

East Meets West and Back Again

By Yenni Kwok



Glory to God by Ki-Chang Kim

“When men destroy their old gods,” writer and daughter of Christian missionaries Pearl S. Buck once said, “they will find new ones to take their place.” From east to west, north to south, people are embracing new “exotic” religions. Buddhism is in vogue in Europe while Christianity is gaining converts throughout Asia. New modernized religions are also pulling in crowds. Are these simply fads? Or do they signify humans’ perpetual need for spiritual fulfillment? One thing is certain: The search for God is alive and well...

One Sunday afternoon, I stood with some 150 young and energetic worshippers. Accompanied by a band, they raised and clapped their hands, singing: “Thou art my power, my refuge. In a storm I will not waver because Thou art with me.” The pastor started his sermon with an assurance: God would break the power of evil spirits.

Some months later, I was invited to a class where a Tibetan monk taught a group of adherents Buddhist tenets and meditation steps. “There are three groups of negative emotions: anger, greed and ignorance,” Geshe Ngawang

Sonam said through an interpreter. “It is possible to purge these poisonous emotions with meditation.”

Neither of these scenes would have been noteworthy had it not been for the place and the people involved. The church service was in Jakarta, attended by a large number of young ethnic Chinese. The Buddhist sermon was at the Tibetan Center in Hamburg, drawing scores of well-educated Germans.

During my stays in Asia and Europe, I could not help noticing the reverse trend of religious proliferation. People of traditionally Buddhist background are being pulled to Christian churches. And, to those who think the half-empty church pews in the traditionally Christian continent of Europe signal people are forsaking their religion, I’d ask them to drop by the Buddhist centers are teeming with local converts.

Of course, we’ve heard about celebrities who are attracted to a variety of “exotic: faiths and cults. The Beatles did it with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, while Madonna has latched onto the California brand of Jewish mystical teachings of Kabbalah. Actor Richard Gere is probably the most famous Buddhist in the world, after the Dalai Lama. But the longing of some spiritual fulfillment also affects ordinary people, especially the urban and educated folks.

This is understandable, according to Pankaj Mishra, the author of *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*. “After decades of peace and materialistic affluence, people in the end feel discontent,” he says. “Their needs cannot be satisfied with the traditional religions.”

Oliver Petersen, of Hamburg, would certainly agree. The 45-year-old was not brought up religious. His family celebrated Christmas, but they hardly went to church. “My family was not against Christianity or the church,” he recalls. “But for us, church was like a museum.”

As he started to question life in his teenage years, he became interested in the Eastern faith. “In Buddhism, I found the familiar rational approach,” says Petersen, who converted in the 1980s and later became a monk for 16 years. (He disrobed in 1999). “It is important for me that a religion can bridge the gap between the scientific and religious world. Buddhism transcends the Enlightenment spirit.”

The European Buddhist Union estimates there are between 3 million and 4 million adherents across the continent, a figure that includes both Asian migrants and European converts. The figure has at least doubled in 10 years, up from 1.5 million in 1996. In Germany, where 45 per cent of the 220,000 adherents are home-grown, Buddhist groups have multiplied from about 15 in the early 1970s to more than 600 today. Elsewhere in Europe: France, Britain, Denmark, Holland and Switzerland, the Buddhist communities are also growing.

Filling the void

Yet, the longing for a new spiritual fulfillment is not only a Western phenomenon. The growing prosperity of many Asian societies has also changed the religious landscape in this continent. The number of Christians in South Korea is estimated between 25-30 percent of the population now. Around two-thirds of them are Protestant, belonging mostly to Pentacostal and evangelical congregations. These new churches are also attracting the urban, educated middle-class elsewhere: Sri Lankans, Thais, Chinese in mainland China and Southeast Asia. According to the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* journal, the number of Christians in Asia has risen from from nearly 300 million in 1997 to 351 million in 2006.

For Katherine Tjandra, a 21-year-old Chinese-Indonesian, choosing Christianity over her parents' traditional belief felt natural. She grew up attending church-run private schools, the preferred option of Chinese families after the government banned Chinese-language schools. As the public worship of Chinese folk religion used to be banned for three decades, she suspects it created "a spiritual emptiness that could be a factor why many young people like us become Christians."

Tjandra belongs to Tiberias Church, one of many evangelical mega-churches that have been mushrooming in Indonesia's cities. Apart from their signature miraculous healing, they also provide a strong sense of community. Pastors and volunteers provide counselling for the distraught by telephones, email, as well as face to face. "They provide a sense of belonging and stability," says Timothy Shah, a senior fellow in religion and world affairs at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Non-static spirituality

In their search of spiritual nourishment, some people are also attracted to a modern version of their traditional faith. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of

Living movement has adapted ancient Vedic wisdom and yogic practices to the needs of the 21st century. With a focus on handling bad emotions, eliminating stress and enjoying life, his teachings have found appeal with the roughly three million people in India and overseas. "I took an instant liking to the Art of Living because it focuses on the inner as well as the outer life," says Seema Hiranaandani, who was brought up Hindu and is now its course instructor.

Indeed, the spiritual pursuit has changed not only people but also the religions themselves. Both scholars and practitioners have pointed out the brand of Buddhism observed in the West differs from that of Asia. It is more laity-oriented and focuses on meditation and discursive studies of religious texts rather than ritual ceremonies, temple donations and other devotional acts.

The practice of evangelical churches originating in America has also taken a different form in Asia and Africa. The ideas about spirits – both Holy and otherwise – and divine healing are particularly strong among Asian and African believers. "People there tend to believe that spiritual forces govern one's life and that is consistent with the church belief," Shah says. "The churches build on what is there already."

Meanwhile, Buddhist meditation has piqued the interest of the Christian faithful. Petersen, the former monk, is often invited to teach meditation by church-run organizations and hospices. Scores of Protestant and Catholic clergy have taken an interest in studying and practicing Zen meditation.

Gundula Meyer, Protestant minister and Zen master from Germany, rejects criticisms that she has deviated from her faith. "You read the Holy Bible with different eyes if you practice Zen," she says. "It is an enrichment, not a problem."

The fact that no society has ever existed without a system of religious belief underscores the notion that the need for spiritual fulfillment is universal. And, it is still, if not more, so in this age of complex and demanding life. We look for something more relevant, adapting or mixing the old and the new. As Mishra puts it, "Modern individuals need something more."

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