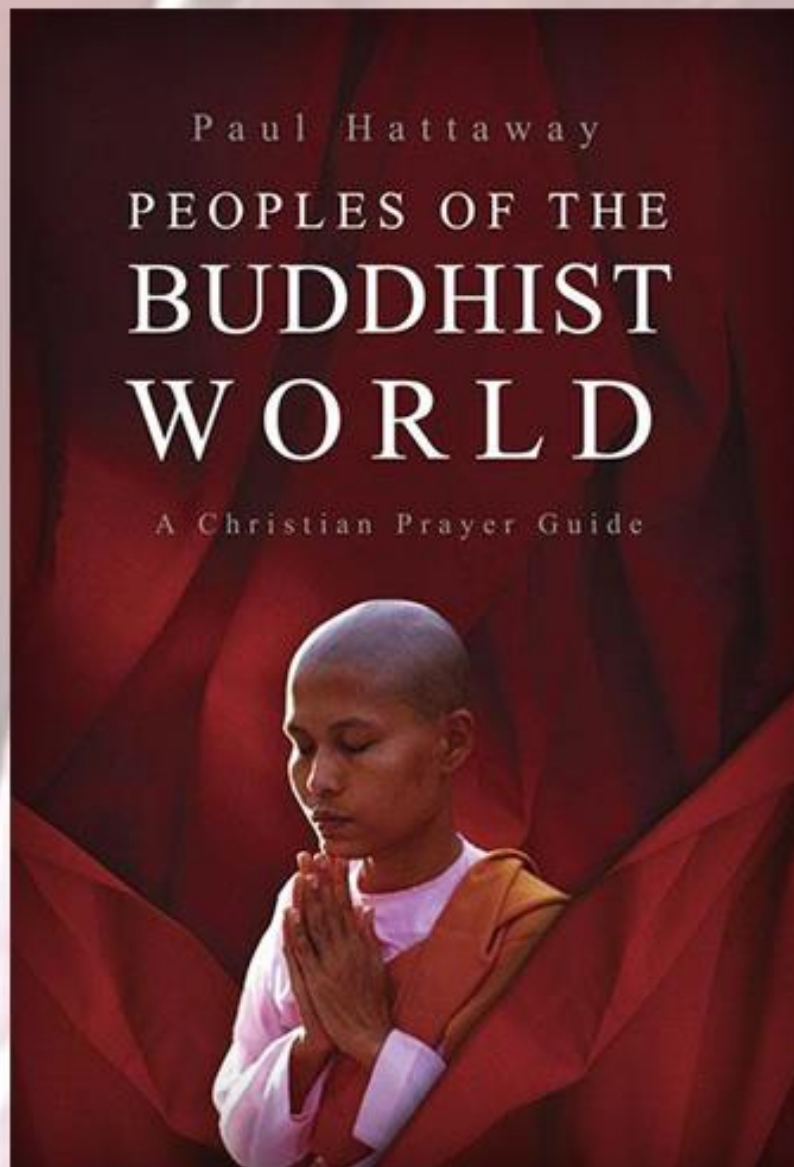


Book Review



S. Dhammika

Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

Peoples of the Buddhist World – A Review

Some Western drug companies spend millions of dollars developing and marketing a new drug only to have the health authorities later discover that it has dangerous side-effects and then ban it. Needing to recover their investment and unable to sell their drug in the West some of these companies try to market their dangerous products in the Third World where public awareness of health issues is low and corrupt governments can be brought off. Some might say that Christianity is a bit like this. Having lost much of their following in the West, churches are now beginning to look for opportunities elsewhere. Of course, the Islamic world is out of the question. Even the most optimistic evangelist knows that the chance of spreading the Gospel amongst Muslims is nil. The obvious targets are Africa, India and the Buddhist countries of Asia.

There are now several evangelical organizations dedicated just to evangelizing Buddhists. The Asia Pacific Institute of Buddhist Studies in the Philippines offers missionaries in-depth courses in Buddhist doctrine, the languages of Buddhist countries and the sociology of various Buddhist communities – the better to know the opponent. The Central Asia Fellowship is geared specifically to spreading the Gospel amongst Tibetans. The Overseas Missionary Fellowship is “an acknowledged authority on Buddhism” and “is available to conduct training sessions and seminars, give presentations and speak on how Christians can work effectively in the Buddhist world.” The Sonrise Centre for Buddhist Studies and the South Asia Network are both on-line communities providing missionaries with detailed, accurate and up-to-date information useful for evangelizing Buddhists. Make no mistake, these are not small ad-hock groups. They are large, well-financed,

superbly run organizations staffed by highly motivated and totally dedicated people and they are in it for the long haul.

A book called *Peoples of the Buddhist World* by Paul Hattaway has recently been published by one of the leaders of this new evangelical assault on Buddhism. The book's 453 pages offer missionaries and interested Christians a complete profile of 316 Buddhist ethnic and linguistic groups in Asia, from the Nyenpa of central Bhutan to the Kui of northern Cambodia, from the Buriats of the Russian Far East to the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka. There is a detailed breakdown of the size of each group, how many call themselves Buddhists and how many actually know and practice it, which languages they speak, their strengths and how to overcome them, their weaknesses and how to take advantage of them, an overview of their history, their culture and the best ways to evangelize them. The book is filled with fascinating and beautiful color photos of all of these peoples, many of them little-known. It makes one very sad to think that these gentle, smiling, innocent folk are in now in the sights of worldly-wise missionaries determined to undermine their faith and destroy their ancient cultures.

However, Hattaway book is also interesting for the lurid glimpse it gives into the bizarre mentality and the equally bizarre theology of the evangelical Christianity. In the preface Hattaway asks, "Does it break God's heart today that hundreds of millions of Buddhists are marching to hell with little or no gospel witness? Does it break the Savior's heart that millions worship lifeless idols instead of the true, glorious Heavenly Father?" No wonder the evangelicals are always so angry and defensive, so self-conscious and full of nervous energy. Every day they live with the contradictory belief that their God is full of love and yet condemns people to eternal hell-fire, even people who have never heard of him. Like a man who has to continually pump air into a leaking balloon to keep it inflated, they have to keep

insisting that Buddhism is just an empty worthless idolatry when they know very well that this is not true. That must be a real strain too. Throughout his book Hattaway repeats all the old lies, slanders and half-truths that missionaries peddled in the 19th century but which most mainline Christians gave up on a hundred years ago.

Hattaway claims that Buddhists, like other non-Christians, are leading empty meaningless lives and are actually just waiting to hear the Gospel. Not surprisingly, the statistics he presents to his readers do not always bear this out. He shows that some Buddhist groups have been subjected to quite intense evangelization for decades and yet have chosen to keep their faith. For example, 32% of Kyerung of Nepal have heard the Gospel but “few have understood the heart of the message.” Hattaway tells us that “the American Baptists worked in the Tovyan area (of Burma) for many decades, but most of the converts they made were among the Karen people. They found the Tovyan people “slow to respond to the gospel – a pattern that continues to this day.” Dedicated and self-sacrificing missionaries have labored in Thailand for over 140 years but have made only miniscule numbers of converts. According to Hattaway, there are 2000 foreign missionaries operating in Chiangmai - more than the actual number of Christians in the city. It is hearting to know that amongst evangelicals Thailand has been dubbed “the graveyard of missionaries.” Twenty one percent of Lao Ga people have been evangelized but “Christianity has yet to make any impact on this people group.” Forty two percent of the Lemo have been told about Jesus but their “strong belief in Buddhism and their isolated cultural mind-set have prevented them from accepting the Gospel.” Of course, Hattaway’s isolated cultural mind-set prevents him from even considering that these people might have decided not to become Christians because Buddhism gives them the emotional, intellectual and spiritual sustenance they need. So he has to explain why

so many Buddhists remain what he calls “resistant peoples” some other way. To him it is because of fear (p.217), intellectual laziness (p.149), greed and blindness (p.172) and of course “demonic opposition” (p.190). Another cause is delusion, as for example amongst the Palaung of northern Burma, who are so completely deluded that “they believe they have the truth in Buddhism” (p.217).

Of course, Hattaway is also crafty enough to know that the stability and cultural integrity of traditional Buddhist societies is a major hindrance to their evangelization. Civil wars such as in Sri Lanka and Cambodia are literally a god-send for the missionaries. Hatthaway calls the disruption and displacement of the Loba people of Nepal by several huge floods “a God-given opportunity” (p.168). Like blowflies to a dying animal, evangelical missionaries swarm around communities in need so they can win converts while disguising their efforts as 'aid work' and 'humanitarian relief.' Unfortunately, many genuine and decent Christians in the West, unaware of this hidden agenda, donate money to World Vision and similar organizations that use aid as a conversion technique. But while many Buddhists have rejected the missionaries' message others have succumbed to it. Thirty one percent of the Tamangs of Nepal have now become Christians. The first missionaries arrived in Mongolia in 1990 and within a few years they had made thousands of converts, mainly among the young. This phenomenal growth has now slowed considerably but the number of evangelical agencies operating within the country has grown enormously and there are still almost no books on Buddhism in Mongolian. In China today, Christianity is growing so fast that churches can hardly be built quick enough to hold all the new converts. The gentle hill tribes people of Thailand and Laos are falling prey to the missionaries one by one.

These and the numerous other successes are not just because the missionaries have been so unscrupulous and persistent but because Buddhists have been so

indifferent, so slow to see the danger and even more slow to respond to it in any effective manner. In Thailand millions are spent on glittering ceremonies, huge Buddha statues and gold leaf for covering stupas but almost nothing on Buddhist literature, religious education and social services for the hill tribes. Another “God-given opportunity” for the missionaries is the general lackadaisical attitude within the much of the Sangha. In one of the most revealing (about the mentality of both missionaries and the monks) and troubling parts of this book is Bryan Lurry's account of the four months he stayed in a monastery in the Shan states in north-eastern Burma. He was there to assess the prospects of converting Buddhist monks and he went away full of optimism. I fear that his optimism was not entirely misplaced. The abbot where Lurry stayed allowed him to teach the monks English (using the Bible as a text of course), show a film on the life of Christ and later even conduct regular Bible classes for the monks. Uninformed Western Buddhists might laud this as yet another example of Buddhist tolerance, albeit misplaced tolerance. I suspect that it was actually due to ignorance and to that indifference to everything that does not rock the boat or contravene traditional patterns of behavior that is so prevalent in much of the Sangha. As a part of his strategy to understand their thinking, Lurry asked his ‘friends’ a series of questions. To the question “What is the most difficult Buddhist teaching to follow?” some monks answered not eating after noon, not being able to drink alcohol and one said to attain nirvana. To the question “If you could change one thing about yourself what would it be?” the replies included to be stronger, taller, to change the shape of the nose and to have more pale skin. When asked why they had joined the monastery not one of the monk mentioned an interest in the Dhamma, in meditation or in the religious life in general. As is usual in much of the Buddhist world, they had probably ordained simply because it is the tradition to do so.

When Lurry asked the monks if they would ever disrobe for any reason “my students expressed their desire to leave the temple in order to be soldiers in the Shan Independence army...They did not see a contradiction in the fact that, as monks, they are literally not supposed to kill a mosquito, much less another human being.” Lurry admits that he was really surprised that so few of the replies he got suggested any deep knowledge of Buddhism or an apparent genuine religiosity. Having lived in monasteries for years I am sad to say that none of the monk’s replies surprised me in the least. All too often today the Buddhist monastic life consists of little more than rote learning, unthinking acceptance of traditional beliefs, an endless round of mind-numbing rituals, going to danas and having long naps. Fortunately, many Buddhist communities are holding out against missionary efforts but with poor religious education and little leadership from a sedate Sangha, how long will they continue to be able to continue to do so? Something has to be done and it has to be done soon.

Another old missionary calumny repeated throughout Hattaway's book is that Buddhists live in constant terror of devils and demons. This accusation is rather amusing coming from the evangelical Christians who see almost everything they don't like as the machinations of Satan and his minions. Lurry says of his experience, “I must admit that the temples intimidated me. I saw many items that discouraged me from entering. At some temples, fierce-looking statues of creatures with long fangs and sharp claws guard the entrance. Guarding the main hall of many temples are two large statues of dragons with multiple heads on either side of the staircase...If such images were on the outside of the temple, what would I find on the inside? I half imagined that these creatures would somehow come to life and attempt to harm me” (p..234). I can understand how simple, often illiterate hill tribesmen in the backblocks of Burma could be frightened of malevolent spirits. But Mr. Lurry is a graduate of the University of North Texas and he is frightened of bits of painted

cement and plaster used to decorate Buddhist temples. So it would seem that its quite easy to scare even well-educated evangelical Christians!

Nine pages in Peoples of the Buddhist World are devoted to the Sinhalese, the native people of Sri Lanka, long a target of missionary endeavors. Despite nearly 500 years of close contact with Christianity only 4% of Sinhalese are Christian and this is despite periods when their religion was severely disadvantaged and even actively persecuted. It both perplexes and infuriates the evangelists that they have had so little success in this staunchly Buddhist island.

Since the late 1950's the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka has tacitly accepted its minority status and for the most part adapted a live-and-let-live attitude towards Buddhism. It has continued its conversion efforts but in a low-key and respectful way. But starting in the 1990's evangelical organizations have literally swamped Sri Lanka and they have a 'no quarter asked for, none given' attitude. So far most of their converts have been amongst Catholics, to the consternation of the Catholic Church, but of course the real target is the Buddhists. Buddhist monks have been calling on the government to enact laws against conversion. But is this really the best solution? It is quite understandable that the Sinhalese do not like their religion being referred to as 'Satanic devil worship' especially by foreigners, which is what most of the missionaries in the country are.

Some years ago a deeply respected Sinhalese monk died and there was a veritable outpouring of grief among the Buddhist public. At the very time of this monk's funeral the leader of a house church in an outer suburb of Colombo, let off fireworks, the usual way people express delight or celebration in Sri Lanka. Naturally, the Buddhists around this church were deeply offended and although no violence occurred some very angry words were exchanged. I happened to witness the locals' confrontation with this church leader. He insisted that his crackers had

nothing to do with the monk's funeral but was unable to give a convincing reason why he had ignited them. Throughout his encounter with his neighbors he was brazen, unapologetic about his actions and dismissive of the peoples' hurt feelings.

Hattaway's book highlights incidents of violence against Christians in Sri Lanka and elsewhere which have unfortunately started to become all too common. Of course, what he fails to mention is that it is only the evangelicals, not Catholics or mainline Christians, who attract such negative reactions. And of course he fails to mention why people sometimes get so angry at the evangelicals. The fact is that it is their bad-mannered pushiness and their complete insensitivity to the religious feelings of others that is the cause of such violence. This is not to excuse the violence but only to explain why it happens. It is also true that some of the more extreme evangelists even sometimes deliberately provoke confrontations. I have two evangelical tracts from Sri Lanka – one insists that villages must become “a battlefield for souls” and the other says that Christians must “confront the unsaved, yes even forcibly confront them, and compel them to make a decision.” And it is not just Buddhists who are offended by the evangelicals' rude aggressive behavior. A Chinese Thai born-again Christian once informed me that the Pope is actually “the prostitute of the Anti-Christ” and showed me the Bible passage that proved it. I could only laugh at his half-baked hermeneutics. But how would a devout Catholic have felt being told such a thing?

The section on Sri Lanka in Hattaway's book is written by Tilak Rupasinghe and Vijaya Karunaratna, two well-known evangelical preachers. They gleefully highlight Sri Lanka's many woes – civil war, high suicide rate, corruption, insurrection – and of course present this as just more evidence that Buddhism is false. Then they make the bold claim, “In Christ there can be healing from the wounds of injustice, oppression and ethnic hatred...In Christ there can be hope for

the redemption of the nation, its land, its language, its culture and its people.” This is a seductive promise and one that some people might be willing to listen to. But of course it is the same old spurious promise missionaries have always made in the lands they try to evangelize, “What a mess your country is in! Your gods have failed. Accept Jesus Christ and everything will be wonderful.” But does Christianity really do a better job of solving social problems? The evidence that it does is very thin. Christianity failed miserably to bring peace to northern Ireland, in fact, it was the main cause of the problem. Germany’s long tradition of Catholicism and Protestantism did not prevent Nazism taking root there. South Africa’s Dutch Reformed Church was an ardent supporter of apartheid and all its oppression and cruelty. The prevalence of evangelical Christianity in the southern United States, the so-called Bible Belt, has not prevented it being the poorest and most racist part of that country. And the racial segregation in the south is never more obvious than on Sunday morning when black and white people still go to separate churches. Hattaway’s book is or at least should be a wake-up call for we Buddhists. Unless we reform the Sangha, better organize ourselves and make more of an effort to both know and apply our religion the Light of Asia may be snuffed out.

Peoples of the Buddhist World

by Paul Hattaway

Piquant Editions

Carlisle, 2004.