

The Problem of an Alien Jesus for Asian Christianity

with Special Reference to Chinese Buddhists



Author: Kang San Tan, Head of Mission Studies, Redcliffe College.

“Who do people say I am?... Who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:27, 29)
“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you,
that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread...” (1 Cor. 11:23)

Why is the Problem of an Alien Jesus critical?

On the first week of January 2006, I went to the Tate Museum in London to enjoy an art exhibition featuring how French and British painters influenced each other during the 18th and 19th Centuries. One section of the exhibition showed paintings portraying the decadent period of French and British societies during the 19th Century. One painting showed the blurred and disfigured face of a child abused by an adult male. Another depicted vividly estranged the relationship between a husband and wife. Most of the paintings in this section are filled with distorted human faces or figures, and complicated human relationships.

Jesus came from Asia. Culturally, one may assert that Jesus is more Asian than Western in his outlook and values. But why is Christianity viewed as a Western religion by the majority of the Buddhist world? One reason could be due to the fact that Christianity was brought to Asia predominantly by Western missionaries. Did Western missionaries faithfully deliver the Jewish Jesus to the people in Asia or did they betray Jesus and his message by presenting a Western Christ?

The problem of an alien Jesus has to do with the many portraits of Jesus communicated through cultural accretions, with minimal contextualization, resulting in Jesus being viewed by a majority culture as alien and foreign to the local people. Although the incarnate Christ is able to enter into all cultures and therefore, is at home in all cultures, successive attempts in the history of Christian transmissions, have exhibited tendencies toward monolithic paintings of Christ. The problem of an alien Jesus should confront all thinking Christians who are interested in the effective communication of the Christian gospel to Buddhist people.

Why is an alien Jesus a serious missiological problem? Firstly, if Jesus is presented in Western dress, Christianity will remain categorized as a foreign religion to Chinese people. Christianity will not take root in the hearts, minds and aspirations of subsequent Chinese believers. In the process of gospel transmission, various writers have shown that 19th Century Protestant missions largely ignored local cultures. This critique of cultural additions to Christ is not a new issue, but one made since the spread of Protestant missionary work. For example, Keshub Chunder Sen, an Indian religious reformer observed:

It seems that the Christ that has come to us is an Englishman, with English manners and customs about him...Is not Christ's native land nearer to India than England? Are not Jesus and his apostles and his immediate followers more akin to Indian nationality than Englishmen? Why should we then, travel to a distant country like England, in order to gather truths which are to be found much nearer our homes? Go to the rising sun of the East, not to the setting sun of the West, if you wish to see Christ, in the plenitude of his glory.

Possibly a “betrayal” is too strong a word because most missionaries came to Asia with deep love for Christ and the local people. Asians are grateful to God for the sacrifices of our Western Christians. However, the sad record of history is something we cannot change. We cannot change the past but we can change the meaning of the past when we begin to learn from the past in the way we do missions today.

Learning from the past leads to my second reason as to why a discussion on alien Jesus amidst other religions is long overdue and is of critical missiological importance. The reason being that newer sending countries face the same danger, as past Western missionaries of old, of adding their own cultural images of Jesus. Some of these contributions are valuable and helpful, while others add to an already confusing and complicated situation of alien Jesuses. Lest the readers think that I have unfairly single out my attacks Western mission bodies, newer sending countries such as Chinese Christian and Korean mission worlds face the same dilemma. The Chinese church herself exhibit split personalities in this matter by both rejecting Western cultural accretions on the one hand, and rejecting many good and neutral aspects of Chinese culture on the other. Some well meaning foreigners will find that local Christians themselves can be the biggest stumbling block in any effort to introduce indigenous forms of Christianity.

Therefore, when looking at China as a mission field, Christianity’s image as a “foreign religion” is now perpetuated not only by Western Christians, but also by missionaries from Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong or the Philippines. When these Chinese churches send out missionaries, whether within mainland China (to minorities or Muslims in West China) or beyond their national boundaries, they too face the same dangers of exporting their foreign interpretations of Jesus. History repeats itself when these Asian missionaries impose a Jesus alien to local contexts. Enthusiastic Asian churches are adopting national workers and sending short term workers without an adequate cultural understanding of local beliefs. Leadership of these mission groups tends to be in the hands of pastors of supporting churches rather than local missionaries living in the midst of non-Christian cultures. Because these mega-churches pay the salaries of national workers, newly formed churches are perpetually dependent on foreign funding. With money and power, the identities of new mission stations are inseparably linked with foreign forms of denominations, leadership styles, and church structures which project an alien Jesus to Chinese Buddhists. Sadly, Christian mission from a position of power continues to ignore local cultures. Are new transmitters of the Christian gospel, whether from the East or the West, better equipped in their understanding of local religions? If it is of any indicator, the growths of religious studies Departments are not matched by an equal interest from Christian missionaries to study Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam seriously.

Who do Chinese Buddhists or Indonesian Muslims Say that I am?

The immediate context for my reflection grows out of my background from a South East Asia’s migrant Chinese community. However, many of the issues raised and implications drawn in this paper will hopefully be applicable to other Asian contexts.

In this section, I will explore Chinese perceptions of Jesus and illustrate how traditional Christian mission approaches need to engage with these portraits of Jesus. For a start, Chinese Buddhists universally view Jesus as a moral teacher, someone as great as Buddha, Confucius, and Lao Tze. Traditionally, this has been bad news for Christians who impatiently pointed out that Jesus is Lord and God of the universe. While Jesus as a moral teacher may be a bad place to end, it is not a bad place to start! The moral teachings of Jesus in the Bible can be studied and discussed with Buddhists, just as Christians need to study the moral teachings of Buddha and Confucius. The Sermons on the Mount, Parables and the

teachings of Jesus in the gospels, stories of Jesus' interaction with the poor and marginalized are powerful stories for presenting Jesus as a moral teacher. Superficially, Christians have been doing this but they did it in the spirit of evangelism rather than a genuine acceptance of Jesus as a moral teacher. Secondly, they share the teachings of Jesus from moral perspectives of Western religion and ethics. For example, most parables of the Bible are to be interpreted within their first century Jewish context. However, the parables are often interpreted as moral teaching rather than presented as a tool for the worldview transformation of the Jewish world. Jewish hearers naturally identified themselves as the lost son in exile, and the Samaritans as the elder brother who remained in the land. But at another level, some of them had to grapple with the possibility of identifying themselves as being the elder brother when they did not welcome followers of Jesus as followers of God. The parable of the Lost Son presented in this story-worldview form functions potentially at a deeper level of transformation for the worldviews of Chinese Buddhist rather than presented typically as an evangelistic call for conversion. A Chinese Buddhist who has the opportunity to encounter the real Jesus of the Jews may see himself or herself as the prodigal son who had gone to a far away country. At another level, he or she may identify with the elder brother who refuses to welcome Christians as having some form of revelation from God.

Another common portrait inherent in many Chinese is the perception that Jesus is a semi-deity similar to the Goddess of Mercy, Bodhisattvas, or "Tua Pek Kong" (Great Ancestor). For those Chinese influenced by Buddhist thinking, Bodhisattvas looks after the well being of followers, including blessing them with material prosperity and emotional well being. Meditation, chanting, and daily thoughts of the Buddha are important spiritual disciplines. Waking up early in the morning to pray and meditate, and ending one's day with another session of prayers and meditations show devotion and commitment to the teachings of Buddha. In addition, the follower shows his or her acknowledgement that there are cosmic powers and there are realms beyond the control of ordinary sentient beings. The human's role is to accept their place and do what is required of them in these cycles of existence. Human disasters such as Tsunamis, floods, fires and the transitory nature of life such as death, sickness, and aging reminds the Buddhist that there are many things in life which are beyond our control. Viewed as a semi-deity by Chinese Buddhists, Jesus has the capability to protect sentient beings from harm. He is the one we should turn to if we are sick, or need protection from the evil spirits. Jesus controls certain realms of existences and nature. He is to be respected and sacrifices can be offered to him. Although such Chinese perspectives on Jesus may fall short of our beliefs in his deity, Christians often fail to recognize that Jesus as Cosmic Deity is a powerful image for the Chinese Buddhist. Rationalist rejections of the supernatural and the playing down of Jesus' roles as a healer and controller of nature came about as another classic case of the blurring of the biblical Christ to suit Western enlightenment thinking.

Third, the Chinese are pragmatics and our psychology for responding to God or spirits is on the basis of how a religion or deities help us in our daily lives. Core questions in Chinese Buddhist thinking revolve around these immediate issues: will this deity help us overcome fears? Will following this religion improve our chances of going to a better world? Will our families be protected, and will these acts of devotion bring pleasure or displeasures to our ancestors and extended families? At the risk of oversimplifications, Chinese Buddhist responses can be crudely reduced to whether this religion works, and does it work for me? These observations of the Chinese Buddhist psyche have critical implications for Christian evangelistic approaches. Western philosophies are deeply influenced by the Greco-Roman philosophical separation of being and doing. The result is Christian ethics being taught, while the application is up to the individual. Buddhists are interested in the outworking of doctrines and emphasize doing first, rather than conceptually understanding the doctrines. The credibility of the gospel suffers a serious blow when Christians preach ethics before

practicing those ethical teachings. Therefore, the short hand for “Jesus is Lord” has to do with Christians practicing what they preach and demonstrating higher ethical standards in their workplaces. When Buddhists see such radical and self-giving lifestyles, they will be interested to know about such a religion that works itself out in real life. Upon closer encounters with the Christ of the Bible, they will stumble upon the mystery of the gospel that it is not about self-fulfilment, but about following Jesus on the way of the cross.

In Search of Asian Faces of Jesus: Implications for Mission Training

Speaking of Western theologies, Andrew Walls observed that “Our (Western) existing theologies of church and state were carved out of the experience of Western Christendom, and were never meant to deal with anything as complicated as the networks of political and economic structures that will characterize the twenty first century” (Walls 2002: 113). Walls goes on to argue that African and Asian Christianities have more experience than Western Christianity in dealing with the issues of suffering, ethnic and religious identities, problems of corruption, power struggles, principalities and spirit worship. If Chinese churches are to mature as an agent of transformation in society, then Chinese Christian thinkers need to understand and engage with the real issues of Chinese societies. One positive hope for change must be the release of Jesus Christ from Western captivity and images. Missionaries do this by encouraging local Christians to see Christ related dynamically to local Chinese culture. Those who are educated in the West need to be re-trained to see Christ through Japanese eyes, Chinese eyes, Filipino eyes and Indonesian eyes. Such diverse imageries and interpretations of an Asian Jesus will not only present deep and rich understandings of an indigenizing Jesus but will also serve to counteract the image of Christianity as a Western religion.

How can missionaries, from Asia and the West, preach a faithful and biblical portrait of Jesus that is both true to his Jewish roots and dynamically related to the hearts and minds of Chinese Buddhists? How can we facilitate the acceptance and developments of Asian faces of Jesus? What kind of mission training is needed for Christians seeking to work among Indians, Japanese or Thai peoples? First, new missionaries need to be minimally self-critical of themselves and their own religious traditions. Academic disciplines and good mission training endeavour to develop such critical lenses and attitudes. The growth of fundamentalist conceptions of Jesus permeates major segments of Korean and Chinese Christianities. In addition, the discipline needed for self-critiques is particularly difficult if missionaries work within mono-cultural or mono-tradition groups. For example, if all the mission team consists of predominantly Southern Baptists from Texas, CMS missionaries from Britain or Methodists from Singapore, then these mission groups need to work very hard in discerning whether their forms of Christianity are appropriate in the new mission field. This may not be an easy task because most of us are not always conscious that our cherished religious heritage is culturally conditioned. Sometimes we forget our own prejudices and are not aware of our ignorance of those positive elements in other cultures.

If the first task dealt with the missionary’s own cultural blindness, the second task has to do with non-Christian’s misunderstandings of the portraits of Jesus. Christian training centres, whether in local churches or training institutions, need to study non-Christian religions on their own terms. Today, “Who do people say that I am?” is still a valid starting question for new missionaries. Whenever Christian workers enter into new Buddhist cultures, they are not preaching Jesus into empty minds. Instead, they will encounter existing portraits of Jesus commonly held by local peoples. Some of these portraits are cultural misunderstandings (Jesus is a Westerner), while others are derived from non-Christian teachings or scriptures (Jesus as a mere prophet in the Quran). If the first task had to deal with cultural misunderstandings from the transmitter’s culture, the second task relates to

cultural misunderstandings associated with the recipient's culture. The Jesus Christ of the Bible must take over these non-Christian beliefs and misunderstandings. Therefore, missionaries need to learn how to address these socio-religious misunderstandings of who Jesus is.

To do this task of cultural understanding, the missionary needs to develop an Emic (insider) Perspective among Chinese Buddhists. An "Emic" approach represents an attempt by foreigners to understand local Chinese perspective of realities in order to accurately describe situations and behaviours. Such an approach is contrasted with logical, linear, simple perspectives, which may be completely off-target! An insider's method to presenting a Jesus for the Chinese takes a phenomenological approach. Although supported outwardly, such an approach is still resisted in many quarters, particularly among conservative Evangelicals, who make no distinction between the Christ of the Bible and the Christ of Western culture. As an example, I have observed foreign missionaries who outwardly championed the need for contextualization of the gospel among Asians, but whose attitudes, relationships and lifestyles demonstrate a message that Jesus can only be accepted as Lord if one becomes a Westerner.

Why is it difficult for foreigners to develop an emic perspective even if one desires to? I would offer two basic reasons. First, I believe an emic perspective compels the acceptance of multiple perspective of reality. This ability to accept different interpretations of reality requires oneself to reject ethnocentric biases. Naturally, we are nurtured in our traditions, in our ways of seeing things and sometimes in our prejudices. Christians, like everyone else, find it difficult to accept that there are differing perspectives of God, of religious beliefs, and of realities. Second, most missionaries identify with local peoples externally through outward behaviours but very few are able to enter into deep and meaningful bonding relationships with locals. Those who have bonded with nationals have a genuine a sense of being at home with nationals, they are accepted by locals, and possess the ability to understand and empathize with local ways of thinking.

The third task in the process of discovering an Asian Jesus is finding cultural bridges that connect the relevance of Jesus Christ to existing indigenous beliefs. For example, Gani Winoyo developed a Javanese Face of Jesus based on the popular eschatological messianic Javanese figure of Ratu Adil (1999: 65-79). Winoyo researched and discovered deep seated beliefs within Javanese worldviews of "Ratu Adil," who will be the deliverer, and "harmonizer" of society. He then appropriated the Jesus of the Bible as someone who is able to bring deliverance, hope and reconciliation in Javanese society. To do this job well, missionaries must view their roles as changing from a "Pearl Seller to Treasure Gatherer." Vincent Donovan, in his work among the Masai people in Tanzania argued that "The task of the missionary is to present the gospel, the task of the people is to express the gospel and its meaning in their own language and thought forms....The field of culture is theirs and ours is the gospel." (Donovan, 1995) Language and cultural learning, spending time in bonding relationships with nationals, and the study of local philosophies and belief systems are no longer optional extras but preliminary prerequisites for serious professionals in this complex trade of transmitting the gospel accurately.

Last but not least, these Asian perspectives of Jesus need to be subjected to the test of the scriptures, and found not in contradiction with historical images of Jesus accepted in other Christian communities. The Asian Jesus cannot be inculturated to Asian soil to the extent that he is unrecognizable from the Jesus found in the Bible or apostolic Christology. Therefore, efforts to present Christ as an incarnation of Buddha will cause more confusion than clarity for Buddhists. Among first generation Christians, former converts of Buddhism and other religions tend to see everything in their former religion and cultures in a negative light. We left our former religions in order to follow Christ.

Enoch Wan, in his article, "Jesus Christ for the Chinese: a Contextual Reflection" represented an Evangelical approach where he contrasted the "Jesus Christ from the West" with "Jesus Christ for the Chinese". Wan's goal was not to mix Jesus in an Eastern cultural pot but to allow Jesus to flourish and grow in a Chinese Buddhist context. Wan explains,

"Jesus Christ from the West" is Western Christianity transported to China by military force, with foreign concepts, cultural elements, etc.; whereas "Jesus Christ for the Chinese" is contextual Christianity being transplanted in the cultural soil of China and the spiritual soul of the Chinese. The former is historical reality whereas the latter being an ideal with strong desirability.

A Christological Question: Who do you say I am?

Our search for an Asian face of Jesus is ultimately an issue of the Lordship of Christ. The issue is not just what non-Christians think of Jesus ("who do people say I am?") but who is Jesus to Asian Christians ("who do you say I am?"). This Christological question penetrates into the depth of Christian worship and discipleship where one's loyalty to Christ is not confined to safe religious boundaries. The answer that Jesus is Lord cannot be verbalized merely by individuals in the privacy of their bedrooms but are to be discussed in public spaces. Contextually, our answers to the question of who Jesus is cannot be completely disconnected from questions about Jesus commonly held by our Muslim and Buddhist neighbours. Likewise for Asians, Christian portraits of Jesus should emerge from the sufferings and heart struggles of Asia rather than a Christology developed in 16th Century Reformation Christianity. Radical discipleships must result in Christ penetrating every aspect of socio-economic and political world of Asia. The Apostle Paul has these multiple dimensions of Christ's Lordship when he proclaimed that "Jesus Christ is the first born of all creation; for in Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities - all things were created through Him and for Him" (Col. 1:15-16).

In the introduction, I referred to French and British paintings during 19th century to illustrate the tragedy of blurred and distorted images of reality. But the dialogical influences between these French and British artists offer a second lesson for our discussion. That is no one person or group can offer an accurate or full portrait of reality. In particular, the task toward a true portrait of Jesus must be undertaken by both foreigners offering etic perspectives as well as by locals offering emic perspectives. We need practitioners as well as missiologists; Buddhist scholars as well as Bible scholars; Western and Eastern perspectives, in this joint-enterprise of portraying a Jesus who is both true to scriptural revelation, in continuity with Christian theology and tradition, and yet dynamically related to local images and cultural contexts. The process of presenting an authentic image of Jesus can only be undertaken in the context of intercultural engagements with local cultures as well as with each other within various Christian traditions. Each group is valued for its distinctive contributions because no one group can fully represent the Christ of Scripture, the Christ in the history of gospel transmission, and the Christ who is related to diverse nations and cultures.

Bibliography

- Donovan, Vincent. 1995. Christianity Rediscovered. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Walls, Andrew F. 2002. The Cross Cultural Process in Christian History. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Wan, Enoch. "Jesus Christ for the Chinese: A Contextual Reflection," URL: http://missiology.org/missionchina/Jesus_Christ_for_the_Chinese_Nov_20001.pdf [20 Jan, 2007]
- Winoyo, Gani. 1999. "Ratu Adil: a Javanese Face of Jesus." *Journal of Asian Mission* 1/1, pp. 65-79.

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/mission) website (www.redcliffe.org/mission). You may prefer to email your response to mission@redcliffe.org, in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/mission) discussion board.