddhist-sensitive approach, there have been many thousands

(some say over 40,000) of Buddhist Background believers following Jesus and spreading the gospel.

This movement began with one people group but has since spread to many other people groups.²⁹ Among the approaches to evangelism and teaching that this movement employs is to present the gospel in terms of the "Four Noble Truths of Christ," in a manner that recalls—but also supersedes—the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha.³⁰ That is, Christ followers use an existing, familiar teaching model, but substitute the truth taught with the teachings of Christ. Again, despite the alleged dangers of syncretism, is it not possible that such people movements among Buddhists are the work of God's



Spirit? If so, then we should tentatively support and promote such movements, while still calling for wise discernment. One of the key ways in which such discernment can take place is through a collaborative process of frontier theologizing in the Buddhist world. By responding to this call to discern and theologize, God's people will catalyze kingdom breakthrough among the unreached, both in the Buddhist world and beyond.³¹ **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ More recently the voice of Peter Thein Nyant has been heard on the implication of contextualization and movements within the Buddhist world with the publication of his *Mission Amidst Pagodas: Contextual*

Communication of the Gospel in Burmese Buddhist Context (Langham Partnership, UK 2014). Also, the systematic theologian, William Dyrness has dedicated a section to theological reflections on movements in the Buddhist world in his recent publication *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements* (IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2016), 90–93.

² Kang-San Tan has developed a theology of religions approach which respects religious identity and multi-religious belonging in the Christian-Buddhist context. *The Inter-Religious Frontier: A Buddhist-Christian Contribution* (Mission Studies, Volume 31, Issue 2, 2014), 139–156.

³ Simon Chan has recently addressed the concern that Western theological models have over-shadowed our ability to hear important cultural themes necessary in our theological encounter with grassroots religious contexts in Asia. See *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2014).

⁴ McGavran 1970 and McGavran 1980, as cited in Smith 2005, 285.

⁵ This definition is adapted from Travis and Woodberry 2010.

⁶ I will return to this question especially in section 3 below.

⁷ In this paper I lean towards understanding insider movements as those groups whose members self-identify as being inside the cultural or religious tradition of their birth (i.e. Buddhism or Islam), even if others in that cultural or religious tradition do not recognize them as such. This way of defining insider movements (prioritizing self-identification) coheres with the point I will make later about the importance of self-theologizing within indigenous people movements.

⁸ Consider the situation in Thailand, for example. According to Paul De Neui, although Thailand is often considered one of the most faithful custodians of Theravada Buddhism, Buddhism is perhaps more animist than classical Buddhist (De Neui 2015, 188). Wan Petchsongkram argues about the Thai Context that although Buddha originally taught his followers to depend on self, "they are now feverishly trying to find something outside themselves as a foundation for their lives . . . Wherever there is some miracle or sacred things, people will rent a taxi and go by the hundreds and thousands" (Petchsongkram 1975, 3). John Lambert comments, "[M]ost Thai are deeply enmeshed in various forms of "popular" devotion that is tied to Thai Buddhism, such

as astrology, spirit devotion, spirit houses, monk veneration, fortune-telling, amulets, power tattoos, and merit-making schemes such as the wildly popular Dhammakaya movement. All the while, Theravada Buddhism struggles to stay relevant to modern culture” (Lambert 2013).

⁹ To clarify, in this section I aim to describe the basic contours of “scriptural” versions of Christianity and Buddhism, focusing on the beliefs that would most naturally emerge from their respective sacred writings (although I will sometimes point out notable exceptions to these beliefs among folk Christians or Buddhists). These worldview questions are stated in my own terms, although they are the product of compiling and synthesizing the questions used by several Christian books on worldviews (most notably Sire 2009 and Burnett 1990; for a copy of a document containing additional questions about knowledge, ethics, history and time and sub-questions under each of the major questions presented in this paper, please contact the author (pokrifka@gmail.com). I am aware that the selection and form of the questions could be considered biased in the direction of a Christian worldview or set of worldviews, but I believe that the worldviews of humans—together with human societies and cultures—are sufficiently commensurable and share sufficiently overlapping concerns that these questions do not unduly distort the nature of the various worldviews they are designed to understand. Further, I am aware that worldview is not an adequate category to understand the depth and fullness of human culture or religion, although I think worldview should be employed in a way that is much richer than its intellectual connotations might suggest. Understood rightly, worldview can include matters of the heart and of social structure and practice.

¹⁰ Bauer 2014 emphasizes the “opposite attributes” of the two spheres of the dualistic view of reality of the Buddha; “all that is absent in *nibbana* is present in *kamma*, and it makes our lives miserable.”

¹¹ For a clear statement and analysis of the four noble truths and other aspects of classical Buddhism, see Siderits 2011.

¹² There are some forms of Buddhism (most notably the “Pure Land” form of Mahayana Buddhism) that believe that faith or trust in the name of the Buddha can enable one to experience nirvana, but this is a relatively rare form of Buddhism.

¹³ With folk Buddhists also, following Jesus would involve a shift in a number of basic beliefs and practices.

¹⁴ Garrison 2014, 37.

¹⁵ Daniels & Waterman 2013, especially 62–68 (see diagrams on 63 and 65 in which religion overlaps with both culture and theology. The two authors agree that using the term “cultural insiders and theological outsiders” would be accurate to describe many believers in insider movements in the Muslim world. I tend to think this would apply to the Buddhist context also, if terms are defined rightly and “theological” includes “spiritual” and “faith” (as personal trust) as well.

¹⁶ This observation about the ambiguity of the terms “religion” and “religious identity” has some interesting implications. It means, for example, that even if two people have exactly the same theological convictions about what is necessary for a person to believe to be saved, and about what beliefs within Buddhism need to be affirmed and rejected, they could still be on opposite sides of the insider movement debate. It would all depend on how these two people define religion.

¹⁷ Paul De Neui expresses basically the same point like this: “for most Thai Folk Buddhists, the strongest barriers to Christ they experience are not religious but social. The so-called ‘religious tenets’ of their faith are relative” (De Neui 2003, 134). Notice, however, that De Neui is using “religious” here to refer to something related to fundamental worldview beliefs—which I connect, with vertical identity—rather than social identity. I would be more inclined to express his something like, most barriers are social rather than concerned with worldview beliefs.

¹⁸ A leader in the main Protestant church in Laos recently told the author that the majority of converts from Buddhism in his community resulted from power encounters involving deliverance from demons. This points out that other significant barriers keeping Buddhist people are the spiritual barriers of demonic bondages, but I am not addressing these in this paper.

¹⁹ In any case, syncretism can emerge just as readily if we call new believers to adopt a new, Westernized cultural form of Christianity, making them outsiders in their own native culture. The reason of course is that missionaries too can be capable of uncritical syncretism, as when we “baptize” individualism even when it runs against the communal themes of the Scriptures.

²⁰ See Travis 2013 for an explanation of the role of an “alongsider.”

²¹ Ultimately, this distinction and relationship relates to the connection between local theologies and global theology.

Missionaries are generally more in touch with global theology, although they also possess and are shaped by the particular local theology in which they were raised.

²² One promising way forward is to find ways of handling these conflicts that appear within the resources of the biblical canon itself, rather than requiring extensive scholarly knowledge of Western theology or even of Buddhism. By focusing on what the Bible contributes to the discussion, we can expect indigenous believers themselves to participate in the theologizing process—with their own indigenous biblical interpretations. I realize that I am assuming here that the local or indigenous believers in question have a decent Bible translation in a language they can understand, a state of affairs that is sadly often not the case for many of the unreached.

²³ What follows is an attempt to explain one way that this could be possible, despite the significant “clash of worlds” between Christianity and Buddhism. This effort is intended as an initial attempt at bridging from a Western Christian perspective to a Buddhist one.

²⁴ See John Goldingay 1987: 19; see 15–25.

²⁵ I realize that in speaking of “what has become a common way,” I am appealing indirectly to certain Western Christian theological traditions or ways that Western scholars have handled apparent contradictions in the Bible. But at the same time I think that virtually every Bible reader around the globe will notice some of the tensions between parts of the Bible and have their ways of handling them. Accordingly, various kinds of indigenous believers who possess a Bible can thus relate to the discussion and be helped by this tradition.

²⁶ Likewise, some have pointed out the “contradictions” in the Buddha’s teaching, such as between his “no-self” doctrine and his teachings on “rebirth.”

²⁷ Even the rather “liberal” K. Koyama opposes these claims, affirming that there is a “blood relationship” between the Old Testament and the New Testament in which the Old Testament cannot be replaced by the Hindu *Upanishads* or the Buddhist *Tripitaka* (1999, p. xii).

²⁸ For further reflections on this kind of approach within biblical studies and biblical theology, in relation to “problematic” texts about women in the Old Testament, see Pokrifka 2011.

²⁹ Judson 2014, 10–12. This movement is probably not best classified as a pure “insider” movement (“C5”), since it draws

from what we might call Western-style church planting methods and includes some Western leadership, but is certainly highly contextualized or indigenous (perhaps C4).

³⁰ Judson 2014, 11–12.

³¹ This collaborative process of critical and creative theological work will help to produce and cultivate movements that are marked by both biblical faithfulness and cultural fit. It would lead to a collaborative connection between local theologizing and global theologizing—theologizing that connects and draws from communities from various parts of the world. I must leave reflections on the concrete features of such a theological process to another writing project. Originally, this paper included a second portion that offered those kinds of reflections. Contact me at pokrifka@gmail.com to obtain a document with these reflections in it.

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