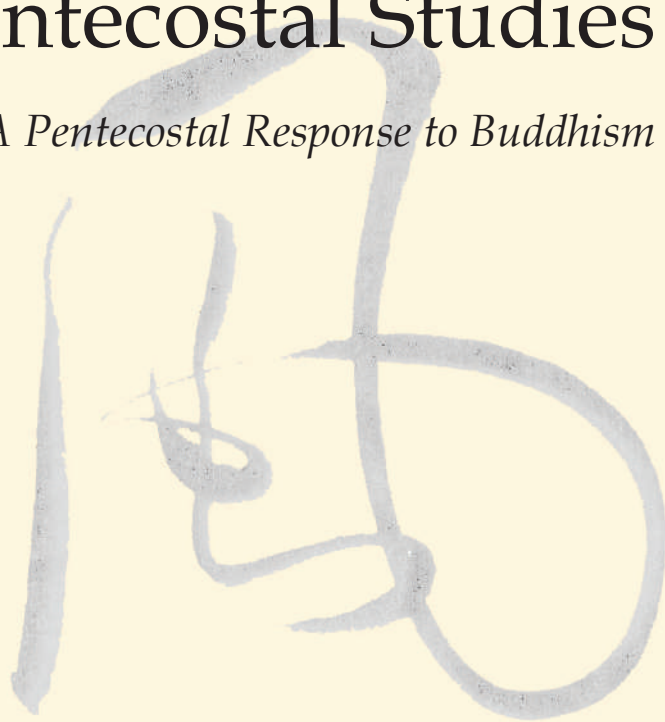


# Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies

*A Pentecostal Response to Buddhism*



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**Some Introductory Thoughts on a Pentecostal Response to Buddhism**  
by Alan Johnson

When I heard Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies (AJPS) was doing a theme issue on Pentecostal responses to Buddhism, a number of questions immediately came to mind. It seemed to me that the phrase “a Pentecostal response to Buddhism” begged for three clarifications:

1. Why is a response by Pentecostals needed for the Buddhist world?
2. Why is a uniquely Pentecostal response needed?
3. Whose Pentecostal response are we looking at?

I begin with the following caveat: I am not a trained theologian, preferring rather to call myself an armchair theologian, meaning that (a) I love the Bible, having read it repeatedly and deeply; (b) I love exegetical commentaries and biblical theology work; and (c) I have been thinking about these things for nearly 40 years now. Being a Pentecostal missionary and practitioner for over three decades in the Buddhist world, my thoughts here grow out of my experiences of working in Thailand plus my interactions with others working in the Buddhist world. In this essay I will address the above three questions and conclude with some personal reflections regarding Pentecostal missiology in the future.

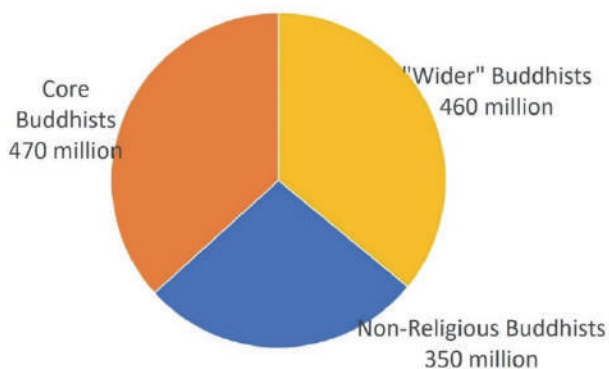
**Why is a Response by Pentecostals Needed for the Buddhist World?**

The answer to this question is rather straightforward. Buddhism, in all three of its major streams—Theravada in South and Southeast Asia, Mahayana in China and North East Asia, and Vajrayana (better known as Tibetan Buddhism)—have all been notoriously difficult arenas regarding a response to the Gospel message and development of robust church movements.

Counting Buddhist religionists is a challenge because, as Brian Morris says, while it is clearly “appropriate to concede that Buddhism is

a religion...it fits uneasily into a theistic definition.”<sup>1</sup> Its indifference towards a creator-god and the aid of spirits to achieve nirvana cause some to see it as more of a philosophy or ethical religion. Another challenge comes from the reality of configurations of religious and philosophical influences that are combined into a total reality for the practitioner on the ground. It is tempting to separate, for analytical purposes, the different influences, such as traditional religions, Brahmanism, Taoism, Confucianism, Bon, Tantrism, and Shinto, in the various streams of Buddhism and somehow conclude that this admixture means they are not real Buddhists or at least not good Buddhists. This makes for radically different numerical estimates, depending on whether peoples that are influenced by the Buddhist worldview at some level are counted, or if such estimates are limited to core Buddhist countries where Buddhism is more public, or is legally considered the national religion. In an attempt to capture this diversity, the *Atlas of Global Christianity* uses three different categories—the core, the “wider” as in Chinese folk religionists, and the non-religious who follow Buddhist practices—and arrive at a total of 1.29 billion people<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1).

#### 1.29 billion Buddhists in the world



**Figure 1. Total Buddhists from the Atlas of Global Christianity, 2010**

It is much easier to count the presence of Christianity among Buddhists simply because there are not nearly as many of them. In most

<sup>1</sup>Brian Morris, *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 45.

<sup>2</sup>Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910-2010* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 2009), 14-16.

countries with Buddhist peoples, Protestant Christianity as a whole is 1% or less, often times after some 200 years of missionary effort. What makes this low and slow response even more remarkable is the fact that much of the Buddhist world has been fairly accessible and open to Christian mission. With the exception of the Tibetan homeland, Christian mission has had a presence among Buddhist peoples, and there are Buddhist-background believer churches in most of these countries. Yet, the overall response numbers in terms of adherents and churches remain disappointingly low. With the two exceptions of Korea and Cambodia, which now have significant numbers of Christians, one does not have to look too far to see that the massive social disruption of war and genocide created windows for openness to change.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear that some kind of response is needed to the challenge of seeing Buddhist societies having access to culturally relevant Gospel communication and churches that flourish in the local cultural environment. Having an identity as a missionary people, we Pentecostals, who are a major bloc in World Christianity and in the global force of cross-cultural workers and who have a record of success in much of the global South, need to respond to the spiritual need of the Buddhist world.

### **Why is a Uniquely Pentecostal Response Needed?**

In mulling this over, I came up with three reasons: two that are internal to Pentecostals themselves and a third that grows out of the history and context of Pentecostal work among Buddhists.

Concerning the first reason, from the perspective of Pentecostals, our identity is forged in the vision of taking the Good News of Jesus Christ to the whole world. Biblically, we see our experience of the Holy Spirit as giving us power to bear witness to “the ends of the earth.” Historically, the pneumatological interest of those who were immersed in the turn-of-the-century revival was to speed up world evangelization.

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<sup>3</sup>Korea’s Protestant growth happened in the twentieth century and peaked in the mid-1990s at 8.7 million members which was about 20% of the population; see Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 40-41,46. The massive growth among the Han in China both in the Three-Self and house church movements, which includes religionists influenced by Buddhism at some level, is well known, although the numbers are estimates. In contrast to conversions numbering in the millions is the case of Cambodia. Although the country is only 2.05% Evangelical and 3.4% Christian (Joshua Project) all Christian growth has occurred when the country was reestablished following the Khmer Rouge genocide and the Vietnamese occupation since 1989. Over the past thirty years, starting from approximately 200 believers, there are now hundreds of thousands of Protestant Christians. This growth is particularly significant because it is located in the heart of the Theravada Buddhist world.

Thus, when a religious bloc, like Buddhism, elicits a relatively small response to the Gospel, it is natural for Pentecostals to be moved to pray and hear the call of the Spirit to go.

The second reason, which may not be as clearly articulated in our own reflections on mission, is that Pentecostals feel they have something to offer in situations where the Gospel's progress is slow. It is a well-known fact that the Christian faith, in general, has done much better among the primal religions than among the major world religions, with Pentecostal and Charismatic missions being the most successful. This numerical success of charismatically inclined Christianity has created the idea (in some quarters, at least) that Pentecostal ministry is *the* answer to fruitful missionary effort in any setting. That assumption has given rise to a discourse that says that if we just had more of the Spirit and power, things would come aright and the difficult group under consideration would respond similarly to what we have seen in the large revivals and Pentecostal movements in Latin America, Africa, and Pacific Oceania.

As to the third reason, I am tossing myself into the ring, since, by and large, the expectations of Pentecostals working among Buddhist peoples have not been realized. I am wondering if the relative lack of success for Pentecostal mission in the Buddhist world can serve as an *invitation* for us to learn about ourselves, and deepen our understanding, plus gain new experiences of how the Spirit works in cross-cultural mission to a Great Tradition religion.

Because my point here concerns the idea of a modest response to Pentecostal ministry, I will begin with the basis for that assertion, starting on the outside and working into my own experience in Thailand. Clearly, there are some large Pentecostal and Charismatic ministries present in places with Buddhist populations; therefore, in what sense do I mean 'a modest response'? First, as a decades-long reader of the prayer guide *Operation World*, I could not help but notice as I prayed through the Buddhist countries of the world, that there were no striking anomalies in the number of Pentecostals and Charismatics as compared with non-Pentecostals. For example, where Christianity grew large (e.g., South Korea, Cambodia), everybody grew; and where things were small and slow, everyone was slow. Second, over my years of working in Asia, I have interacted with colleagues in other countries with Buddhist populations; and it is always a story of challenges and slow growth. Lastly, my own experience as a Pentecostal missionary with a Thai Pentecostal organization leaves the impression that all Protestant Christian entities here grow relatively slowly. While some Charismatic/Pentecostal churches have become large and developed their own networks, the reality is that, outside of the mother church, the

daughter churches remain small and within the size range of all other Protestant churches.

My suspicions about this were confirmed by Martin Visser's doctoral research on conversion patterns among Thai Protestants. What he found was a mixed bag quantitatively when it came to Pentecostals and Charismatics.<sup>4</sup> He separated out growth among the ethnic Thai from tribal peoples; those are the numbers to focus on in Table 1. Note that he uses the term 'Charismatic' to include Pentecostal as well as Charismatic groups. What is of interest relative to my argument is that denominational missionary-founded non-Pentecostal/Charismatic churches grew at an annual average growth rate (AAGR) of 5.1%, with non-Presbyterian groups under the Christ Church of Thailand (CCT) growing at a rate of 7.6%, whereas those founded by Pentecostal denominational missionaries grew at only 3.6%.

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<sup>4</sup>Marten Visser, *Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand*, vol. 47, *Missiological Research in the Netherlands* (Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer, 2008). Visser designed his research such as to ensure that the factors of theology and geography did not interfere with the analysis. To that end, he used a three-fold division geographically—Bangkok, provincial capitals, and rural—and a three-fold division theologically—the Christ Church of Thailand (CCT), which is a member of the WCC; Pentecostal groups, which emphasize charismatic gifts (particularly speaking in tongues and healing); and all other denominations outside the CCT, which share an evangelical, non-charismatic identity (8). Using those categories gave him a 3x3 matrix on geography and theology, and he sampled 10 from each category. He ended up collecting data from 94 churches with a total of 3,197 respondents (9). Because it was a study on conversion church growth, Visser used the annual conversion growth rate (AACGR) as the variable to represent conversion growth. The research showed that the annual average growth rate (AAGR) of Thai churches reaching ethnic Thai of 4.2% is mostly explained by conversion growth, with biological growth being comparatively small (10).

Table 16. Protestants per denominational grouping

Denominational grouping		Denominations*	Churches	Members	% of total Protestants	AAGR members since 1978**
CCT Presbyterian Districts	Thai	11	407	49,314	15	1.2
	Tribal	9	133	15,695	5	12
	Total	11	540	65,009	20	2.1
CCT non-Presbyterian districts	Thai	5	194	20,194	6	7.6
	Tribal	5	590	77,522	24	6.6
	Total	8	784	97,716	30	6.7
Non-charismatic mission founded Denominations	Thai	34	669	32,126	10	5.1
	Tribal	27	412	28,146	9	10.2
	Total	37	1,081	60,272	19	6.6
Non-charismatic independent Denominations	Thai	4	58	2,364	1	9.0
	Tribal	9	68	4,513	1	N/A
	Total	9	126	6,877	2	13.8
Charismatic mission founded denominations	Thai	12	340	23,114	7	3.6
	Tribal	9	40	3,082	1	N/A
	Total	12	380	26,196	8	4.1
Charismatic independent denominations	Thai	4	493	30,952	10	16.8
	Tribal	2	4	352	0	N/A
	Total	5	497	31,304	10	16.9
Non-denominational Churches	Thai	N/A	385	22,008	7	9.9
	Tribal	N/A	99	6,359	2	N/A
	Total	N/A	484	28,367	9	10.8
Churches of unknown affiliation	Thai	N/A	100	5,669	2	N/A
	Tribal	N/A	30	1,638	1	N/A
	Total	N/A	130	7,307	2	N/A
Total	Thai	70	2646	185,741	57	4.2
	Tribal	61	1,376	137,307	43	8.0
	Total	82	4,022	323,048	100	5.4

Table 1. Average Annual Growth Rate of Thai Protestants Among Ethnic Thai, 1978-1978

Visser's classification of 'independent church' movements includes those founded by Thai people and not by denominational missionaries. Within that category, non-Charismatic independents grew at a 9.0% annual rate, while Charismatic independents grew at 16.8%. This latter number, however, needs an asterisk, because it reflects primarily the growth of one movement, which turned out to be very controversial and was eventually asked to leave the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT), one reason being the 'swallowing' of existing churches into its system. The movement eventually imploded to where now several streams of these churches are back under the EFT.

Before looking at what we might learn from our engagement with the Buddhist world, let me clarify what I mean by 'a Pentecostal response'? Over the years, I have puzzled over things when people talk

about ‘a Pentecostal view’ of this or that. Certainly, there are unique emphases that come from our pneumatology, but I have not always been clear as to whether or not there are specific Pentecostal ways of looking at those things.

One day I posed the question of a unique Pentecostal viewpoint to a theologian friend, David Tremontozzi of Continental Theological Seminary, and found his answer very helpful. In his view, when talking about Pentecostal theology, we are looking to account for the experience of the Holy Spirit in ‘doing’ theology. David illustrated it thusly: if Pentecostal theologians think in certain ways about the work of the Spirit in the Bible, how does that inform how we think when looking at a completely different subject? In this way, there *is* a unique Pentecostal response of viewpoint on any subject, because that response is informed by our experience and understanding of the Spirit.

With David’s perspective in mind, I want to frame the ‘invitation’ that the Buddhist world presents to Pentecostals not in terms of what we are doing among Buddhists, but rather in terms of what could or should be explored from a Pentecostal perspective as it relates to our efforts to plant and grow the church among Buddhist peoples. I admit that Pentecostals probably have not tended to look to their failures, or lack of success, as a source for theological reflection. However, for many of us laboring in the Buddhist world, that lack of robust success has pushed us to ask questions we might never have asked if things had just worked. I am going to suggest two areas (likely there would be others), both based on personal interest gained from my own experiences.

The first area has to do with something firmly within the Pentecostal mission wheelhouse—signs and wonders. To set the stage, I’ve always felt uncomfortable in missions strategy and practice with silver-bullet, single-dimension kinds of answers. Some of my interaction in the Buddhist world with Pentecostals (both local and expatriate) reveals the logic that, since Pentecostals have been successful in what are classed as ‘power encounter’ kinds of things, we should certainly be successful among Buddhists if we would just rely on the power of the Holy Spirit in signs and wonders. As already noted, the problem is that this claim has not held true among Buddhists. While we have signs and wonders aplenty, this has not resulted in robust planting and growth of churches that outstrips non-Pentecostal efforts.

From listening to many Thai conversion stories, the vast majority of those stories have included some kind of experience with spiritual power. Thus, in essence, it stops being an independent variable that can influence other things if everybody has it more or less. If people are experiencing power in some way, but it is not resulting in conversions that stick and does not lead to solid churches, then we need to consider



other variables. It has been simply assumed in the West that people interpret power experiences mediated through a Christian as having something to do with God and this Jesus and has moved them towards faith. But this is simply not the case in the Buddhist world; it's much more complex.

While definitely needing to keep the biblical emphasis on signs and wonders, what does our Pentecostal experience and understanding of the Holy Spirit's work say about an ambiguous response to power or about reinterpretations of power? Is there a lens of the experience of the Spirit to help us query why signs and wonders have not been sufficient in bringing about the longing for response to the Gospel? We Pentecostals have been used to accounting for our successes through the lens of our experience of the Spirit but not our failures. What Pentecostal 'tools' do we have for people who start to follow Jesus because of an experience of power but then leave him when he seemingly doesn't come through for them later?

The second area is, in my opinion, the one needing the most reflection, because it's arguably the great need in most of the Buddhist world where you have any level of response. It starts with the Buddhist's perception that the Christian faith is alien; and in most of the Buddhist world, ethnicity and being Buddhist are intimately tied. Thus, to become a Christian is to deny one's nationality/ethnicity. This perception has been reinforced where people have responded positively to the Gospel and churches have developed but, for the most part, with very foreign forms. In Thailand, the result is that, after nearly 200 years of Protestant Christianity and some 300,000 ethnic Thai Protestant Christians, Christianity is still seen as the religion of the 'white western world'. And it's still hard for many to conceive of a Thai person becoming a Christian.

What is important here to my point is that Thai Protestants do not see the way they live out their Christian faith as being somehow foreign; rather it's just the right way to follow Jesus that was handed down or that they were born-again into. And Thai Pentecostal Christians are just the same. People coming from the outside see clearly the borrowing of western Evangelical forms in everything—e.g., ways of doing evangelism, framing of the Gospel story, the music, the structure of church services, use of 'Christianese', the altar call-style crisis conversion for professing faith and praying the sinners prayer, small group structures, emphasis on individualism in decision-making, a general disdain or reticence to use ritual, gatherings focused around preaching, and one-to-many communication, to name a few.

Thai Protestant Christianity shares a rather consistent version of the way that the Gospel is propagated and churches are formed and grow. You have your denominational and doctrinal flavors; but in the main,

there is a constrained set of ways in which the Christian faith is lived out and practiced that tends to be very foreign in its forms and ethos. When Pentecostalism does something different, it does so within the parameters of those foreign forms, which intensify the experience. If a particular form would include bearing witness, then Pentecostals might do it more boldly and consistently. However, what's apparent to outsiders walking into Thai churches and Thai society is that a major obstacle to acceptance of the Christian faith is its 'foreignness'.

In teaching future pastors and workers at our small Bible school, I developed a little scenario to see if I could tease out from them any kind of connection between cultural issues and Thai response. It is common for Christians in ministry to talk about—and acknowledge—the ethnic Thai response to the Gospel as being slow. One day I asked my students to think about who or what is to blame for this slow expansion of the Gospel. Obviously, we cannot blame God, so what are the other possibilities? It fascinated me that each time I did this, the response progression was the same—i.e., first, blaming themselves (the Christians); second, blaming the Thai people as being spiritually darkened; and third, blaming Satan who blinds them.

I would next press the students to think of something else. However, no one ever came up with an answer that looked at cultural and structural issues. Yet from the perspective of cross-cultural workers, there are all kinds of impeding issues that result from using foreign forms rather than thinking about how to do something in a way more appropriate for Thai culture.

I would close our session by illustrating my point using just one cultural dimension—that of decision-making. In the individualistic West, people can make their own decisions; but in most other places, the decision-making process ranges from the need to consult and get approval all the way to absolute obedience and sanctions for non-compliance. I would then illustrate how evangelistic methods of westerners are extremely individualistic (i.e., western) and generally ignore family dynamics, which is one reason why so many 'professions of faith' never become a part of a local church. I remind them that they're not thinking like Thais when choosing a way to relate to people and their families as they attempt to share the Gospel.

All this raises a number of questions regarding the relationship of our Pentecostal experience to what happens when the Gospel crosses into a new cultural setting. When we talk about cultural and structural issues, these are the arenas of contextually sensitive ministry. And it is in these arenas where local Christians are making decisions on how such biblical functions as gathering for worship, evangelism, discipleship, etc. are to be carried out in their own cultural setting. If these things matter for the

progress of the Gospel, then why is it that Pentecostals (both local and expatriate) don't relate these kinds of choices and decisions to their Pentecostal experience of the Spirit? Or farther, why have Pentecostals not been led by the Spirit in some way to crack the hegemony of foreign forms in the Thai Protestant church that clearly are a hindering factor in Thai response? And why have they not been led by the Spirit to find a contextual solution to the identity issue that keeps so many people from responding?

For over twenty years now, I have been involved in helping new missionaries and those involved in graduate programs think about contextual issues. It's interesting to me that people often see this as something technical and conceptual but not spiritual. One reason this may be the case is because very few Pentecostals have written specifically on the subject of contextualization and the role of the Holy Spirit.

An exception to this is John Easter, who did his doctoral research on the role of the Spirit in contextualization in Malawi. He noted that

despite the rising presence of Pentecostals and Charismatics among the ranks of the global Church and the subsequent influence leading to a renewed interest in the Spirit's work in the world, scarcely has any serious discourse of the Spirit's activity in the contextualization process taken place.<sup>5</sup>

His literature review of Pentecostal reflection on contextualization comprises but two pages; and in a content footnote in which his scholarly work on the relationship between the Holy Spirit and mission theology and practice going back two decades, there were only six entries.<sup>6</sup> I am not familiar with all of them, but none addressed the kinds of questions raised above that are very pertinent to ministry in the Buddhist world.

The one person who has written explicitly about Pentecostal contextualization is Allan Anderson. In his view:

Pentecostalism has contextualized Christianity, mostly unconscious of the various theories behind the process, and mostly unnoticed by outsiders. The experience of the fullness of the Spirit is the central plank of Pentecostal and Charismatic theology, and it is in this focus on experience that contextualization occurs. . . . Rather than being theorized about, a contextual

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<sup>5</sup>John Easter, "The Spirit, Context and Mission: The Contextualization Practice of the Malawi Assemblies of God with Implications for Pentecostal Missiology" (Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2011), 23.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 22, footnote 28.

theology is acted out in the rituals, liturgies, and daily experiences of these Pentecostals.<sup>7</sup>

He has definitely captured something very important in the dynamic of the way Pentecostals operate. In his research on David Yonggi Cho of Yoido Full Gospel in Korea, Anderson says:

One of the main reasons for the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism has been its remarkable ability to adapt itself to different cultural and social contexts and give authentically contextualized expressions to Christianity. Pentecostalism is inherently adaptable to contextualization: the vibrancy, enthusiasm, spontaneity and spirituality for which Pentecostals are so well known and their willingness to address problems of sickness, poverty, unemployment, loneliness, evil spirits and sorcery has directly contributed to this growth. We see these features in the ministry of David Yonggi Cho.<sup>8</sup>

In his work on Cho, Anderson shows that Cho was responding to the influence of the worldview of shamanism that permeates and underlies Korean society,<sup>9</sup> transforming symbols in a synthesizing process where Pentecostalism interacted with Korean shamanism and Buddhism and Korean spirituality via such things as Prayer Mountain and dealing with grief and the need for healing.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, the emphasis on blessing and prosperity was his “theological counteraction” to the *han* (grief) created by the ravages of the Korean War.<sup>11</sup>

I think this is a great start on thinking about the work of the Spirit in context issues; but there are still large unexplored areas where Pentecostal cross-cultural workers need to be reflecting on their experiences through the lens of pneumatology. What Anderson and others document about the Pentecostal experience on the ground, and what he acknowledges is an unconscious process, falls into a pattern I call ‘auto-contextualization’. By this I mean that local Christians embedded in culture make automatic culturally-based decisions about things they do as a Christian that they don’t reflect on. This is not a

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<sup>7</sup>Allan H. Anderson, "Contextualization in Pentecostalism: A Multicultural Perspective," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 41, no. 1 (2017): 34.

<sup>8</sup>Allan H. Anderson, "The Contextual Pentecostal Theology of David Yonggi Cho," *Asian Journal for Pentecostal Studies* 7, no. 1 (2004): 102.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

spiritual process *per se* nor one that's guided by the Holy Spirit. For instance, in America, pastors don't have to be told to keep their church grounds and buildings clean and neat. That already being a value, when you become a Christian and start attending church, 'clean and neat' is going to follow, for we innately know that a dirty environment will not be long tolerated. Thus, if you want folks to keep coming back, such things need to be attended to. Another area of auto-contextualization is in the way people lead—It is from the gut, from what Carrithers calls narrative knowledge, not the paradigmatic knowledge of seminars and the classroom.<sup>12</sup>

The kind of auto-contextualization that Anderson seems to describe is where people who are embedded in the ethos, longings, and quests of that cultural setting experience the Holy Spirit and automatically begin to shape their responses through the traditional channels of that culture but now via the power of the Spirit and the Gospel. I think Anderson has nailed it regarding Cho, in that this is not syncretism, but rather Pentecostal answers presented through the channels of Korean spirituality. Such is truly contextual work that's Spirit-driven because local people are experiencing the Spirit and being moved by him to work in the lives of others through familiar channels—the resulting 'version' of faith being very local and indigenous on those dimensions.

Looping back to my earlier point concerning the Buddhist world's modest response to the Gospel of the Pentecostals, what I have been trying to illustrate is that there are other contextual decisions lying *outside* of this auto-contextual phenomenon that are implicated in the slow Gospel expansion among Buddhist peoples. In fact, Pentecostal ministry among them seems to have the same earmarks that Anderson notes, but is not resulting in response and in robust communities of faith. It has to do with contextual decisions that are not automatic; and as a culturally embedded Christian saved into a particular 'version' of the faith, I do not see them due to my Christian experience filters.

It is at the nexus of the version of faith, particularly the forms that one has received for how one 'does church' (i.e., the entire gamut of beliefs and practices as a people walk with Jesus) in that setting, plus the relationship of those forms to other potential local options to express the same biblical functions. Certainly, I think the Holy Spirit is concerned about this for his people, and thus, is worthy of the kind of Pentecostal reflection Tremmentozzi is talking about. It is precisely here where I think the modest response among Buddhists opens the door for looking at something that has apparently not been broached by Pentecostal

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<sup>12</sup>Alan R. Johnson, "An Anthropological Approach to Leadership: Lessons Learned on Improving Leadership Practice," *Transformation* 24, no. 3 & 4 (July and October 2007).

practitioners. One of John Easter's key findings in his work with Malawi Assemblies of God (MAG) pastors seems to point in this direction:

Second, while acknowledging the Spirit's role in supernaturally aiding the contextualization process related to both evangelism and discipleship, the findings also confirm the struggle of respondents to adequately address how MAG pastors go about analyzing diverse contextual dynamics inherently part of their contextual framework.<sup>13</sup>

John told me that, when he was doing focus groups and talking about cultural issues, how excited the participants got and were asking why they did not do this kind of thing in their Bible training.

What I am wondering about is the work of the Spirit in helping us see things that lie outside the normal range of our thought processes, where things like our local cultures remain invisible to us and where we only see them when coming into contact with other cultural patterns. John's research (as illustrated in Figure 2) shows that we need to do more work on the relationship between learning about culture and the work of the Spirit in applying this in our ministry.<sup>14</sup>

History and our own experiences remind us it is quite possible to have a powerful work of the Spirit that then ossifies into a particular way of expressing spirituality once powerful in its original setting but loses its impact when local culture changes. Interestingly, this seems to have happened in Korea where spectacular Protestant growth slowed in the mid-1980s and stopped altogether by 1995.<sup>15</sup> Culture change and ethical issues were a part of this across Protestantism, yet somehow Pentecostals' experience of the Spirit did not render them immune to these issues or enable them to see that such issues were also present in their version of faith. If developing contextually sensitive ministry requires being able to see things that are cultural about our own version of faith, what is the role of the Spirit in promoting or enabling that kind of self-reflexivity?

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<sup>13</sup>Easter, 254.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. 252.

<sup>15</sup>Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 106.



**Figure 2. Role of the Spirit in Contextualization Among Malawi Assemblies of God Pastors.**

### **Whose Pentecostal Response Are We Looking at?**

Are we looking at Pentecostal cross-cultural workers, or local Pentecostal leaders and churches, or Pentecostal national church movements in total? I think all three of these are critical stakeholders, and each has a unique role to play. In what follows, I will discuss these three kinds of groupings through the lenses of my three decades' experience as an Assemblies of God World Missions (AGWM) missionary in Thailand and my work in developing the Institute for Buddhist Studies at APTS in Baguio, Philippines.

In the first third of my missionary career, thinking about the Pentecostal stakeholders never crossed my mind. Being involved with local churches in the Thailand Assemblies of God (TAG) environment, my colleagues and I were all doing our best to plant and develop churches and strengthen the TAG movement. In the late 1990s, I was asked to help establish an Institute for Buddhist Studies at APTS. An institute focusing on Islam, put on by the Center for Ministry to Muslims (now Global Initiative), was already up and running during a semester break period each year. With the idea of adding other institutes over time, one focusing on the Buddhist world was next in line. Its purpose would be to train western and majority world cross-cultural workers and local Christians to better engage Buddhist peoples.

Tasked with this role, I started talking with missionaries, local Christians from Buddhist backgrounds, and national church leadership. One of the questions I asked them had to do with how the fact that they were communicating the Gospel with Buddhists had impacted their approaches. It was from their responses that I began to get a real education. What was initially surprising was the similarity of responses between the cross-cultural workers and the local Christians—so much so that it made me wonder if the latter's views had not been picked up (either explicitly or implicitly) from missionary influence. The third

response was only given by local Christians. Here are each of the three typical responses, followed by my analysis of its meaning and implications.

**1. “We don’t need to learn about Buddhism because these people are not good Buddhists.”** This answer was so pervasive that I actually had to change the name of the trainings from Buddhist Studies to Ministering to People Influenced by the Buddhist Worldview. As someone who spoke Thai, it seemed quite incredible to me that expats and local Christians alike could claim Buddhism was not an issue, since the terminology and concepts are woven warp and woof throughout the language. Thus, I started trying to connect with new workers by taking them on a Buddhist holiday to a local temple that was jam-packed with people and activities and telling them not to let anyone convince them that Buddhism was somehow unimportant.

As I thought about this, I came to realize that this likely stemmed from mapping an orthodox Protestant understanding of what a good Christian is back onto local Buddhists. Because people did not regularly attend temple, engage in traditional religious spirit/cult kinds of activities, and/or read Buddhist texts, meant they were not really Buddhists, but rather they were ‘folk Buddhists’. My response was that we are all folk-something, since there is no religion practiced that’s not culturally embedded. We are folk-Christians with our own versions of faith influenced by both the Bible and local culture that cannot be easily unwoven.

**2. “We don’t need to study Buddhism because that won’t help in getting people to respond.”** Both the missionaries and the local Buddhist-background believers pushed back on the idea that learning about Buddhism would be helpful. Even when I explained that we were not advocating the study of Buddhism in order to argue with or convince them in point-by-point comparisons, the respondents still didn’t think it was necessary. Their reason was that there’s a standard routing in testimony stories and that, by simply being in relationship with and bringing people to church, they will gradually respond over time. All of this could happen without Buddhism *per se* ever being broached. For cross-cultural workers doing ministry in the context of a Buddhist-background church, there is evidence that this works, so why waste time doing something that’s not necessary. What was problematic for me in all of this is the stark reality of their being millions of Buddhists that lie outside of the scope of what their version of faith is reaching. I came to label this the working-in-the-Christian-bubble mentality, where the few



results we have from running our version of faith justifies its continued use and makes learning more about the Buddhist context irrelevant.

**3. “Studying Buddhism is for foreigners; we, being born Buddhist, know what this is all about.”** This was the comment of local Buddhist-background Christians. Although outsiders coming may not think the people they’re working among are serious Buddhists, they are at least aware that Buddhism has something to do with things. I found this response to be a reflection of the ‘Christian bubble’ perspective and also the assumption that being born into it means auto-contextual work would happen. As I have argued above, that has not happened where there are so many ministry ‘things’ local Pentecostals do that are patently foreign in origin and not helpful in their local context.

This disinterest on the part of local believers from a Buddhist background was expressed in a case study back in year 2000 when the Southeast Asia Network (SEANET), an interdenominational network of people focusing on the Buddhist world, was formed. Over the years, there has been a lack of participation from Buddhist-background Christians. Held annually in Thailand, very few Thai have participated. The two who have been most involved are believers whose graduate study advisers had urged them to look at the Christian-Buddhist interface and cultural issues.<sup>16</sup>

I went to visit one of them at his local church to talk about issues of context. He told me the reason contextualization was such a difficult topic was that Thai pastors are enamored with church growth and when he would talk about cultural issues they would think of it as another method to help their church grow. When they realized it was not a method for church growth they would lose interest. He said he found it very difficult to get Thai pastors to listen to him talk about issues of local culture and the gospel. The Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT) actually asked him to train new missionaries in Thai culture in the hopes that perhaps they could influence Thai pastors they connected with. He did tell me that if he can get a fellow Thai pastor to really listen to what he is saying about cultural issues, they do begin to grasp the importance of being more sensitive to Thai cultural dynamics for communicating the gospel and living out the Christian life in the Thai setting. However, the

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<sup>16</sup>Nantachai and Ubolwan Mejudhon did their doctoral work at Asbury Seminary and were encouraged by Darrell Whiteman to look seriously at Thai culture. Bantoon Boonitt did his doctoral work in England and was challenged by John Davis, who worked many years in Thailand, to look at the Christian-Buddhist relationship. These experiences made all of them much more sensitive to Thai cultural issues as they relate to the communication of the Gospel and the shaping of the Christian community. Both Mejudhon and Boonitt participate regularly in SEANET.

lack of there being an agreed-upon Thai term for the whole idea of ‘contextualization’ means it is challenging even to broach the subject.

Having thought long and hard as to why Pentecostal workers plus Buddhist-background believers, pastors, and national church leaders pay so little attention to the Buddhist context they work in, two things come to mind. First, Buddhism is not radical-other like Islam. The fact that there are Buddhist-background, above ground, legal churches takes the edge off needing to learn about it. Second (and conversely), in the Muslim world where church movements are very small or non-existent, one feels the pressure to have to ‘figure things out’ a bit more. The presence of an existing church with its foreign forms creates that ‘Christian bubble’ where, from the inside, it looks like everything is working pretty well.

### **Where Do We Go from Here in Shaping a Pentecostal Response to the Buddhist World?**

I am grateful to AJPS for the vision of producing a theme issue on the Buddhist world. I find a number of things happening today encouraging as I look back where we started twenty years ago. For instance, there are new cross-cultural workers coming into my own organization—the AGWM—who are convinced of the need for more contextually sensitive approaches. Being Pentecostal practitioners, their reflection and research will help us grow in our understanding of the role of the Spirit in contextualization. Mark Durene, AGWM’s Area Director for the Southeastern Asian mainland, has started “Change the Map,” a prayer movement for the Buddhist world. This has led to collaboration between the three AGWM regions that cover the three major streams of Buddhism.

Also, there are some documented church planting movements now that are experiencing Charismatic phenomena; much can be learned from their experiences. And in Thailand, there is a group of Thai pastors now writing and publishing about issues of Thai culture and the Christian faith, which is something that has not happened before. Thus, this is a good time for those of us in Pentecostal circles to pray, think hard, and listen to the Spirit as to how we are to bring the Gospel to the Buddhist world in the days ahead.

Regarding particular areas we need to work on, let me say first that I think all three of the stakeholders I have identified have important roles. In my view, we should start with our biblical texts and ask what does it truly mean to be Pentecostal? Then, we need to take the insights from those texts and use them to challenge the versions of faith we are part of as well as our own methods of work. At the same time, we should be

asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the culturally informed parts of our faith that tends to remain invisible to us. This helps to initiate a process where we learn to continuously ask the Spirit to keep us from ossifying our forms, and to reveal the need to find new forms for communicating the Gospel and living as God's people in Buddhist societies. My hope is that focusing on the Buddhist world will be the start of significant Pentecostal reflection and discussion about the work of the Spirit in developing indigenous forms of the Christian faith.

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