

Contextualizing the Gospel in the Fear-Power World of Folk Buddhists

by James E. Morrison

One day, while sitting on our couch in the afternoon light, Drolma (not her real name) broke down, became emotional, and asked me to pray. She began to tell me about her father, an alcoholic who did not have the power to give up drinking, who had completely ruined his life. Now her brothers were headed in the same direction, drinking too much and wasting all of the money she was earning. She had told me this before, but it was still such a burden. For her this was a spiritual issue, and she specifically asked me to pray that God would give them the power to stop drinking. “Only God is able to do that,” she said. Though a relatively new believer, she knew that God did not always answer immediately and that she would need to be patient. As she cried, I prayed “God, give her father and brothers the power to stop drinking. Help them turn from their sinful ways and follow Jesus.”

Drolma is a believer from a folk Tibetan Buddhist background—a tradition steeped in shamanism, animism and tantric Buddhism. Her story is illustrative because, amongst other things, it highlights a worldview that primarily sees life from a spiritual or “power” dimension. Truth, in the epistemological sense, is of little concern. Rather, the issues of daily life, and the out-working of power, is central. Truth lies in the things that work, that provide obvious benefit. This worldview is the prevailing one of the vast majority of folk Buddhists across Asia, and of folk Tibetan Buddhists as well. As Tsering notes, “Most people in the Tibetan Buddhist world are unconcerned with gaining enlightenment, meditating, or practicing tantric rituals. Like their shamanist ancestors, they see religion as a means to solve problems of everyday life.”¹

In this context, I will explore some possible ways to tailor more relevant presentations of initial expressions of the gospel to a folk Buddhist setting. Folk Buddhists have long proved resistant to the gospel.² There are many reasons for this: geographical isolation, limited missionary access, demonic oppression, cultural pride, and prevailing views of Christianity being a “foreign” religion or being “just the same as Buddhism.” These are some very real barriers.

James E. Morrison (pseudonym) is a graduate student at the Cook School of Intercultural Studies, Biola University. He has lived and worked among Tibetans for more than twenty years.

An additional factor may be that gospel presentations have not been as perspicacious as they could have been—they may have either been speaking to a misinformed set of needs, speaking superficially, or just not speaking at all.

In this article I suggest that an empathetic understanding of the cultural paradigm of fear-power, the predominant worldview of folk Buddhists, may result in more efficacious engagement than an approach which flows from the worldview lens of a guilt versus innocence society. Though I will more specifically focus on the folk Tibetan Buddhist³ people of the Central Tibetan Plateau in the People's Republic of China,⁴ there are certain generic similarities that could apply to other folk Buddhist groups. My approach is to provide: a basic theoretical framework (defining contextualization and folk Buddhism); a theological framework (what the Bible has to say and possible syncretistic concerns); and a brief practical framework (some applications that could perhaps be used by on-field practitioners).

Contextualization: Theories and Models

Many attempts have been made to define contextualization. Common elements include communicating effectively in a cross-cultural setting and a “culturally relevant” gospel. Nigerian Josphat Yego defines contextualization as

the never-changing word of God in ever-changing modes of relevance. It is making the gospel...relevant in a given situation.⁵

Flemming fleshes this definition out a little more by adding that contextualization is

the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation. This happens in such a way that the gospel both comes to authentic expression in the local context and at the same time prophetically transforms the context.⁶

More than just clear communication (the goal of any good communicator anywhere) contextualization seeks to also develop localized theologies which speak to the needs of the local community. These needs may not necessarily be apparent to the cross-cultural worker. Hiebert's “critical contextualization” has proved to be a significant voice in this regard.⁷ He advocates taking the local culture seriously, discussing the critical needs of the culture openly (as perceived by the receptor culture itself), and yet ultimately still being guided by the authority of Scripture. This approach certainly has merit.

One could say, then, that there are two essential components to contextualization:



communicating in a way that resonates with the host culture without losing the (confrontational and transformational) sharp edge of the gospel;⁸ and establishing theologies that address the concerns of the people. It is on this theoretical basis that I approach the fear-power concerns of folk Buddhists of Central Tibet.

Scott Moreau provides a detailed account of the development of contextualization and has codified various models of its application. The predominant model for evangelicals is the “translation” model,⁹ which is born out of a belief that there is a culturally transcendent message, a kerygma, to be translated, transplanted or re-planted

(depending on one's choice of metaphor). The primary objective is to “convey Christian meanings with minimum distortion to the message of the Bible,”¹⁰ with Scripture as the final arbitrator of both theology and pedagogy.¹¹

What is Folk Buddhism?

And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all. (Luke 6:19, ESV)

According to noted missionary and scholar Alex Smith, “Folk Buddhism holds sway over one billion of the earth's inhabitants,”¹² and in lands where this religion prevails “the gospel languishes in its impact”¹³ the church being “tiny, usually less than 1%.”¹⁴ Folk Buddhism is an eclectic and syncretic mix of the teachings of Buddha with pre-existing, indigenous, animistic, or shamanistic religions. In Thailand,

Folk Buddhism, as opposed to pure “book” Buddhism, would include animistic or primal religious practices as well as Theravada or Mahayana Buddhist practice in a syncretistic mix.¹⁵

In Tibet, folk Buddhism is a mix of native shamanism and tantric Buddhism. Tibet's ancient indigenous religion, known as *Bon*, is a combination of shamanism and animism. In the seventh century, the Indian shaman, Guru Rimpoche (also known as *pad ma 'byung gnas*), paved the way for tantric Buddhism to take root in Tibet and Bhutan. Tantric Buddhism involves magical spells and mantras, as well as occult practices, as it seeks a “fast track” to enlightenment. The shamanism already prevalent in Tibet was fertile soil for tantric Buddhism.¹⁶

Folk Buddhism is characterized by both fear and power. For the Burmese folk Buddhist, his or her fear is the fear of spirits or *Nats*. Peter Thein Nyunt observes that for the Burmese, fear is a constant: “The greatest fear comes from the danger of harmful spirits or evil spirits . . . or being

harmed by . . . *Nats*.”¹⁷ Tibetans often express fear of local deities (*yul lha*), demons (*dre* and *klu*)—ubiquitous spirits that constantly seek to harm humans. As Tsering states, “The world of the folk Tibetan Buddhist is filled with aggressive spirits, capricious gods, malignant demons.”¹⁸ These spirits need placating; they need a higher power to deal with them. Placating them is typically done through practices one can find throughout the Tibetan folk Buddhist world, practices such as: sorcery (*mthu rgyag ba*); divination (*mo rgyag ba*); consulting an oracle, shaman or lama (*lha pa, sngags pa, and bla ma*); reciting mantras (*sngags* or *gsang sngags*); astrology (*rtsi rgyag pa*); making offerings (*mchod pa phul ba*); spinning prayer wheels (*mani khor ba*); and making visits to monasteries and temples (*mchod mjal*).

Tibetans, like many folk Buddhists, are also terrified of going to hell and have an elaborate understanding of eighteen realms of hell (*dmyal khams bco brgyad*). Interestingly, Smith, in his paper, “Missiological Implications of Key Contrasts Between Buddhism and Christianity,” writes that in a survey of many Thais who became Christians, fear of going to hell was a prominent factor in their becoming believers.¹⁹ Since western Christianity has largely filtered out hell and eternal damnation, it is common to think that these teachings are irrelevant to our cross-cultural audiences. In reality, teaching on Jesus being the only one who has the power to save us from hell is thoroughly good news. By excluding this dimension, particularly in fear-power cultures, we are potentially doing them a grave disservice. Although to some degree unavoidable, one must be careful not to transfer one’s own spiritual poverty or inherited theological biases onto the host culture.

As with all folk Buddhists, Tibetans are in search of power (*nus pa*) and empowerment (*byin rlabs*). Griswold notes, “Buddhists, especially folk Buddhists,

In a survey of Thais who became Christians, fear of going to hell was a prominent factor in their becoming believers.

are searching for power.”²⁰ In his section on “Folk Buddhism Promises Power,” De Neui observes that

Folk Buddhism address[es] some of the heart issues of Thai people by providing them with a source of power they believe will assist them in life.²¹

Hesselgrave and Rommen suggest that “. . . contextualization involves knowledge of both a message and an audience.”²² A brief sketch of the audience has been given, but how then is one to present the gospel to folk Buddhists that speaks in a relevant way to a people with a highly developed sense of fear and power?

A Theological Framework

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Colossians 2:15, NIV)

Roland Muller suggests the missionary enterprise exists “simply for the purpose of addressing sin and the results of sin, among the peoples of the earth.”²³ While this is no doubt true, “the peoples of the earth” do not necessarily have a correct understanding of sin. Folk Buddhists are no exception; they do not view sin as wrongdoing or disobedience against a holy God. For a Tibetan, sin (*sdig pa*) or what they understand to be “negativity” or “demerit,” is unavoidable; it is something one accumulates every day, consciously or unconsciously. Indeed, one’s very existence is the result of *sdig pa* and the cruel scales of karmic retribution. Nonetheless, the atonement (how Christ’s life, death, and resurrection deals with the sin issue) does address humanity’s universal problem and is at the heart of the gospel. It is a message that can certainly be relevant to the folk Buddhist as well.

Muller and Georges, amongst others, have provided three cultural paradigms by which the atonement can be understood. Accordingly, for cultures that are predominantly guilt-innocence based, penal substitution tends to be the dominant atonement motif. Cultures that are shame-honour based may lend themselves to a “satisfaction” motif of atonement, and fear-power cultures may be more orientated to the “Christus Victor” (also known as the “ransom theory”) atonement motif.²⁴

According to Georges, the Christus Victor motif was the main atonement theory for the first thousand years of church history.²⁵ This motif, with its emphasis on the power of Jesus triumphing over Satan and his army of demons, and the defeat of both cosmic and earthly forces of evil, certainly has a strong potential appeal to the folk Buddhist.²⁶ However, while I believe it is appropriate to emphasise Jesus’ power to triumph over evil, one cannot just gloss over the sin/guilt problem. It also needs to be mentioned that Jesus, by his death and resurrection, not only defeated evil, but made it possible to clear away all of humanity’s wrongdoing. Through faith and repentance in Jesus, one can be set free from the power of sin and evil behavior, escape its deadly consequences, and be completely delivered from all demonic powers. Rather than present exclusively only one atonement motif, and even though focusing on the power aspect is relevant for folk Tibetan Buddhists, my contention would be that one can also present aspects of penal substitution. Colossians 2:13–15 sees the two quite neatly juxtaposed.

The emphasis for the folk Tibetan Buddhist, at least in initial expressions of the gospel, can be more on Jesus’ power to forgive sin and less on having

a “guilty conscience.” Following the legal motif with its images of a courtroom setting and using legal terms such as “guilty conscience” can be quite difficult to communicate in Tibetic languages and may be better left for subsequent gospel explanations.

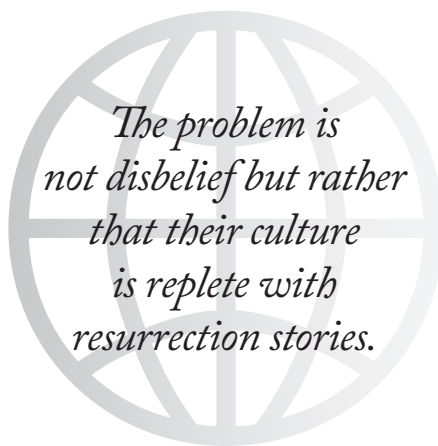
Not wanting to sound contradictory, though, I also believe it is appropriate to mention—even in initial Gospel presentations—that Jesus died in our place. Rather than God rightfully and fairly punishing us for our sins, Jesus took our punishment and by the power of his resurrection we are saved from death and hell. Although folk Buddhist cultures stress that only the individual alone can impact his or her own karmic destiny through individual merit making, it may be surprising that there are examples in folk Buddhist cultures of substitutionary acts whereby someone lays down his or her life for another. And these are always seen as honorable. In Tibetan culture, there are two well-known substitution folk tales and in Thai culture there is a famous legend of someone intentionally forfeiting his life so others could live.²⁷ My point here is that one should not make light of the forgiveness of sin just because it may not fit neatly into a particular atonement motif.

Syncretistic Concerns

Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him. (John 12:37, ESV)

Ever the pragmatists, folk Buddhists can certainly be open to syncretic practices. One must be careful not to highlight the power aspect too much. To do so would give the wrong impression that Jesus would provide all the power and miraculous healings one could possibly want. The folk Buddhist might easily be interested only in the perceived power Jesus might give him or her, and not in Jesus himself nor his salvific work on the cross. In my experience, folk Tibetan Buddhists are very willing to give anything a try, provided

it might work for them. Clear teaching should also stress that believers give their allegiance to a new power, a new authority, indeed the one true power, and that we follow and obey his ways, not our own. De Neui highlights this need for caution as he notes that responses to the gospel tend to be based on pragmatism.²⁸ He recalls a conversation with Charles Kraft where church leaders in Nigeria would still visit shamans “because things happen faster.”²⁹ On the flip side though, De Neui also cautions that many folk Buddhists can remain enslaved to spiritual powers even within the church because “issues of power have never been fully addressed.”³⁰ Clearly, a balanced approach is needed.



Other Approaches?

“Who is this man?” they asked each other. “Even the wind and waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41, NET)

Tom Steffen, in assessing the major evangelism models such as the Four Spiritual Laws, Evangelism Explosion, Any3, C2C, Chronological Bible Teaching, Chronological Bible Storying, The Romans Road, T4T, Storying the Story, found that all of them “present the gospel predominantly from an innocence/guilt frame.”³¹ Newhouse also notes that he could not find any story sets that incorporated a Christus Victor atonement motif in his search for relevancy with folk Buddhists.³² It does seem a little perplexing that alternative

models have not gained currency, especially given that Muller, Georges, and more recently Mischke have described alternative contextualized atonement motifs. That being said, many years ago I happened upon a basic gospel outline that seemed to speak to our fear-power folk Tibetan Buddhists in ways I had not imagined or planned on. I will discuss this further below.

A Practical Framework

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. (1 Corinthians 4:20, NIV)

Missionaries, especially those who are fresh out of seminary, can fall into some common pitfalls. Overly engaging in Christian apologetics is one of them. Although establishing solid evidence for faith is important, trying to “prove” the truth of the gospel through argument can be of relatively no benefit with folk Tibetan Buddhists. I remember one Easter Sunday a new worker was giving an address to a group of expatriate missionaries on the “proofs” of the resurrection. He implored us to consider that this was what our Tibetan friends needed to hear. In fact, Tibetans do not have any issues with believing in the resurrection. The problem is not disbelief but rather that their culture is replete with resurrection stories.

Apologetics may find a place when one is dialoguing with a highly educated and dedicated Buddhist practitioner, perhaps a high-level monk or lama, but he, too, will not question the miraculous elements of Christ’s life.

In my experience, I have never had one Tibetan ever express doubt over the existence of Jesus, his miracles, his death or resurrection. Folk Tibetan Buddhists readily accept these things. They are more interested to know, “What practical difference can Jesus make to my life now?”

In framing an initial evangelistic gospel presentation, I believe that four main areas need to be covered:

creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration. For the folk Buddhist with a fear-power worldview, framing these areas with a “power emphasis,” with Christ as the superior power over all, may prove to have more resonance.

The creation story would focus on God as creator and the source of all power, with Jesus as the ruler and Lord of all (Colossians 1:16–17). Humankind, being originally sinless, lived peacefully and without suffering under the rule and reign of God. People did not live in fear of death or evil spirits.

Recounting the story of the fall would focus on the fact that humankind, through disobedience to the rule of God, gave in to the power of Satan. As a result, people lived in fear of the spirit world and its domination over them. This led to all people living under the power of sin and Satan, and universal suffering entered the world.

The redemption aspect would focus on Christ’s defeat of the power of Satan and the power of sin and death. In so doing, he sets people free from Satan’s power, control, and from the power of sin in

Framing creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration with a “power emphasis” may prove to have more resonance with the folk Buddhist.

our lives (Colossians 2:13–15). Through repentance and faith in Jesus, sin can be swept away, and by allegiance only to Jesus, one can be set free from the power of demons and one’s own evil behavior. This section could be developed further through selective narrative passages as outlined below in the section entitled “Using Power Passages from Mark.”

The restoration story would focus on becoming part of God’s kingdom, living under his rule and authority, just as God originally intended (Romans 14:17). Being set free from the powers of darkness, one now has the power to live a life pleasing to God and beneficial to others (2 Peter 1:3).

Using Power Passages from Mark

... so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. (Mark 2:10, NET)

Some years ago, our team began drafting a translation of a small tract called *Jesus Christ Has Power to Save Us*,³³ based on passages from the Gospel of Mark. In some ways I felt the passages were a little random and out of context for our audience. My concerns at that time were of a linguistic nature and I was not primarily thinking of the predominant cultural worldview and whether I was directly addressing it. It just so happened that the title of this tract, and the subsequent stories in each section, resonated strongly with our audience. In fact, the small tract has remained one of the most enduring resources our team has produced.

What follows (as shown in Table 1 below) is not the result of careful planning or strategy. It was simply baby steps in our translation project that serendipitously (or perhaps, more accurately, providentially) engaged our audience in ways I had not anticipated.

Table 1. Jesus Christ Has Power to Save Us: Passages from Mark which May Resonate with Folk Buddhists

<i>Bible Passage</i>	<i>Key Story</i>	<i>Key Focus</i>
Mark 1:14–15	Jesus Brings Good News	Jesus is king of God’s powerful kingdom
Mark 1:21–28	Jesus Has Power to Drive Out Evil Spirits	power over demonic forces
Mark 1:32–34	Jesus Has Power to Heal All Diseases	power over sickness
Mark 2:1–12	Jesus Has Power to Forgive Sins	power to forgive all evil behaviour
Mark 4:35–41	Jesus Has Power to Calm the Storm	power over nature
Mark 5:21–24, 35–42	Jesus Has Power to Raise the Dead	power over death
Mark 7:14–15, 17–23	Jesus Speaks about Evil in People’s Hearts	power of evil
Mark 9:2–8	Jesus is God’s Son	powerful Son of God
Mark 14:10–11, 44–46	Jesus Betrayed	given over to evil
Mark 15:6–15	Jesus Sentenced to Death	given over to human power
Mark 15:25–26, 33–39	Jesus Crucified	subject to the power of death
Mark 15:42–46	Jesus’ Body Put in a Tomb	subject to the power of death
Mark 16:1–7	Jesus Is Alive	power over death
Mark 16:15–16, 19–20	Good News for Everyone	Jesus empowers all his followers

Conclusion

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16, NIV)

Presenting the gospel to folk Tibetan Buddhists, and perhaps to folk Buddhists wherever they may be found, with an empathetic approach to their fear-power concerns may result in the gospel penetrating their hearts more deeply. Although much more could be said about the worldview of folk Buddhists and how to deal with the obstacles of karma and merit-making, what has been presented here is only one small attempt at a more contextualized approach for initial engagement.

The gospel is God's power to save people from darkness, deliver them from fear and demonic oppression, and empower them to live transformed lives under a new allegiance to the most high and powerful God. A transformed life is a real and relevant "power encounter" for the practically minded folk Buddhist.

After being unable to contact her for a few months, I rang Drolma last week. She was eager to tell me that her two brothers had not drunk any alcohol for six weeks and that her father had also reduced the amount he was drinking. Naturally, she was overjoyed. When I told her that I had been praying for her and her family, she burst into tears saying, "Thank you. Thank you so much for praying. God has the power to do these things." **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Marku Tsering, *Sharing Christ with Tibetan Folk Buddhists* (Chiang Mai: Central Asian Fellowship, 2006), 85.

² Alex Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes* (Overseas Missionary Fellowship (USA) Inc. 2001), 27–28.

³ "Folk Tibetan Buddhist" here is used as a more generic category; a fuller understanding of the term is that it refers to a synthesis of shamanism, animism and tantric (Vajrayana) Buddhism imported from India.

⁴ There are three main Tibetan people groups—Central, Kham and Amdo. These designations are a simplification of the ethnic and linguistic groupings of Tibetan peoples but will suffice for the purposes here. Though this paper will focus on Central Tibetans, much of what is discussed could also be applied to the other groupings.

⁵ Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2012), 35.

⁶ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 19.

⁷ Paul Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, July (1987): 104–111.

⁸ I find the search for "relevancy" can sometimes lead to a watered-down version of the gospel that loses its cutting edge. In Acts 14 (Paul's address to the Laconians) Flemming notes that though Paul did address the felt needs of his audience by weaving "his listeners' life experiences into the larger story of God as revealed in the Scriptures," Paul "refuses to dilute the substance of the gospel and its call for repentance and transformation." (Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 71). In Acts 14:15. Paul implores his listeners to, "Turn from these worthless things to the living God."—not exactly what one might call a "seeker friendly" approach.

⁹ Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 31.

¹⁰ Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 61.

¹¹ Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 61.

¹² Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*, 23.

¹³ Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*, 28.

¹⁴ Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*, 28.

¹⁵ Paul De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists" retrieved from: <http://www.thaicrc.com/collect/MIS/index/assoc/D4113.dir/4113.pdf> (2002), 29.

¹⁶ Tsering, *Sharing Christ*, 55–57; David Lim, Steve Spaulding and Paul De Neui, eds. *Sharing Jesus Effectively in the Buddhist World* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 246.

¹⁷ Peter Thein Nyunt, "Christian Response to Burmese Nat Worship in Myanmar," in *Seeking the Unseen: Spiritual*

Realities in the Buddhist World, ed. Paul De Neui (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), 258.

¹⁸ Tsering, *Sharing Christ*, 86.

¹⁹ Alex Smith, "Missiological Implications of Key Contrasts Between Buddhism and Christianity," in *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World*, eds. John Lim and Steve Spaulding (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2003), 31–56. Also (Work in Progress, 2013) retrieved from: <http://www.thaicrc.com/gsd/collect/MIS/index/assoc/D5643.dir/5643.pdf>.

²⁰ Scott Griswold, "Sharing Jesus with Buddhists," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Art. 8 (2014): 12.

²¹ De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists," 11.

²² David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 128.

²³ Roland Muller, *Honor & Shame: Unlocking the Door* (USA: Xlibris Corp, 2000), 15.

²⁴ Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (Timē Press, 2014), 50–51.

²⁵ Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 50.

²⁶ See also Thomas Newhouse, "The Christ Victor Atonement Motif Applied to Evangelism among Folk Buddhists in Mainland Southeast Asia," Master's thesis, Wheaton Graduate School, (2012). Newhouse makes a strong case for the Christ Victor motif but is also balanced enough not to dismiss penal substitution as having no relevance. He suggests presenting both motifs.

²⁷ Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*, 26; Griswold, "Sharing Jesus with Buddhists," 102.

²⁸ De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists," 6.

²⁹ De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists," 6, footnote 13.

³⁰ De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists," 22.

³¹ Tom Steffen, "Minimizing cross-cultural evangelism noise," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. 43 (4), (2015): 415.

³² Newhouse, "The Christ Victor Atonement Motif Applied to Evangelism among Folk Buddhists in Mainland Southeast Asia," 28.

³³ Our tract was based on the tract from Scripture Gift Mission (SGM) originally called, *Jesus has Power to Save*.

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