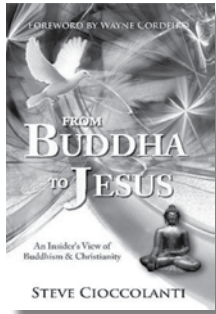


Book Reviews & Notes

From Buddha to Jesus: An Insider's View of Buddhism & Christianity, by Steve Cioccolanti (Sweet Life International, 2007, 240pp.)

—reviewed by Larry Dinkins



You wouldn't expect a pastor of an International Church in Melbourne, Australia with a name like "Cioccolanti" (Italian for "chocolate") to claim an inside track to the mind and worldview of Buddhists. However, his claim to an insider's view of Buddhism is substantiated by his Thai upbringing and exposure to a very religiously diverse extended

family. Besides his Thai Buddhist roots, Steve has added to that a broad education in America and Europe which allows him to address Buddhist issues from both an oriental and occidental viewpoint.

The word "Insider" is emphasized in the title because most apologetical literature on Buddhism is written from the standpoint of "Outsiders" who can claim field experience as missionaries or special skill in the study of comparative religions, but have not been personally steeped in Buddhism from their youth. Hearing and observing first hand how a relative or friend articulates and practices his or her faith is much different than what is portrayed about Buddhism in Hollywood or in scholarly textbooks.

Buddhism has recently experienced an upsurge in popularity due to media exposure as well as its perception as a "tolerant" religion in a world of religious violence and intolerance. The worldwide popularity of the Dalai Lama as a globetrotting ambassador for Buddhism has only added to its luster. Cioccolanti has seized on this fact and has written a popular treatment designed for both thinking/seeking Buddhists from the East as well as anyone from the West who may be dabbling in eastern mysticism. Academics will be disappointed by the lack of original sources and careful scholarship, yet the book was not designed as a textbook for seminary, but a practical book designed to clarify and demystify certain misconceptions about Buddha and his teachings as well as bridge the cultural gap between eastern and western mindsets.

This book has already prompted a strong reaction both in Thailand and especially among Western converts to Buddhism who object to what they view as simplistic explanations of the Buddha's teaching and a false caricature of their faith. There have been numerous books writ-

ten on Islam and Hinduism, which have spawned similar controversy, yet such a treatment on Buddhism is a rarity. For this reason, those who minister to the estimated one billion who are touched at some level by Buddhism should at least be aware of this book.

A strength of this book is the conversational tone and illustrations along with stories that act as conversation starters when one tries to dialogue or discuss the gospel with a Buddhist. Buddhist often have stock answers, which tend to kill further discussion. Claiming the universal goodness of all religions or conversely the foreignness of western religions such as Christianity is an effective way of deflecting more probing questions. Cioccolanti's knowledge of Buddhist semantics, parables, prophecies and stories helps defuse the common barriers that are often erected when engaging in conversation with Buddhists.

The author recognizes the important place of semantics and language in his treatment. Most all major doctrinal words such as God, sin, salvation, belief, heaven and hell must be redefined for a Buddhist to grasp their true biblical meaning. Cioccolanti has recorded over fifty footnotes in his book all related to the definition of familiar Thai words. Added to this are numerous references to both Pali and Sanskrit, the ancient languages of the Buddhist scriptures. Inclusion of these key words serves as a good reminder to all evangelists who tend to speak "Christianese" instead of the heart language of the target group.

The typical gospel presentation to the Thai has stressed the positive aspects of the love of God, His plan of salvation, and assurance of heaven. This approach may fit a western audience, but for the Buddhist it is often more helpful to remind them first of their inability to live up to their own standards or through their own efforts seek to pay for their numerous sins. Cioccolanti does this by using Buddhist analogies and stories like the "Blind Turtle" as well as the five precepts to emphasize these points. His admonition is to prepare the ground by preaching law instead of prematurely emphasizing grace, which more often than not confuses the first time hearer. When a Buddhist begins to understand that he is indeed a sinner under his own standards, then the message of the love, mercy and compassion of God makes much more sense.

Cioccolanti makes numerous references to the sayings of Buddha and yet is honest when he admits that we really don't know the accuracy of those assertions. One cannot compare three hundred years of oral transmission before the Buddhist scriptures were recorded and the eye witness accounts of Jesus that were written in the first century. However, just as Paul quoted Greek philosophers without endorsing all their teaching, it is permissible to quote familiar sayings of Buddha as a bridge to Asian hearts or to answer an objection. This book serves as a healthy reminder

I have lived among Thai Buddhist people for over twenty years and was pleasantly surprised to gain new insights from this book, many of which are absent in more scholarly treatments.

of the need to “re-load” certain Buddhist sayings or concepts with biblical meaning in order to avoid syncretism.

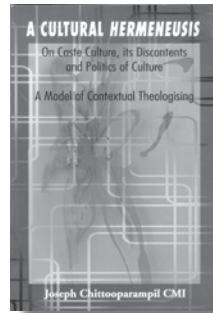
Avoiding syncretism is no easy task as those who have tried to “push the envelope” with insider movements will attest. In an effort to be relevant to Thai Buddhists, the author tends to blur the lines at times. Speculations about how Buddha or Jesus might have believed about reincarnation are hypotheticals that no one can be sure of. The idea that God gave revelation to Buddha, Ezekiel and Jeremiah and yet only two of them wrote down that revelation is problematic to say the least (p. 154). The assertion that Buddhism is closer to Christianity than all other world religions including Islam is also an item of dispute (p. 206). Speculation over Buddha’s relationship to God (p. 226) and just how far one can press the analogy of Jesus and the coming Buddhist Messiah (p. 237) are topics which scholars will continue to debate.

Another disturbing aspect of the book is the author’s propensity to lose focus and address issues that are important to him, but are tangent to the main theme and title of the book. It is rather jarring to find in a chapter on “The Last Words of Buddha” an exhortation to speak in tongues. In a treatise on the end times, Cioccolanti inserts a section on Creationism and Darwinian evolution, which may be suitable in a biology class, but could be deemed out of place when the theme is Buddhist eschatology. One could also cite frequent references to Jesus paying for sins in hell during the three days between the cross and resurrection (p. 59, 136, 139). One could have wished that such distractions could have been left out of the book and thus evade unnecessary alienation on the part of some readers.

Overall, the contribution that Cioccolanti makes is his honest attempt to address Buddhist perceptions and world-views that are often missed by scholars and “outsiders.” I have lived among Thai Buddhist people for over twenty years and was pleasantly surprised to gain new insights from this book, many of which are absent in more scholarly treatments. Most of the illustrations, stories and parables are practical enough to be internalized and used in a win-some way in personal witnessing. There are plenty of starting points for those who are wondering just where to begin a conversation when engaging a Buddhist. This book serves as a reminder that it is a divine work that brings people “from Buddha to Jesus” and yet it is our job to partner with God by being ready to “give an answer for the hope that lies within us” in a culturally relevant way.

A Cultural Hermeneusis: On Caste, Culture, Its Discontents and Politics of Culture, A Model of Contextual Theologising, by Joseph Chittooparampil (CMI; ISPCK 2005, 310pp.)

—reviewed by H. L. Richard



This book comes with exciting promises and prospects. The back cover blurb by Dr. Thomas Kochumuttom suggests that “this book...analyses and interprets the still active reality of caste culture in India. The presentation is objective, analysis scientific and interpretation novel.” The foreword by noted scholar G. Gispert-Sauch states about

the author that “from his observer participation in the life of the poor in these [central] regions and an indepth dialogue with many scholars who have studied the area, he offers us a new interpretation of the dynamics of caste in India today, which corrects the somewhat static views of Dumont and other classical authors” (pg. xi).

How very disappointing then it is to read the book and feel seriously betrayed in these expectations. The first chapter is entitled “The Caste System in a Historical Perspective,” yet this hardly seems to be what the chapter is about. Granting that the history of caste is exceedingly murky, there is little that is insightful in this chapter. A striking sentence illustrates the problem: “Amaladoss *guesses* how the interrelationships between groups especially between the dominant castes and the masses of people, *possibly* developed into social, economic, and political strata which ultimately gave to each one their position in the hierarchy” (pg. 8, italics added). Not only is a guess about what might have happened presented, but the guess is by the Roman Catholic author Michael Amaladoss, and a major problem of the entire book is its reliance on Roman Catholic authors to the neglect of more objective secular scholars. (Dalit scholars, of course, have little respect for secular scholars, who are seen as part of the Brahmin elite.)

The first chapter is really about untouchability or the Dalit experience, and that continues to be the theme of the entire study. Chapter two is entitled “Contemporary Experience of Caste,” but it offers only a contemporary Dalit experience. “Cultural Dynamics” is the third chapter closing the first section; but the focus is again the rather narrow (though vitally important) realm of Dalit issues. Part two (two chapters) offers an analysis of caste culture, but the pattern is already clear, and indeed

this also is about Dalit perspectives. The third and final section (four chapters) is “Towards a Counter-Cultural Interpretation,” and of course it is a Dalit interpretation (chapter 7 at least advertises its contents clearly: “The Indian Untouchables’ Critique of Caste Culture.”)

Among problems in the interpretative schema is a dichotomization (illustrated in the quotation referring to Amaladoss above) of the dominant castes and the sub-alterns. Yet many of the frustrations that mark subaltern experience are in fact experienced in a similar way even among the so-called dominant castes (granting that generally the severity of problems is greater the lower the caste). Particularly a parallel dichotomy of urban and rural experiences, while noted more than occasionally, should have been discussed seriously at some point in a book that makes broad claims about interpreting caste in India today.

A further significant problem is the lack of serious critique and evaluation of proponents of Dalit perspectives. Kancha Ilaiah’s terminology of Sudra “neo-Kshatriyas,” and his severe objections to this development, is presented as simple truth when subtle analysis is needed. Phule and Ambedkar are similarly introduced, although thankfully the author does allow that Ambedkar’s Buddhism is marked by “fierce rationalism” and a “rationalistic ‘liberation theology’” (page 150, quoting from Gail Omvedt). Worst on this line is an extensive outline of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) political antics, including the shockingly wasteful construction of “Ambedkar Park,” which the author seems to support.

These criticisms are not to suggest that the book is without value. For those interested in understanding liberation theology as articulated in India today it gives an excellent introduction. Despite a clear and overwhelming bias for the poor throughout the study, the author does not gloss over problems, and especially this admission is noteworthy:

... the grounds on which Untouchables dispute the dominant ideology are often equivocal. In the caste system, a person does not want to be lower than others, and at the same time he/she wants to be higher. In the same way a person who resents the superiority of the higher caste may resent efforts by those lower to claim equality. People are both for emancipation and domination. (pg. 172)

A worthy study, but *not* an analysis of caste in the changing contexts of India today.

Power and Identity in the Global Church: Six Contemporary Cases, by Brian M. Howell and Edwin Zehner, eds. (William Carey Library Publishers, Pasadena, 2009, 191pp.)

—reviewed by Brad Gill

A recent spate of articles and books suggest that *people groups* and their sense of identity is weakening in the wake of globalization. It’s becoming popular to forecast the

demise of ethnic peoples as the tide of modern technologies lifts people from their local bonds. The term ‘glocal’, coined to describe the combination of global systems and local (ethnic) traditions, could become just another buzzword in missionary vernacular that dilutes the value of people group orientation. But just how much does ethnicity determine how persons come to Christ in an increasingly *flat world*? Brian Howell and Edwin Zehner have pulled together a group of keen mission anthropologists to refine our grasp of just how this ‘glocal’ reality complicates the ethnic basis of peoples. In their new book, *Power and Identity in the Global Church* (William Carey Library, 2009), they offer us six studies of contextualization in churches from the Basque people of Spain to Buddhist Thailand. In effect they ground more theoretical discussion of globalization in actual ethnic realities, thus helping us better understand many frontier mission situations.

In his introduction, Howell suggests that “the ethnicity industry” has often talked in terms of “un-contextualized culture,” failing to see and/or address the more problematic nature of ‘context’ in driving ‘culture’ (or ethnic identity). Before we can talk meaningfully about contextualization, Howell says we need to better recognize what’s happening in the ‘context’, i.e., the ‘place’ where cultural identity is shaped. The blend of culture and context can often seem a blur for those of us in cross-cultural mission, “since how people think about the traditions, norms and behaviors that distinguish them as a ‘people’ emerges only in conversation with the social, political and national context of power and identity” (p. 22). Howell et al. join the increasingly loud perspective of social scientists who suggest that power inequalities, especially those resulting from the reach of globalization, push and pull at the formation of cultural (ethnic) identity. The editors propose, therefore, an analytical distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘context’ so that we can better appreciate just how church movements negotiate their emerging identities as followers of Jesus.

The book triggered memories of my own ministry among a people group in Africa back in the early eighties, facing that culture with what these authors would consider *earlier* contextualization theory. Our team was in a large ethno-linguistic people group, a Muslim people, which stretched across vast terrain and was shaped by distinctive linguistic and tribal pockets. This we knew, but everything else was a hunch. In both rural and urban locations we were all seeing clear signs of globalization, but what we didn’t see were our own unexamined assumptions surrounding the nature of ‘culture’, ethnic identity and people groups. Something else was driving the differences we saw across this people group. Those in the region north of us were wholeheartedly embracing their ethnicity, an identity that trumped even their Muslim faith, while many in my region were shedding or hiding their ethnicity to enhance their position in the national economy. The ‘context’ of political, social and eco-

conomic forces was driving different forms of cultural identification, which we noted especially in those coming to Christ. By separating ‘culture’ and ‘context’ Howell and company help us “tease apart in some analytical ways” those forces that may shape how Christian identity is “constructed, contested, created, re-created, stretched, affirmed, denied and altered” in mission settings (p. 16).

While these cases do not focus at all on Muslim and Hindu religious worlds, Zehner’s study of syncretism and contextualization in Buddhist Thailand contributes some new perspective to the insider debate. Jennings’ insights into Japan’s cultural value of corporate relations and Vanden Berg’s treatment of the African theology of witchcraft also make vivid just how Christians craft their new identities between major religious traditions. These studies are good fuel for any *insider* discussion, especially the frequent reference to the politicization of ethno-religious boundaries, that familiar radioactive division of peoples as with Muslim and Christian. These studies illustrate how a highly charged context can determine theological emphasis (Moeller’s study of the Kuna people), or the linguistic choices of polyglot Philippine believers (Howell), or the nationalistic affiliation among Basque believers (Ybarrola). The reader is able to see how culturally given religious and ethnic identities become more ‘constructed’ as developing churches react, alter or assert amidst the problematic context of globalization. But it’s Zehner’s article from the Buddhist sphere that helps us begin to dissect the types of syncretism and the subtle nuances of ‘hybridity’ that emerge from the murky conversion process (a subject he treats more extensively elsewhere). He makes the risky suggestion, as does Vanden Berg with his “contextualization from the ground,” that the young converts are essential for determining theologically how the equation of culture, religion, ethnicity and political inequalities should inform Christian identity. The book in its entirety will deepen the debate on *insider* realities.

One gets the sense from these case studies that the ethnic reality of *people groups* is alive and well, but the sense of ‘place’ they have traditionally generated is contextually invaded and fragmented (p. 19). In his Afterword, Robert Priest suggests these cases help refine the more “crude” ideas of culture implicit in the *homogenous unit principle* promoted by the Church Growth Movement of an earlier era. As a former student at McGavran’s school, I bristle a bit at his cursory treatment of this ground-breaking school of thought, but his succinct assessment of the maturation of our thinking on contextualization is excellent and well worth the purchase of the book. Indeed, ‘glocal’ dynamics are problematic for culture, making ethnicity no longer an absolute indicator of identity. But neither does ethnicity seem to disappear. Howell and company illustrate its residual power amidst the forces of globalization. **IJFM**

From the Editor’s Desk (continued from p. 107)

death accomplished, while biblical, is not the only way Scripture talks about the atonement. Does the Bible provide a kaleidoscope of images that speak to animists more powerfully than our preferred *satisfaction* view?

Hindu world. Timothy Paul has spent over twenty years reaching out to Gujarati Hindus here in the US. His experiences have led him to develop a practical, contextualized approach to ministry among Hindus that will (and I guarantee this) challenge you. Wrestle with it, even disagree with it, but don’t fail to let it challenge you. Especially if you have no direct involvement with Hindu friends, you’ll be glad you read it. See also H. L. Richard’s book review, p. 146.

Buddhist world. Long-term OMFer Larry Dinkins’ book review represents a baby step in the direction of redressing our neglect of Buddhist concerns in the IJFM. Stay tuned.

Tokyo 2010. Don’t miss this announcement, p. 151.

Back to the Future II? III?

Like Paul, I end here with a few salutations (and goodbyes).

After almost 25 years in various places along the time-space continuum (North Africa, Michigan), we welcome Brad Gill back to IJFM’s future (Brad is our historic link to Edinburgh '80 and to our student roots). He may have only written one editorial (1:2, reprinted in 25:1), but those thoughts find expression in the bullet points on the fourth page of each IJFM. More importantly, his timely intervention saved this journal from being discontinued after only one issue. Once that crisis moment passed, others were able to carry it forward.

Unlike 25 years ago, Brad won’t be getting off so easy this time. Rest assured that you’ll be hearing more from him as we go along (see his book review on pg. 147).

As we welcome Brad back, we also say goodbye to Emily Cox, whose one-year internship with IJFM is now over. If we could bottle your enthusiasm and sell it on eBay we’d never have to charge anything for the journal. Thanks for your fine assistance in layout and subscriptions; we wish you the best!

Speaking of going (back to) the future and the arrival of new help, Emily’s replacement, Karen Watney, has been a good friend of ours since the mid-1980s.

Last but not least, we’ll have to manage for a little while without managing editor Anya Gandy, who’s finding it harder to reach her keyboard. By the time the next issue come out, Baby Gandy should be here.

Well, congratulations for making it to the end of this long editorial. The future is now.



Rory Clark, Acting Editor, IJFM