

From Nichiren Buddhism to Christ: Reflections for Cross-Cultural Evangelism and Missional Implications for Discipleship

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Abstract

This article offers insights based on the author's own conversion experience, and it aims to contribute to ongoing conversations around contextual evangelism by identifying common roadblocks and misunderstandings that often hinder the reception of the gospel. By situating personal narrative within a broader missiological framework, this article emphasizes the need for relational and contextualized discipleship of new converts, as well as for saints to engage more deeply with apologetics, as the church participates in the *Missio Dei*.

1. My Personal Testimony—from a cultural Buddhist to positive thinking to new age mysticism to Nichiren Buddhist to Christ

For many people in East Asian communities, the thought of turning to Christ can be daunting—almost unthinkable—because of the heavy consequences that often follow, making it difficult to even consider the possibility of Christianity. From a young age, I was warned never to ‘play with fire’ by even considering Christianity! The cost of truth varies



A native of Singapore, Sharon How was raised in a family that practiced Chinese religious syncretism, blending Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. She later became actively involved in Soka Gakkai, a lay-Buddhist organization rooted in Nichiren Buddhism. While studying in China, Sharon began to wrestle with the emptiness of her beliefs and her spiritual brokenness. In a moment of desperation, she prayed for God to reveal the truth. God answered her prayer through a dream that led her to read the Gospels, where she encountered Christ and surrendered her life to Him. Sharon brings a deeply personal perspective to the intersection of faith, culture, and identity in East Asian communities. Her journey shapes her engagement with questions of beliefs and worldviews, and she seeks to share her story as a testimony to the transformative power of the gospel. Sharon How recently graduated with a Doctorate in Piano Performance from the University of Houston.

among individuals, depending on emotional ties, personal biases, and the weight of long-held customs. For me, following Christ has not led to me being disowned by my family, as it might in other cultures, but my conversion was still perceived as walking away from my family's traditions. Like many Chinese families in Singapore, mine followed a blend of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. After high school, I found myself searching for answers to my existential questions. After exploring positive thinking and new age mysticism, I embraced Nichiren Buddhism because I thought I was satisfied with their answer to human suffering.

Nichiren Buddhism is a branch of Buddhism based on the teachings of the Japanese Buddhist priest Nichiren in the 13th century. In the modern world including the West, it is probably best known through the work of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), one of the largest lay organizations in Buddhism worldwide.

It was not until I moved to China for my undergraduate studies (2014-18) that I began to question the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism. While there had been various benefits I might have felt that I had gained from it, I continued to be a spiritually broken woman who was struggling with anger issues. Deeply aware of my character flaws, I felt a sense of depravity, something that I could not overcome no matter how hard I tried. Supposing that God really exists, somehow I knew I would be punished. Supposing that the teachings of karma really hold, I had no certainty that I had accumulated enough good karma to outweigh the bad karma. The outward "human revolution" I was striving to demonstrate felt hollow because, internally, I had no real transformation. If I had shared my struggles with any Soka Gakkai leaders, they would likely have dismissed them for my lack of Buddhist practice or lack of faith. But being away from my religious community for the first time allowed me to confront these questions without their influence. Reaching a point of exhaustion, I began wondering whether I was heading to a spiritual dead end. As King Solomon rightly declared, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (Prov 16:25).

2. The differences make all the difference, and...

Whether we admit it or not, every worldview has its underlying set of beliefs, philosophies, and principles that shape how its followers engage with life's fundamental questions. Although some congruency exists, such similarities in worldviews are only superficial. Overlooking the deep and fundamental differences is dangerous, especially because this essentially contradicts Jesus' exclusive claim of salvation through Him alone.

While Buddhism and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible, both worldviews recognize that something is wrong with the world and that there are deeper and more pressing questions of life than the physical and the material. As ambassadors of Christ, we can validate their quest (not their answers though, and we shall see why!) and put ourselves in the mindset of the questioner: What are some presuppositions of their worldview? Are there specific claims of a particular worldview that appeal to the questioner? Do these claims truly identify what the questioner is seeking, and how so? (From this point, what might the questioner truly be seeking?)

While a critical evaluation of the teachings of Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Buddhism, and their allure to the world are beyond the scope of this article, the author anticipates a forthcoming article addressing the topic more thoroughly.¹ But here are some factors that have attracted people of all walks of life to this religion:

1. The promise of absolute happiness, i.e. “Happiness-making machine”
2. Feeling that we have our part to play in our own salvation
3. The promise that I can transform my suffering into joy and change my destiny by my own willpower
4. The desire to be our own God and to define our own morality that goes along with culture
5. Its humanistic efforts towards world peace that corresponds to a distorted view of peace
6. Their claim that they hold the key to objective truth

3. Common roadblocks to understanding the Gospel

3.1. “So all they have to do is just ask for forgiveness from God, continue doing evil, then ask for forgiveness again?”

At its core, the Buddhist works-based salvation is contrary to the Christian doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, apart from human works. This fundamental difference makes the concept of grace almost inconceivable to the average Nichiren Buddhist, who views God’s unmerited gift of grace as not only unfair but even unjust. Part of this resistance stems from the ungodliness often observed in professing Christians. In fact, a common question raised in their circles is, “So all they have to do is ask for forgiveness from God, continue doing evil, and then ask for forgiveness again?” (I vividly recall a conversation where a Christian casually claimed that he could just keep committing sexual immorality, then repent to God, and be forgiven!)

Unfortunately, much of evangelical Christianity today presents the gospel in a seeker-sensitive way—focusing only on the good news while neglecting the bad news, emphasizing grace without fully acknowledging the holiness of God, and promoting the acceptance of Jesus into one’s heart rather than calling sinners to repentance in faith. Such a gospel only reinforces the misconceptions that Nichiren Buddhists probably already have. It is important to understand that Nichiren Buddhists are rarely just believers in name only. Different from other forms of Buddhism, this religion is exclusive. Most of them take their faith seriously and would be particularly skeptical of any religion that offers an easy path to salvation without any call for a transformed lifestyle. Therefore, it is important that we explain that Christianity does not offer a cheap grace, but rather, “repent and believe” is a call to genuine repentance from sin, and a call to holiness; though we fall short, the Christian’s desire is to be obedient to His will. Christians whose lifestyles align with their profession of faith build better credibility with Buddhists.

3.2. “But I believe in the system of karma, the system of grace is unfair and unjust!”

Although Buddhists may differ in their doctrinal beliefs and teachings, karma (“law of deeds”) is a shared concept among them. The initiator of karma is undetermined, but many simply accept it as a universal law. Since they do not believe in the existence of God as the ultimate moral Judge, karma serves as the only impersonal force that holds everyone accountable for their actions.

Most Buddhist traditions, including cultural Buddhists, hold to a fatalistic, hopeless and pessimistic view of karma. It is common to hear people attribute their suffering in the present life to bad karma from their past lives. In John 9 where Jesus heals a man who was blind from birth, His disciples asked Him, “Rabbi who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). A Buddhist worldview would see the blind man as: he probably has this fate now because he had bad karma in past lives. Yet, Jesus’ answer was radically unexpected, as Jesus said, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3).

One question I often ask Buddhists is: if the law of Karma is operative, do you believe that, by the end of your life, you will have accumulated enough good karma to outweigh the bad? Do you think karma merely encompasses actions, or does it also include thoughts (such as harboring unrighteous anger or using profane language)? Can we ever be certain that we always have a positive balance of good karma over bad? If the Buddhist position is correct, then realistically, no one has any hope.

Through polite inquiry, we can gently encourage them to consider their belief system. This opens the door to engage in meaningful dialogues about the full gospel—both the bad news of sin and the good news of grace that abounds because of God’s love for us. While explaining sin, we should be aware that Buddhists are likely to see sin only as a wrong action or immoral deed, since bad karma is probably the closest equivalent to sin in their worldview. However, Christians understand sin to be a state—our bondage to sin—for which “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23). We are either bondservants of sin, or we are bondservants of Christ.

3.3. The gospel clouded by their Buddhist presupposition lens

The Buddhist system of karma, combined with superstitious tendencies in East-Asian cultures, often leads them to interpret any good thing in life as something that they merited in present or past life, and calamity as the inevitable result of bad karma. As such, statements like “Jesus was crucified on the cross to pay for your sins” may be received differently than intended. Through their lens, they are more likely to perceive Jesus’ crucifixion simply as an operation of the law of karma—surely Jesus must have done something bad in a past incarnation to deserve this.

Thus, the bigger lesson for us is this: when engaging in dialogues with people from other cultures, we ought to be sensitive to the fact that their cultural environment is often different from the Bible-belt or Midwestern Christian environments that we may be accustomed to (as a matter of fact, words like grace or sin were never in my vocabulary until I became a Christian!). In their worldview, there is no understanding of a sovereign

God as the Creator, nor the biblical concepts of eternal life, sin, and holiness. Terms such as eternity, righteousness, evil, heaven and hell carry entirely different meanings in their worldview. If we do not clarify these terms and make them understandable within their framework, the gospel becomes meaningless to them; worse still, it could potentially reinforce their misconceptions.

In the Nichiren Buddhist worldview of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness, a person is his own authority, responsible for working out his own salvation: “If you seek enlightenment outside yourself, then your performance of even ten thousand practices and ten thousand good deeds will be in vain. It is like the case of a poor man who spends night and day counting his neighbor’s wealth but gains not even half a coin.”² For them, the Christian dependence on God is viewed negatively—as undignified weakness. To address this, we need to explain that God’s kingdom is fundamentally different from the world’s values (See Matthew 5:1–11). Rather than returning evil for evil, Christian love dictates that we are to bless our enemies, following the example of our Lord Jesus (See Matthew 5:38–45; 1 Corinthians 4:12b; 1 Peter 2:23). Even the Messiah came in humility and meekness, not in the authoritarian power that was expected. Dependence on God, then, is exercising God’s strength under His control. This puritan prayer from the Valley of Vision encapsulates the biblical understanding of the cross:

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly, Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision, where I live in the depths but see Thee in the heights; hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold Thy glory. Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart, that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit, that the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all, that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that to give is to receive, that the valley is the place of vision.

Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells, and the deeper the wells the brighter Thy stars shine;

let me find Thy light in my darkness,

Thy life in my death,

Thy joy in my sorrow,

Thy grace in my sin,

Thy riches in my

poverty, Thy glory in my

valley.³

4. The struggles and internal battles in the initial period of a new Christian convert

The jump from Nichiren Buddhism to Christianity initially felt like an enormous leap. There was no concept of sin, and the concept of eternity as cycles of birth-life-death-rebirth was diametrically opposed to the Christian view of eternity. Nichiren Buddhism is a works-

based religion, whereas Christianity teaches salvation by grace alone. As a new believer, I found myself grappling spiritually and morally, as the “high places” in my life were trampled under the Word of God. It was liberating and disorienting at the same time, as everything felt foreign to me, coming from a religious background of Chinese syncretism and Japanese Buddhism in a Southeast Asian nation. (I had never even come across or heard John 3:16 in my entire life until I first read the Bible!)

Coming from a works-based salvation worldview, the concept of grace was difficult for me to embrace. Grace strips away the illusion that I could save myself. Grace confronts the root of human pride in me, particularly the sinful desire for autonomy from God. For so long, I had believed that I had to work for everything—my salvation, my righteousness, my peace. But the words of Jesus—“It is finished”—were radical. Salvation by grace, through faith alone was both liberating and terrifying. Is there truly nothing I can do to earn more of God’s love, or more of God’s favor? Is there really nothing I can add to it?

Navigating my newly found Christian faith without proper discipleship was extremely hard. What I desperately needed during those times was a supportive church community that could empathize with my internal struggles and offer comfort and support. At times, in a new convert’s feeling of loneliness in the Christian Walk, it was tempting to look back to what was familiar, to the community that once made me feel included, to the days when I did not feel so alienated in my family. Much like Lot had to leave Sodom and flee to the mountains, what once seemed so appealing must now be abandoned, for its path is the way of destruction—“Escape for your life. Do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away” (Gen 19:17). Even with that newfound freedom, I was still plagued by an underlying fear that something bad might happen to me for turning to the God of the Bible. After I was baptized, I continued to cling on to my Buddhist artifacts for several months; it was not about the physical objects, but about the fear deeply ingrained in me from my upbringing, the fear that disrespecting the Buddhist religion could lead to harm.

For Christians who had never grown up in such cultures, it might seem silly that converts could be so paralyzed by such fear if the truth has already set us free. But we often fail to sympathize with their formidable challenges that are real to them even though they are not always immediately apparent to us; it is easy to dismiss those fears because they are often not encountered or heard of in the West. Perhaps we might even forget that these people are new converts who are just beginning their first steps in knowing God! As fellow brothers and sisters, even if we do not fully understand, let us nevertheless bear their burdens, pray with them, cry with them, minister to them, show hospitality to them, offer loving words of correction to any underlying presuppositions, always ensuring that we are sensitive to the challenges faced by new believers from such cultures.

5. The Church as participant of *Missio Dei*

The Christian mission should be understood, first and foremost, as part of *Missio Dei*. In this framework, God the Father, is the source and the author of mission. Therefore, mission is “a movement from God to the world.”⁴ It is our Lord’s own divine commission

from Matthew 28:18–20 that established the basis for sending His people to participate as agents of His mission in spreading the gospel to the world.⁵ If churches are to be God’s instruments for mission to the world, we ought to be marked by our fellowship in unity and love (John 13:35), walking in a manner worthy of the gospel (Ephesians 4:1–2), and worshiping in truth and in spirit (John 4:23–24).

5.1 The treasure of Christian discipleship to new converts

The body of Christ has a responsibility to instruct, to love, and to disciple the new believer in the Christian faith, that the believer may be built up in Christ, grounded in “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Every true conversion involves a powerful encounter with the true and living God, in which God raised us up and made us alive even when we were dead in our trespasses (Eph 2:5–6). But conversion is not the end goal; rather, our goal is that “Christ may dwell in [their] hearts through faith—that [they], being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [they] may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:17–19).

“One of the greatest weaknesses in local churches today is that we lead people to Christ and then, basically, abandon them. It’s “hit and run evangelism.”⁶ Such neglect arises due to several possible reasons [*italics mine*]:

- Assuming that new converts will grow *as long as* they attend church and Bible studies
- Having *only* formal, structured “cookie-cutter” discipleship that neglects the relational side of discipleship
- Limiting the definition of discipleship to *merely* studying the knowledge of God
- Individualistic church culture

New Christians who converted from other religious backgrounds often have a stifled understanding of the gospel due to lingering presuppositions from their upbringings, and they desperately need mature believers who are willing to walk alongside them. Discipleship is more than just a “cookie-cutter” formalized program to instruct new believers in Christian doctrines. It is an invitation to learn Christ, to draw near to God, and to practice spiritual disciplines as they are guided and disciplined by seasoned Christians. It is also an invitation to learn what it means to be a Christian in daily lives and circumstances as they observe the lives of faithful Christians. Discipleship needs to be relational and tailored to individuals, since every new Christian faces unique challenges that we would learn about only if we connect with them personally.

It is also not uncommon for new converts to lose some of their companions as a result of following Christ (See 1 Peter 4:3–4). In some cultures, following Christ might lead to converts being disowned by their own families! What can churches do to come alongside

and embrace the abandoned convert? How can the local church integrate new believers into the family through nourishing relationships and hospitality that extends throughout the week rather than just on Sundays? Do we invest time and effort to build relationships within the Church?

5.2 The value of apologetics in the Church and in evangelism

Christianity is under attack today, and it must be defended. There are attacks from within by cults, sects, and heresies. And there are attacks from without by atheists, skeptics, and other religions. The discipline that deals with a rational defense of the Christian faith is called apologetics. It comes from the Greek word *apologia* (cf. 1 Peter 3:15) which means to give a reason or defense.⁷

In a time when pluralism and inclusivism prevail, it is more crucial than ever for Christians to be spiritually discerned, in order that the gospel of Christ is not compromised. The distinct differences must be clarified to sharpen our discernment, as our faith in doctrinal truths affects not only our lives and relationships, but ultimately, how we will spend eternity. Regrettably, the blending of incompatible worldviews is becoming increasingly prevalent in this age dominated by relativism and universalism. Kanzo Uchimura (1861-1930), a Christian evangelist during the Meiji and Taishō periods in Japan, teaches: “Christianity and Buddhism view the same truth from different standpoints. The two are essentially one in magnifying Love as the most potent power in the universe, and nonresistance as the only means to overcome the evil.”⁸ Such attempts to reconcile Buddhism and Christianity compromise the purity of the historic Christian faith and should raise critical concerns! Even when a particular worldview does contain some truth (rather than entire truth), it is still falsehood; as believers, are we equipped to discern logical fallacies and to be able to defend the Christian faith?

In the end, faith is what we place our trust in, and the Christian faith is not blind faith. We have grounds for why we believe what we believe. Christians are called to “always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks [us] for a reason for the hope that is in [us]; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet 3:15). In the Book of Acts, Paul is always “making a defense” of the gospel (22:1; 24:10; 25:8; 26:1-2). Apologetics is not an end in itself; it does not replace the believer’s relationship with Christ, nor the study of God’s Word, but it does strengthen our Christian faith in the following ways: (1) it equips us to use our reason to discern truth from error; (2) it reinforces the why behind our Christian faith; (3) it gives us the tool in our Christian witness to address the roadblocks that hold people back from the gospel.

Conclusion

Recorded in the gospel of John was this scene in which Pontius Pilate looked directly into the eyes of Truth and asked, “What is truth?” (John 18:37–38). Yet, Pilate was so blinded by his own political power, his own interests, and his own lies, that he could not see the truth even though Truth was standing right in front of him. Despite this, Jesus’ compassionate response was to treat Pilate as one who needed light and truth from above

(John 19:11). As Christ's ambassadors, may we have compassion on the lost to shine the light of Christ in the dark world, in order that "they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in [Christ]" (Acts 26:18).

Endnotes

¹ Additionally, the reader may consider this publication booklet by the SGI Canada to gain some context: Buddhism: A Philosophy of Life | SGI Canada [https://www.sgicanada.org/uploads/2.%20About%20Us/Introductory%20Materials/SGIBookletBuddhism%20a%20philosophy%20for%20living%20\(June%202023\).pdf](https://www.sgicanada.org/uploads/2.%20About%20Us/Introductory%20Materials/SGIBookletBuddhism%20a%20philosophy%20for%20living%20(June%202023).pdf).

² Ibid., 3.

³ <https://www.ligonier.org/posts/lord-high-holy-thou-has-brought-me-valley-vision>.

⁴ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

⁵ Victor Raj, "A Missional Reading of the Church and World," *Lutheran Mission Matters* 32, no. 1 (May 2024): 12; Robert Newton, "The Divine Service and Missio Dei," *Lutheran Mission Matters* 32, no. 1 (May 2024): 23.

⁶ Bill Hull, and Ben Sobels, *The Discipleship Gospel: What Jesus Preached-We Must Follow* (Carol Stream, IL: Him Publications, 2018), 131.

⁷ Norman L. Geisler, "An Apologetic for Apologetics," <https://normangeisler.com/an-apologetic-for-apologetic>

⁸ Kanzo Uchimura, *Uchimura Kanzo Zenshu*, vol. 30, ed. Koichiro Michiie (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1982), 74.