

Doing Theology Among Cambodian Refugees

Sheri Kafton

Doing theology among peoples of different cultures is not limited to "overseas" locations. In this article Sheri Kafton, a U.S. resident, illustrates how such theology can be done among Cambodian refugees in the United States. From her own firsthand experience she delineates three areas of felt needs which must be addressed: what it is like to be a refugee, a Buddhist, and in bondage to the fear inherent to animistic beliefs. Kafton then suggests communication techniques—including the use of traditional arts—which may help to implement theology among this people group.



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He sits motionless, expressionless, a barefoot peasant in black rags. But as the camera zooms in, and as his face fills the screen, the movie audience looks beyond the passive expression and hears the anguish that filled the silent years of 1975-79 in Cambodia:

They tell us that God is dead, and now the party they call Angka¹ will provide everything for us. He says Angka has identified and proclaims the existence of a bad new disease, a memory sickness that's known as thinking about life in pre-revolutionary Cambodia.... We must be like the ox and have no thought—except for the party. No love—except for Angka. People starve, but we must not grow food. We must honor the comrade children whose minds are not corrupted by the past. I'm full of fear, Sidney. I must show no understanding. I must have no past. This is the Year Zero, and nothing has gone before. The wind whispers of fear and hate. The war has killed love, Sidney, and those who confess to the Angka vanish, and no one dare ask where they go. Here only the silent survive (Dith Pran, "The Killing Fields").

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Dith Pran was one of the silent who survived. Two to three million other Cambodians were not; they died as victims of the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot. For most of those 400,000 who managed to escape to refugee camps along the Thai border, "the happy ending" in 1979 portrayed in the movie "The Killing Fields" was a rare fantasy. For most, the fear and the suffering have continued in different forms—both in the camps that are harassed by Vietnamese raids and Thai hostility² and in the difficulties of relocation in third countries. Surprisingly, many Cambodian refugees have said that the *greatest* challenge and suffering they faced was not in the terrors of the holocaust, but instead in their adjustment to life in America, where they confronted hostility, prejudice, depression, unemployment, and the loss of their culture and values.

It is now a critical time of transition for Cambodians in the U.S. It is a time of receptivity to the compassion of Christians and to the message they present. Fortunately, many Christians *have* responded to the need; articles occasionally appear in Christian journals stressing the importance of ministering to "the mission field on our doorstep," highlighting sponsorship, orientation to American life, and teaching English as successful evangelistic strategies.

But is that enough? Is there anything *else* we can do to communicate the hope of Christ to the Cambodian refugees? Can their suffering provide a theological framework for presenting the gospel? Are there culturally relevant *forms* for presenting biblical truth that avoid the "foreign" stigma hindering past attempts to communicate the message of Christ? Are there elements of Cambodian culture that can be "transformed" into a Christian context rather than completely erased?

This essay is an attempt to explore some of these issues, an attempt that begins with an understanding of Cambodia's cultural and religious background and then moves to the felt needs of refugees as a basis for presenting a biblical theology.

Cambodian Buddhism

The dominant religion of Cambodia—and of the Cambodian refugees—is Theravada Buddhism (also known as Hinayana Buddhism or Buddhism of the Little Raft), the same form of Buddhism practiced in Thailand and Laos. Once the state religion (prior to the Khmer Rouge), Buddhism was outlawed in 1976,³ temples destroyed, and monks killed. Yet over 90% of the Cambodian refugees entering the U.S. still consider Buddhism their "religion" or worldview. Often stressed is the concept that Buddhism is not merely a religion, "not a revealed dogma, but rather a way, a line of conduct, a psychological attitude that gives direction to one's life" (Garry 1980:49). Cambodians often view Buddhism as "a badge of national identity" (Bunnag 1984:159), and converts to Christianity are often seen as those who have turned their backs on their own culture.

The sacred writings of Theravada are written in the Pali language and are called Tripitaka, "The Three Collections." The first focuses on monastic discipline, the second deals with general religious questions, and the third with morality and philosophy.

The doctrinal formula focuses on karma (a cause-effect philosophy—"that which a man is, is the fruit of what he has been"), and the fundamentals of Buddhist doctrine are contained in the Four Noble Truths: (1) life is full of suffering (*dukka*); (2) suffering is caused by desire (*tanha*); (3) suffering can be avoided by the crushing of desire; and (4) desire can be crushed by strict adherence to a prescribed moral path.

Cambodian Animism

Although Theravada Buddhism officially denies the existence of other-worldly beings such as spirits, gods, and devils, animism is an integral part of the belief system of the average Cambodian.

When we inquired about the Forest-Spirit we also asked questions on the relations of the villagers...to Buddhism.... We asked the villagers whether the

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priest does not forbid them to worship the spirit. They answered that the Buddhist religion helps a man to get merits. It teaches us to behave well and to hold the five commandments: do not kill, drink whiskey, lie, steal, and commit adultery. Hearing the teaching of the Buddha and giving food to the teacher brings personal merit. So we might pass away to a better life.

But in this life there is only the spirit who can help the poor man. How could Buddhism help to fight rats eating the rice on the stem? How can Buddhism drive wild pigs away when they come to devastate the fields? The matters of the Spirit are the business of the spirit and the matters of the temple are the business of the temple. One does not contradict nor oppose the other (Filbeck 1985:115).

This co-existence in Cambodia of two religions (or two varieties of the same religion), "each one fulfilling different purposes and meeting different needs" (Filbeck 1985:115), continues in the refugee community in the U.S. Fortune-telling, amulets, and spirit appeasement are common. So is the compartmentalization of religion. Consequently, even Cambodians who turn from Buddhism to Christianity are likely to continue to turn to animism to fulfill needs that they perceive Christianity cannot fulfill.

Responding to Refugees' Felt Needs

The place to develop a strategy for "doing theology" among refugees is not in a library study of the belief system of Buddhists and animists, but in *interactions* with the refugees themselves. By *learning to listen*, we can discover the needs that the refugees themselves identify through their statements, questions, and experiences.

Presenting the gospel to Cambodian refugees must be a holistic approach, but it may be easier in this essay to compartmentalize the issues into their felt needs as refugees and their beliefs as Buddhists and animists. The basis for "my theology" comes from refugee interviews (both my own and those reported by Lausanne and Nguyen) and from the findings of those working with Buddhists and animists in the Third World.

In a brief paragraph (Lausanne 9), the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism suggests several themes that can be highlighted in sharing the gospel with refugees: love, constancy, hope, peace, and justice.

Love

In "The Killing Fields," Dith Pran said, "We must have...no love—except for Angka.... The war has killed love." The cruelty of the Khmer Rouge regime, the hostility of the Thai government toward the refugee camps along the border, and the hostility in the U.S. of Anglos and other ethnic groups toward the Cambodian newcomers all have magnified in the refugee a message of rejection. But although these factors have worked together to erase any *expression* of love, they haven't erased the *longing* for love.

This remains the most important theme for the expression of the gospel. The love expressed by Christians in providing relief work in the camps and the love expressed by Christians in helping refugees adjust to American life have sparked an interest in the *message* that Christians have to share.

Similarly, the message of God's love has the strongest appeal theologically:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends (John 15:9-13).

Constancy

The constancy of Christ appeals to refugees who have experienced the breakdown of cultural, religious and national values. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Although there were efforts during the holocaust to completely erase Cambodia's past and begin at the Year Zero, that effort may have succeeded only in increasing

the Cambodians' longings for a cultural identity and constancy.

This theme is important to develop in the *implementation* of the Christian message (to be discussed later) as well as in the content of the message. The use of Cambodian arts in both the delivery of the Christian message and in Christian worship can erase the "foreign" stigma of Biblical faith. Today there is a resurgence of interest in Cambodian arts within refugee communities. If these arts can be "redeemed" to communicate a Christian message, there may be more receptivity to the message.

Also, an emphasis on the eternal nature of Christ and his role in creation can honor the Buddhist's reverence for the ancient. Many Cambodian refugees have not initially been interested in Christianity because Jesus Christ "is younger than Buddha,"⁴ but an emphasis on the eternality of Christ can refute that misconception. Teaching about Jesus can begin with Genesis and move into the prophecies (spoken during the same era that Siddhartha Buddha taught) before addressing the New Testament record.

One key "redemptive analogy" that fits in this area is the "Say-Ari-Metrai." Stories passed down in Cambodia about Buddha's teaching include the story of him saying:

Don't worship me as God. I am *not* God; I'm the Supreme Teacher only. But coming after me *is* one who is God, so meditate on his coming and look for him. The name of the one to come is Say-Ari-Metrai (translated as "Prince of Peace" or "Lord of Mercy.")⁵

By focusing on this story from Cambodian folklore, Christians have been able to point to the Prince of Peace promised by Isaiah during the same era that the Buddha spoke.

Hope

The hope that God offers is a powerful alternative to the former despair of Cambodian refugees. It is also a powerful alternative to the despair that can be cultivated by belief in the continuous cycle of reincarnation promised in Buddhism.

This message of hope is parallel to that experienced by participants in the Jewish exile described in the Old Testament. Learning the Old Testament record could lead refugees to discover "a norm for life here and now and the hope for the future" (Nguyen 1985:63). In both historical events

...their tragedies were caused by injustice; both cried over the ruin of their countries; both remembered the good old days in their homelands;...and both expected that they would someday return to their homes (Nguyen 1985:64).

Peace

The traumas of war and dislocation robbed Cambodians of the peace and serenity that was so symbolic of their country. Buddhism offers its own form of peace, but many refugees discovered that it was not enough to sustain them through the horrors of the holocaust and are therefore more receptive to the peace promised by Jesus:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (John 14:27).

Responding to Buddhist Beliefs

Tissa Weerasingha suggests three categorizations of biblical truth that are appropriate to the conceptual framework of Buddhism: a theology of suffering, a theology of self, and a theology of origins (Weerasingha 1984:304). Of particular interest to Cambodian refugees may be the theology of suffering.

Suffering

The misery of mankind and the social injustice in the world were issues that concerned Buddha, and they also concern Cambodian refugees today. Son Xuan Nguyen's description of Vietnamese refugees applies equally to Cambodian refugees:

Suffering has overwhelmed the people, and the people have been submerged in sufferings. The teaching

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of Buddha had come as an affirmation of what they had already experienced and were bound to. So they quickly embraced it. But most of them could not achieve the goal that Buddha had set (The Eightfold Path) (Nguyen 1985:60).

To begin with suffering is to begin with a common Buddhist principle. But an important distinction, an important thesis of a theology of suffering, is that the *source* of the symptom of suffering is the problem of *sin*. A contemporary of Siddhartha spoke of this *root* of suffering as he addressed another group of people:

We all like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).

Of course, the *hope* that Isaiah extended to Israel—and to all peoples—is the Suffering Servant:

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and as one from whom men hide their faces; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed (Isaiah 57:3-5).

It is in Christ...that we can find the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Suffering Servant, who not only pointed out the problem of humankind, but also bears human suffering and can give the refugees abundant life without their giving up the desire to live meaningfully. The historical Siddhartha remains important for the salvation of the (Cambodian) Buddhist, as he affirmed the human predicament and revealed the impossibility of human effort, but the... Buddhists need the Gospel of Jesus in their time of crisis (Nguyen 1985:63).

While dealing with the subject of sin as the source of suffering, it is important to remember Raymond Fung's words in

"The Forgotten Side of Evangelism":

People are not only sinners; they are also the sinned against. When we proclaim the good news of the gospel, we proclaim it to people who are both subjects and objects of sin (Fung 1982:1).

Karma

Another central theme in Buddhist belief is karma, the law of cause and effect. Although there are certainly dangers of syncretism in attaching Christian meanings to Buddhist principles, it has been suggested by Ken Rideout, in "Christ to the Thinking Buddhist," that this law of cause and effect could be considered the law of works from which Christ came to set man free. This could be an important point for dialogue with Buddhists, sharing with them the good news that "all their causes can be undone" (Rideout) through Jesus Christ.

Encountering Animistic Fears

My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2:4).

"Jesus is Lord and Savior.... We who believe in Him do not have to fear evil spirits or live in the shadow of their dominion".... This was the first time they had heard the gospel, and for them it was good news. "How can we have this power?" one man spoke up.... Sam-Oeurn responded, "If you will believe and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, turning from your witchcraft, then I will pray with you. I will ask Him to come into your life. He will then give you His power; you will not have to fear anymore" (Burke 1977:59).

A prevalent concern of refugees is fear—fear of nature, fear of spirits, fear of policemen and others in authority. As a means of dealing with those fears, animism has often proven more satisfying to the southeast Asian than the Western application of persuasive words or logic. A "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" is called for instead, in what Alan Tippett would call the "power encounter" in communicating the gospel

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in other cultures. In his book *Anointed for Burial*, Todd Burke writes extensively of the success of "signs and wonders" in communicating Christ in Cambodia. Though I don't always agree with Burke's theology, I do agree that fear is an important concern to be addressed and that it needs to be addressed with more than mere words. Otherwise, the new Christian may continue to rely upon animism to deal powerfully with his fears.

Communication through Involvement

The strongest way to communicate the message of Christ's love is through loving interaction with the refugee. A demonstration of the reality of Christ's concern for the physical and emotional needs of the refugee speaks louder than any words. Refugees can be fed, clothed, taught English, and oriented into American life in an expression of Christ's love that invites an interest in the gospel.

Anyone can have worldly sympathy, but we need to have *God's broken heart* if we are ever going to understand the poor and the needy. The result, if we mean business, will be a broken heart that longs to hold someone in need—to hold someone no matter what condition they are in.... We must ask...ourselves the question, "What would Jesus do?" ...Before I understood God's burdened heart for these people, I would have avoided him [a sick refugee] entirely. But when I saw him, I knew what I was to do. I ran and put my arms around him, and in turn he hugged me back. There was no awkwardness, only God's love. What he desperately needed that day was not to experience rejection, but the love of God..., the compassionate heart of Christ reaching out to the unlovely (Bills 3).

Communication Through Traditional Arts

A more neglected means of communicating the gospel is the utilization of traditional art forms. Cambodians take pride in their heritage of art, sculpture, dance, theater, and music. Though these forms convey Buddhist and animistic worldviews, some can nevertheless be redeemed for the communica-

tion of Biblical truth. It's nothing less than tragic that literacy lessons and preaching are still viewed as primary vehicles for the gospel.

Storytelling

A story well told is appreciated in any culture. Stories serve an important role in society—bonding people together and revealing basic values, ideals, beliefs, and fears:

Religious teachings, through the telling of the former lives of Buddha, "Jatakas," permeate all life in Cambodia. From this the Khmers derive their respect for life in all its forms, their tolerance, honesty, frankness (Garry 1980:49).

Classical Cambodian stories and legends are often recounted in poetry form (Steinberg 1957:263). They follow a well-defined pattern that could be adapted to present Christian truths:

Comprising mostly of verse, its language is characterized by symmetry and circumlocution, with the rhythm of the sentence prevailing over punctuation.... [It] reflects an aristocratic, religious, and rural society, often retiring, almost motionless and unaffected by time, and motivated by a desire for justice with magico-religious sanctions (Nepote 56).

Dance

The Khmer dance is full of meaning. It is a religious art that assembles the people in a communion of belief and sets a spiritual, temporal, and spatial link between two worlds: the human and the superhuman (*Bridging Cultures* 1983:93).

To this day, Cambodians view dance as one of the most powerful temple offerings to obtain assistance from the spirits (Cravath 1986:181).

Khmer dance...was associated with funeral rites..., with ancestor worship involving sacred stones, with a fertility cult, and with a pattern of kinship enabling communion with the ancestor-spirit realm in order to assure sufficient rain for the earth's fertili-

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ty.... Classically trained dancers remain today a powerful symbol of Khmer national identity—an image sustained initially by the government of the republic (1970-1975), then by refugees in camps along the Thai border, and, at present, in various Khmer communities in France, the U.S., and elsewhere. Despite great effort to preserve the classical dance tradition, one significant function of Khmer dance appears to have been irretrievably lost—dance as a ritual offering to deceased ancestors believed to influence the fertility of the land. This function reflects an ancient indigenous method of invoking natural harmony and human happiness. Today there is very little dance in Cambodia and the classical tradition has been severed from its roots. The flower is without nectar, and an intimate link with mystical wisdom has been lost (Cravath 199-200).

Could dance—this “powerful symbol of Khmer national identity”—be redeemed to communicate Christian truth, just as dance has been redeemed in so many other cultures? Initially, I thought so. After a more extensive study, I feel uneasy about the idea.

One Cambodian church in Southern California used dance to tell the story of the Ten Virgins, incorporating ethnic costumes and music. Dance drama seemed the perfect medium for such storytelling. But in light of dance’s traditional role in spirit appeasement, I have begun to wonder if any members of the audience may have misinterpreted the Christian dance’s function. This is an area that requires further research—preferably by Cambodians themselves!

Conclusion

Cambodian refugees are a suffering people in need of the Suffering Servant. They are a people bound by karma who need to know that Christ came to undo all their causes. And they are a people of rich cultural heritage who need to see the gospel communicated through their own arts and who deserve to worship Christ through these arts.

The Cambodian community is unique and in the midst of profound changes. Though we communicate an eternal Christ revealed by an unchanging Word, we need to constantly adapt

our presentation of the Good News, alert to facets that address felt needs.

Notes

1. “Angka Loeu” was what the Khmer Rouge called their regime during the 1975-78 period. According to the U.S. Committee for Refugees in “Cambodians in Thailand,”

The testimony of tens of thousands of Cambodian refugees since 1979 describes the brutality which the Pol Pot regime quickly imposed upon Cambodia. Intent upon nothing less than the total restructuring of traditional Khmer society, the Khmer Rouge evacuated the country’s urban centers, including Phnom Penh, dispersing the people to virtual slave labor camps devoted to agriculture. All signs of the earlier society were systematically destroyed, and human interaction depersonalized. Temples were demolished, the monks either killed or forced to join work gangs. Family life was banned, with parents, children, and spouses sent to different work sites around the country. All sense of belonging and affiliation was reduced to service to the “Organization” (Angka Loeu). Many were punished or killed for the most innocent signs of superior education, wealth, or sophistication. Even wearing glasses or speaking a foreign language became dangerous. Significantly, many Cambodians never heard the name of Pol Pot or any of the other leaders of the Khmer Rouge until after their escape from Cambodia—they had not heard the state referred to by anything but “Angka” for nearly four years.

2. One well-publicized example of the Thai hostility is described in “Cambodians in Thailand”:

Those who panicked at the edge and tried to run back were shot. Over the course of several days, 44,000 Cambodians were forced at gunpoint over the precipice.... Thousands died, many from the fall, and others as they tried to cross the minefield at the bottom of the cliff (p. 10).

3. According to Shawcross,

Article 20 of their constitution, promulgated in 1976, declared: “Every Cambodian has the right to worship according to any religion. Reactionary religion, which is detrimental to Democratic Kampuchea and the people of Kampuchea, is absolutely forbidden.”

For centuries Buddhism had been the glue which, together with the monarchy, held Cambodian society together. All over the countryside the Khmer Rouge expelled bonzes

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from their wats, smashed the Buddhist images and turned the wats into stores. Many bonzes were killed; all others were forced to exchange their saffron for black cloth and were forced to work like everyone else in the fields.

According to *The Chinese Rulers' Crimes Against Kampuchea*, 1984, p. 76, the Khmer Rouge's stated policy was that "Buddhism is a tool of the exploiters, so it cannot be allowed to remain in existence in Kampuchea."

4. Interview with Paul Nhem, 1985.

5. Interview with Toun Sary, 1985.

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