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**RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES
OF BUDDHIST STUDENTS
AT ADVENTIST COLLEGES IN THAILAND:
IMPLICATION FOR INTEGRATING FAITH WITH
LEARNING**

by

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Religious Beliefs and Practices of Buddhist Students at Adventist Colleges in Thailand: Implication for Integrating Faith and Learning

Background

Thailand is deeply rooted in its culture and religious heritage. It is also an important participant in the Asian economic boom. Although it has faced economic challenges that have slowed the pace of development, the country has entered into the modern world of business, trade and industry and is expected to continue to be an important player in the growth of Asia. A challenge for the country is the demand, on the one hand, of the modern business and technological world, and the maintenance of its cultural and religious heritage, on the other. In response to this apparent conflict in goals, the Thailand Ministry of Education mandated that all accredited educational institutions develop and maintain the country's cultural and religious heritage. The questions that beg to be answered are: What does it mean to develop and maintain the Thai cultural and religious heritage? What is the impact of education on this heritage?

In the context of the mandate from the Thai Ministry of Education, we wanted to investigate how Christian institutions were developing and maintaining the country's cultural and religious heritage or what impact such institutions were making on the maintenance of this heritage during the tenure of the university students. No such studies had been undertaken. Thus, beginning in 2001, we implemented the longitudinal study, "An exploration of changes in cultural, moral and religious attitudes consequent upon a Four-year program of studies at selected Christian institutions in Thailand." This paper reports on a subset of this larger study. In this essay, we report on the changes in religious attitude, beliefs and practices of Buddhist

students in Adventist colleges in Thailand. Specifically, I examined the following questions:

- (a) To what extent did Buddhist students change in their religious attitudes, beliefs and practices during their tenure at Adventist colleges in Thailand?
- (b) What influence factors may be related to this change in attitude, beliefs and practices?

Related Literature

Mandate of the Ministry of Education

According to Matthews (2006), the Thailand Ministry of Education mandated that cultural, moral and religious values are to be cultivated through education. Traditional culture must be preserved and passed on because citizens cannot be truly Thai if they do not understand their own Thai culture. The preservation of Thai culture can be done through the strengthening of national identity, cultural identity, national security, national character and cultural communication.

Thai ethics includes as a foundational principle the concept that morality is an indispensable element in developing a mind of high quality, and therefore, the development of ethical values is an integral part of any educational program. Thus, moral values can be strengthened through ethical understanding, development of character traits consistent with Thai moral and cultural values, modest life style and healthful living, and strong family relationships.

Thai religious culture is an indispensable feature of society because, without a religious basis, it is not possible to achieve knowledge or a sound ethical system. The pathway to wisdom and morality is through faith. Accordingly, in the Thai context, religion is a societal pillar manifested through Buddhism in all its teachings and

traditions. Faith is the pathway to intellectual development and manifested through the practice of the 'four noble truths' (defining suffering, diagnosing the cause of suffering, establishing the goal of ending suffering and developing practices leading to the cessation of suffering) and the practice of the three admonitions (do no evil, but do good, and purify the mind). Religious values should also be cultivated through the maintenance of a material-spiritual balance. Furthermore, religious values could be enhanced through a spirit of 'brotherhood' and interdependence among all variety of religious traditions.

Understanding Buddhism and Thai culture

There are numerous articles on comparative religion, and entries in encyclopedias, that provide information on Buddhist philosophy and the religious practices which grow out of this philosophy. Of particular interest are the works of the Editorial Board: International Buddhist Conference (1990), Payutto (1995) and Punyasinh (nd, 3rd Edition) because they facilitated a deeper understanding of the relationship between Buddhist philosophy on the one hand, and its application as both a religion and a symbol of national identity in Thailand on the other.

There are many books and articles that describe Thai culture. These are published in a spectrum from superficial to serious, and take a number of different approaches. Those published for tourists tend to be superficial, providing only enough information for the tourists to get by. Among the most helpful sources are those written for missionaries. These are serious attempts at explaining the very complex idiosyncrasies of Thai culture. An excellent source is a scholarly paper by Santasombat (1992) in which the author explores the interplay of culture and national identity, an important element in the broader research part of this study.

In a more recent paper, Phetchareun (2007) describes Buddhists as relational people, whose whole society is based primarily on relationship, permeating every aspect of life, including work, education, leisure and politics. Relationships define respect and honor, success and survival.

Developing Familiarity with Research on Thai Attitudes

Komin (1990) provides detailed statistical analysis and significant commentary on the psychology of the Thai people, and their attitudes to life and culture in Thailand. This research gives the “is” of what it means to be Thai. In *Principles and models of early childhood development in Thai cultural ways*, Khemmani (1993) reviews the objectives of elementary education and the concept of the ideal Thai citizen which are based on Royal Decrees, highly respected in Thailand.

Transmission and Maintenance of Cultural Heritage

Fadiman (1998) introduces the reader to the inevitable conflict between Western and Southeast Asian culture. The tenacity of cultural identity is explored by Thomas Sowell (1996) in his book *Migrations and cultures: A world view*. This historical and contemporary examination of the transmission and maintenance of culture is informative, but may ultimately be misleading in light of the global teen culture which appears to be developing. The youth, under such strong influence from Western youth culture, may not be as resilient as the people groups about which Sowell has written. In this book *Non-Western educational traditions: alternative approaches to educational thought and practice*, Reagan (2000) provides insights into approaches to maintaining culture in various educational settings round the world, including Buddhist cultures. In his conclusions, Reagan addresses “Common Themes in Non-Western Educational Traditions,” in which he makes suggestions for

a more positive evaluation of traditional, non-Western forms of education, and argues for the inclusion of these traditional approaches in formal educational settings in order to maintain cultures. This is exactly what the Office of the National Education Commission of Thailand is calling for in their policy recommendations relating to “Indigenous Knowledge.” See <http://www.edthai.com/reform/mar20a.htm>. With this understanding, a responsible model for maintaining cultural values may be developed and implemented. A recent and helpful approach to cross-cultural teaching which assumes a Christian perspective is Lingenfelter, and Sherwood G. Lingenfelter (2003), *Teaching cross-culturally : An incarnation model for learning and teaching*.

The Investigation

The Broader Study

Four Christian colleges and universities in Thailand participated in the broader study. Participants from these 4 institutions were 279 students from various religious affiliations (Christian, Buddhists, Muslims, and others) and in various disciplines (science, business, nursing, and others). Using a panel study over a 4-year period, these students were ‘followed’ with a survey questionnaire. Only 129 students remained at the end of the 4th year. Focus groups and personal interviews were conducted at the end of the 4th year.

The questionnaire was developed using guidelines from the mandate of the Thai Ministry of Education (see Matthews, 2006)) and basic Christian values and beliefs (see items in Tables 1-8). The questionnaire was reviewed by Christian scholars familiar with Thai culture and then pilot tested on a small sample of Thai students. The Questionnaire was administered around December/January each year over a 4-year period.

This study

For this paper, we delimited the sample to only Buddhist students attending Adventist colleges. There were 75 of these students during the 1st year. They were predominantly female (93.3%), single (98.7%), under 22 years old (96%) and primarily in the nursing program (78.7%). For various reasons, there were only 50 students left at the end of the 4th year. Some may have dropped out, and others may not have been present at the time of the data collection. This is to be expected in longitudinal study.

The Result

Changes in attitudes, beliefs and practices (Survey)d

Summary statistics about changes in attitudes, beliefs and practices among the Buddhist students are reported in Tables 1-8 in Appendix A.

- A.
1. Some movement towards a more creationist world view, but remained largely naturalist and Buddhist world views; a 'spike' back to Buddhism world view at the end of the 4th year. (Table 1).
 2. It is interesting to note that a large percentage of the Buddhist students (42.7% during 1st year and up to 52% during 4th year) endorsed the concept that the Bible is the revelation of God and that it contains instructions that human beings should know and live by. (Table 2).
 3. At 1st year, only 28% of the Buddhist students agreed that 'Jesus is fully God and fully man; the only hope and Savior'. At the end of the 4th year, 50.0% of the students fully endorsed this concept. (Table 3).
 4. The understanding about of the doctrine of sin was largely unchanged at around 63%-64% reporting only having 'some knowledge' of it, although this had dropped to a low of 44% during 3rd year but did go

up again to 64% during the 4th year. There was some movement from 3% (1st year) to 8% (4th year) of the students who indicated that they know and believe the doctrine of sin. (Table 4).

5. Although small, it is encouraging to note that the percentage of Buddhist students who indicated knowing and believing the Christian doctrine of salvation increased from 2.7% during the 1st year to 10.0% during 4th year. (Table 5).
6. The level of understanding of the Christian doctrine of eternal life remained at 'some knowledge' for about 50% to 50% of the Buddhist students. There was, however, a small increase from 7% (1st year) to 10% (4th year) of students who reported knowing and believing this doctrine of eternal life. (Table 6).
7. Table 7 lists 14 Christian beliefs and practices and reports the percentages of Buddhist students who indicated their level of understanding as 'well or very well'. Movements are generally from the 1st year and somewhat stabilized during the 2nd through 4th year. For example, only about 33% of the Buddhist students understood 'well/very well' that Jesus is the only Savior during their 1st year at the Adventist College. The percentage of students who understood this concept increased to 54% by 2nd year and to above 60% by the 3rd and 4th year. Similar trends are indicated for 'observing Sabbath as the day of rest' and 'daily Bible/devotional readings'. There were little changes with respect to 'health and physical life style' and 'daily prayer'.

8. Buddhist students were asked to what extent they practice 14 Christian beliefs and practices. Table 8 reports the percentages of students who reported that they practice these beliefs and activities. Even during their 1st year, a fairly large percentage of the Buddhist students reported that they were already practicing these beliefs and practices. Especially encouraging were the 72% who were already observing the Sabbath as a day of rest, the 64% who believed the Bible is true and that it is the best guide for daily living, and the 67% who believed that tithes and offerings are to be given to support the church. The percentages increased slightly by the 2nd year but in some cases (e.g. Belonging to a Christian church) decreased by the 4th year.

B. At the end of the 4th year, personal interviews and focus groups were conducted. The themes that emerged from the qualitative data may be categorized as (a) changes in attitudes, and (b) changes in behavior.

1. Changes in Attitude. A dominant theme that emerged is one of ambivalence toward Christianity. One student stated 'I feel I am a Christian'. Another echoed, 'I believe in Christianity, but I don't know enough to commit to it'. Others indicated that although they believe in Christianity, they didn't think it is their religion or that they are confused, although they 'feel' in their heart that they are Christian. This ambivalence can be partially explained by strong parental influence. Many of those interviewed indicated that they didn't want to upset their parents or that their family told them they cannot change and must keep the Buddhist faith.

2. Changes in behavior. A number of those we interviewed indicated that they like going to church because they enjoy being at church and

Christian services. In fact, a number reported that, although they are still Buddhists, they attend church more often than they do attend Buddhist temples. One student stated 'I am now neither Buddhist nor Christian; I just do good and I know I will be blessed'. Others indicated that they are now better Buddhists because they have attended a Christian church. Being in an Adventist college has also changed their personal devotion. "Now I pray more often to God than to Buddha." "I pray to Buddha at home, but to God in College." Another student reported that the study of Christianity has 'made me study Buddhism more deeply.' Others indicated that they are 'more peaceful now', that they know about forgiveness, a concept apparently not in Buddhism. Still others reported that they have more positive attitudes about Christian teaching after having been in an Adventist College.

Influence Factors

We asked students what aspects of their experiences at the Adventist Colleges influenced their beliefs, behavior and attitudes about Christianity during focus groups and personal interviews. They can generally be categorized into two broad themes: (a) institutionally organized programs, and (b) people in the colleges (friends, faculty/staff, and the pastors). Programs that had positive impacts were Bible classes that were thought provoking; Sabbath school classes that were relevant; and sermons that were based on Bible stories, had positive message, and non-condemning. One student commented, "At church, I find love waiting for me; I don't find this in the Buddhist temple." Another said, 'Church reminds us to do good.' Other students commented that, although they didn't necessarily like to wake up early, morning worships had positively impacted their views about Christianity.

Two groups of people in the colleges had significant influence on the Buddhist students. These were friends and faculty/staff. Two activities with friends were dominant: being invited to religious services and singing Christian music. The Buddhist students remembered fondly teachers who talked to them about Christianity and who prayed with them. One student commented ‘they treat us like human beings’. Another said, ‘they act like our parents’. About the pastor, they said they appreciated the fact that he is caring and that they could go to him to talk about personal problems, something they apparently are unable to do with the monk in the Watt. A number of the students reported of instances where their prayers were answered and these experiences had definitely positively impacted their views about Christianity. Overall, they indicated that the campus ethos of the Adventist colleges were caring and friendly.

Discussion and Implication

In this study, we wanted to examine if there were changes in beliefs, practices and attitudes about Christianity among a group of Buddhist students who were attending Seventh-day Adventist colleges in Thailand. And, if there were changes, what factors the students attributed to for these changes. We found that some movement towards a more creationist world view, but these students had largely remained naturalist and Buddhist. There were also a greater understanding of basic Christian beliefs and practices. Changes tended to take place during the second year but that these changes either level off or somewhat declined during the 3rd and 4th year. Loyalty to Buddhism and respect for parental wishes appear to be contributing factors in the ambivalent attitudes of the students toward Christianity. And campus ethos, interaction with friends, teachers and pastor appear to be important factors that

influence changes in religious attitude, beliefs and practices. In general, we think the 4-year experiences at Adventist colleges in Thailand had positive impact on the Buddhist students.

Most of the changes in religious attitude, beliefs and practices appear to level off by the 2nd year. This may be due to a 'novelty' effect. That is, during the first year, the students were introduced to new concepts about Christianity and given the circumstances (friendly and caring campus, influence of friends and teachers), they would experience positive impact. By the second year, these religious experiences may have become much more 'routine' and therefore, changes may be harder to come by. It is also possible that the colleges, unintentionally, goes on a 'maintenance' mode. That is, once students are 'indoctrinated' by the 2nd year, religiously-related programs (church, classes, etc) tend to only maintain those initial changes. The leveling off may also reflect the resiliency of Buddhist students in their own beliefs and that changes are only at the knowledge level, and may not be sufficient to significantly change behavior. Most of these students were nursing students who transfer to Bangkok during their 3rd and 4th year in order to do their clinical and practicum. There may be fewer opportunities to be involved in religious activities in the Bangkok campus. Holmes (1987) suggests that integrating faith into learning can be operationally defined along Indoctrination –Interaction – Integration continuum. Perhaps the institutions may want to deliberately align its curriculum and co-curricular activities so their influence goes beyond indoctrination.

Interaction between Buddhist students and teachers and friends appear to be important influence factors. Blumer (1969) suggests that interaction have significant effects under the following conditions (a) Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; (b) Meanings derive out of social, and

perhaps religious, interaction; and (c) Meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things that are encountered. (p. 2). Holmes (1987) echoes this idea that interaction is an important concept toward integrating faith in learning. Matthews and Gabriel (2001) argues for an interactionist model for integrating faith with learning. Phetchareum (2007) clearly attributes his success of sharing Jesus with Buddhist students to a relational-interaction approach. He states, 'almost all Buddhist (students in Mission College) learned to know Jesus through people who were in a close relationship with them' (p. 11).

Another important influence factor is campus ethos. They describe the campus as friendly and caring. Sire (1990) suggests that human relationship with God has been in the context of a community (e.g. Lev 26:12 'I will walk among you and be your God; and you will be my people) and by implication suggests that the college as community be conducive for integration faith and learning. Adventist colleges in Thailand appear to have a culture conducive for introducing and integrating faith into learning. Such an ethos must be maintained.

So what can the Adventist colleges in Thailand do to enhance the integration of faith into its learning environment? Harris (2004) suggests that there at least four approaches to integrating faith to learning: the two-realm approach, the false distinction approach, the compatibilist approach, and the transformational approach. The two-realms approach argues that 'disciplinary knowledge and Christian faith exist in separate realms that are essentially mutually exclusive' (p. 223). In the false distinction approach, 'all knowledge is one' and therefore integration is unnecessary. For followers of the compatibilist approach, the emphasis is that there are common points of agreements between Christian worldviews and academic disciplines.

Transformationalist believe, like those compatibilists, that there are common points between Christian worldviews and academic discipline, but in too many instances, academic disciplines have 'truncated' their Christian insights. Whatever approach or approaches the colleges choose to use, Harris (2004) cautions us to remember that 'integration is about the building of one's worldview, not simply the learning about something in a Christian way. Therefore, the Christian worldview does more than make faith 'relevant' to learning." (p.227).

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Appendix A Statistical Analysis Tables

Table 1. Attitude to the origins of the earth and life on earth (% Endorsing)

Response Option	Year 1 (N=75)	Year 2 (N=66)	Year 3 (N=67)	Year 4 (N=50)
A (Naturalist)	58.7	45.3	37.7	34.7
B (Buddhism)	26.7	25.0	15.9	36.7
C (Theistic Evolution)	12.0	18.8	22.7	18.4
D (Creationist)	0.0	10.9	20.0	10.2

- Option A - The universe is a product of the natural advance of science and the best explanation for life is natural evolution. No gods or spiritual powers were involved*
- B - The earth and all forms of life are in relationship to the spiritual force of the universe. The life of any individual thing is a part of the universal spirit, with which it is one.*
- C - The earth and all life forms were created by a God who is separate and distinct from his creation. This God has a personal identity. The creative act took millions of years.*
- D - The earth and all life forms were created by a God who is separate and distinct from hiscreation. This God has a personal identity. Creation was an act of a moment.*

Table 2. Understanding of the Christian Bible (% Endorsing)

Response Option	Year 1 (N=75)	Year 2 (N=66)	Year 3 (N=67)	Year 4 (N=50)
A (Like other holy books)	1.3	4.5	6.0	6.0
B (Inspired, but does not apply today)	9.3	10.6	10.4	10.0
C (Not necessary to follow it)	44.0	37.9	26.9	32.0
D (Guide to know and live by)	42.7	47.0	44.2	52.0

- Option A - Bible contains no more truth or wisdom than the Holy books of other religions.*
- B - Bible is inspired by God, but its messages apply to the time and the people for whom they were originally written.*
- C - Bible may inspire some people, but it is not necessary that everyone should follow its instruction in order to be enlightened.*
- D - Bible is the revelation of God; contains instruction that human beings should know and live by*

Table 3. Understanding of who Jesus Christ is (% Endorsing)

Response Option	Year 1 (N=75)	Year 2 (N=66)	Year 3 (N=67)	Year 4 (N=50)
A (Great religious leader)	5.3	6.1	4.5	2.0
B (Human being, but divine)	6.7	4.5	7.6	6.0
C (Good and righteous man)	56.0	47.0	39.4	42.0
D (Hope and savior of humans)	28.0	42.0	48.5	50.0

- Option A - *Jesus was a great religious teacher, but no more.*
 B - *Jesus was just a human being, but divine because worked through him*
 C - *Jesus was a good and righteous man whose examples are good for us to follow*
 D - *Jesus was fully God and fully man; the only hope and saviour of humankind.*

Table 4. Understanding of the Christian doctrine of Sin (% Endorsing)

Response Option	Year 1 (N=75)	Year 2 (N=66)	Year 3 (N=67)	Year 4 (N=50)
A (Know nothing)	6.7	7.6	4.5	0.0
B (Have heard about it)	9.3	12.1	16.7	12.0
C (Some knowledge)	62.7	62.1	43.9	64.0
D (Know it well)	16.0	10.6	18.2	16.0
E (Know it well; believe it)	2.7	7.6	6.7	8.0

- Option A - *Know nothing about the Christian doctrine of sin.*
 B - *Have heard about this doctrine; but doesn't know what it is*
 C - *Have some knowledge about this doctrine*
 D - *Know the doctrine well enough to be able to explain it to someone else.*
 E - *Know the doctrine well enough to be able to explain to someone; I believe it*

Table 5. Understanding of the Christian doctrine of Salvation (% Endorsing)

Response Option	Year 1 (N=75)	Year 2 (N=66)	Year 3 (N=67)	Year 4 (N=50)
A (Know nothing about it)	8.0	3.0	4.5	4.0
B (Have heard about it)	8.0	12.1	13.6	18.0
C (Have some knowledge)	66.7	66.7	56.1	54.0
D (Know it well enough)	12.0	12.6	16.7	14.0
E (Know it well; believe it)	2.7	4.5	9.1	10.0

- Option A - *Know nothing about the Christian doctrine of salvation*
 B - *Have heard about this doctrine; but doesn't know what it is*
 C - *Have some knowledge about this doctrine*
 D - *Know the doctrine well enough to be able to explain it to someone else.*
 E - *Know the doctrine well enough to be able to explain to someone; I believe it*

Table 6. Understanding of the Christian doctrine of Eternal Life (% Endorsing)

Response Option	Year 1 (N=75)	Year 2 (N=66)	Year 3 (N=67)	Year 4 (N=50)
A (Know nothing about it)	8.0	9.1	4.5	6.0
B (Have heard about it)	22.7	10.6	16.7	4.0
C (Have some knowledge)	57.3	62.1	51.5	60.0
D (Know it well enough)	6.7	13.6	18.2	20.0
E (Know it well; believe it)	6.7	4.5	9.1	10.0

- Option A - Know nothing about the Christian doctrine of Eternal Life.
 B - Have heard about this doctrine; but doesn't know what it is
 C - Have some knowledge about this doctrine
 D - Know the doctrine well enough to be able to explain it to someone else.
 E - Know the doctrine well enough to be able to explain to someone; I believe it

Table 7. Understanding of Christian Beliefs (% endorsing 'well/Very well)

Response Option	Year 1 (N=75)	Year 2 (N=66)	Year 3 (N=67)	Year 4 (N=50)
1. God is creator; has personality	38.6	63.1	71.7	70.0
2. Jesus is only savior	33.3	53.8	65.6	62.0
3. Bible is true; best guide for living	50.7	70.8	77.3	76.0
4. Christian sexual morality	60.0	73.8	85.0	76.0
5. Belonging to a Christian church	30.7	50.0	50.8	51.0
6. Observe Sabbath as a day of rest	33.3	76.9	70.2	69.4
7. Tithes/offerings in support of church	44.0	59.3	64.2	67.3
8. Health physical life style	80.0	75.4	79.1	80.0
9. Daily Bible/Devotional readings	37.0	59.3	56.1	50.0
10. Daily prayer	62.7	69.2	68.1	64.0
11. Participation in church programs	56.0	64.6	64.6	56.0
12. Living by Christian moral values	57.3	67.7	67.7	62.0
13. Service to others	57.3	72.3	68.7	64.0
14. Telling others about Christian faith	50.6	48.4	66.7	56.0

Table 8. Percent Practicing Christian Beliefs

Response Option	Year 1 (N=75)	Year 2 (N=66)	Year 3 (N=67)	Year 4 (N=50)
1. God is creator; has personality	54.7	75.0	77.4	79.5
2. Jesus is only savior	53.3	68.8	75.8	72.7
3. Bible is true; best guide for living	64.0	87.5	80.6	93.0
4. Christina sexual morality	74.7	81.0	83.9	86.4
5. Belonging to a Christian church	50.7	56.9	66.1	56.8
6. Observe Sabbath as a day of rest	72.0	90.8	79.0	84.1
7. Tithes/offerings in support of church	66.7	83.1	75.8	86.4
8. Health physical life style	81.3	87.5	83.9	100.0
9. Daily Bible/Devotional readings	60.0	73.8	69.4	59.1
10. Daily prayer	76.0	86.2	75.8	86.4
11. Participation in church programs	73.3	92.2	83.9	84.1
12. Living by Christian moral values	72.0	83.1	79.0	79.5
13. Service to others	77.3	89.2	88.2	81.8
14. Telling others about Christian faith	69.3	76.9	83.3	84.1