

‘RELIGION’ THROUGH THEIR EYES:
UNDERSTANDING WHAT *SASNA* IS AND HOW IT FUNCTIONS IN THERAVADA
SOCIETIES

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Consider this scenario: a Cambodian Buddhist woman has come to recognize Jesus as her Lord and wants to follow Him. Can this woman go to the Buddhist temple with her family for the annual commemoration of her deceased father? Can she bow before his urn and his photo portrait? At the temple, when the family pays homage to the abbot, can she bow before him like everyone else?

How would we reconcile home culture and Christian identity in this case? Christians, generally, would consider these acts as religious and therefore forbid them, invoking Scripture such as Exodus 20:5. However, for Buddhists, these religiously appearing rituals are primarily socio-cultural gestures demonstrating profound respect. Not performing these socially sacred acts is interpreted as ingratitude and insolence rather than religious impiety.

Therein lies the core of the problem: that different people have varying ways of defining what is religious and what is not. In anthropology, religion is known as an “essentially contested category” (1955:167). This means that what religion is depends on who decides what the defining parameters are. It is not a universal concept but a contextually constructed one. This raises some important questions: How do different communities understand what religion is and its role in society? Importantly, how do the local people themselves—those whom we live among and minister to—conceptualize religion? And, where there are differing interpretive frameworks, whose do we use to evaluate cultural phenomena?

In this presentation, I am suggesting that to reconcile home culture and Christian identity, we need to appreciate the divergent conceptions of religion. As the Asia-Pacific region is so diverse, I shall focus on Theravada Southeast Asia, namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, offering ethnographic evidence from my fieldwork in Cambodia.

A Western Conception of Religion and Its Limitations

By and large, Westernized¹ and Christian-background people define religion as a discrete system of beliefs and practices that individuals have the rights to choose. It is widely recognized among anthropologists of religion that this modern concept is a Western construction (Dubuisson 2003; Picard 2017). It emerged from within a unique historical context of the West, revolving around the Reformation, Enlightenment, secularisation, and colonisation. Byrne succinctly puts it, “Enlightenment rationality did to religion what it was busily doing in all the emerging sciences: it began to order and structure these diverse cultural phenomena into categories...[religion became] this discrete realm of human activity, a realm which is perceived as distinct from the rest” (1998:102–4). Masuzawa (2005) argues that this sacred-secular dichotomy was wielded for political expediency to marginalise local wisdom and disestablish traditional administrative structures, and the continual use of analytical framework of religion perpetuates a Eurocentric view of the world and a colonial mentality.

¹ This term does not refer to just Westerners but including non-Westerners who have been largely influenced by the European Enlightenment intellectual tradition through education and media.

As a result of this history, religion is segregated from other aspects of life and society; the sacred is dichotomized from the secular. Religion is also largely defined by a set of textually derived doctrinal beliefs and scripturally aligned orthodox practices. In addition, religion is relegated to a private realm; it is regarded as a matter of an individual's convictions in certain truth claims and experienced personally in one's heart and mind as distinct encounters with the Divine.

However, this conception of religion does not describe the lived realities of many non-Western peoples, and the application of this historically-construed category on practices that are markedly different from Christianity is thus problematic. It conceals and obscures many pertinent dimensions of other visions of life. It also constrains the field of study as selected aspects of other religions are extracted to fit pre-defined parameters, and the aspects that do not fit are often deemed as aberrant, incoherent, or superstitious. In religious studies, this academic phenomenon of squeezing a square peg into a round hole is called "religionization" (Hefner 2011:72–73), and it was through this process that the world religions 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' were "invented" in the 18-19th centuries (Almond 1988; Pennington 2005). Buddhism contrived in this manner has been described as "a philosopher's abstraction" (Gombrich 1995:59) and "a scholarly fiction" (Hansen 2005:5128) that "exist, not in the Orient but in the Oriental libraries and institutes of the West" (Almond 1988:13). This construal of so-called orthodox Buddhism suits outsiders' imaginations of insiders' practices. Asian scholars themselves admittedly acknowledged that by "invest[ing] themselves with Christian-like features of belief" (Isomae 2014:54), it renders the religious project "better conforming to Western expectations" (Bell 2006:30).

Assessing non-Western ways of life through the monolithic rubric of religion tends to produce a disparaging view of the cultural Other. David Gellner, an eminent professor of the Anthropology of Buddhism opines, "Buddhism, where in Asia it has been practised, in virtually all of its very different forms, has been frequently and vehemently condemned by western observers as syncretic" (1997:280). He points out that outside observers of Buddhism who are quick to "slap the label 'syncretic' on phenomena" are not genuinely "interested in capturing 'the native's point of view'" (1997:278). Giving a negative assessment of another people's way of life is like evaluating an abstract portrait according to Leonardo da Vinci's artistic techniques and then giving it a bad review. Using another metaphor, examining non-Western culture through the lens of a Western analytical framework is tantamount to a parallax error, in which a wrong reading of a water level is taken because the reader is looking at the water meniscus from a wrong angle. Similarly, our reading of another's religious practice as incoherent or syncretistic could be because *we* are epistemologically positioned in a wrong place. To better grasp another's vision and practice of life, we need to understand the internal logic of the indigenous thought world. In the following section, I offer some emerging perspectives on the Khmer conception of *sasna* ('religion') based on fieldwork research in Cambodia.

A Non-Dualistic Buddhist SEA Paradigm of Sasna ('Religion,' Khmer)

In the Khmer thought world, *sasna* ('religion'; *sāsana*, Pali) does not refer to a bounded set of beliefs and practices that is separate from all other aspects of life and society. Rather, it has a far broader semantic field, and the breadth of its meanings is alluded in Khmer-French dictionaries. In the handwritten *Dictionnaire Khmer-Français*, the French archaeologist and linguist, Étienne Aymonier, explains the Khmer word *sas* or *sasena* as "religion; race" (1878:384). In another compilation, *Vocabulaire Français-Cambodgien et*

Cambodgien-Français, by Jean Moura, an administrator of the French Protectorate of Cambodia, *sas*, *sassena* is explained as *religion*; *sas prea Put* as *religion du Bouddha* (1878:101), and the French phrase *embrasser une religion* (embrace a religion) is translated as *chol sas* (1878:158). Similarly, Guillou found that “[i]n two 1930s Khmer-French dictionaries (Guesdon, Tandart) *sāsana* (with the spellings *sāsa* or *sāsa(na)*) translated as ‘religion, nationality, order, command, message, precept, discipline, race or ethnic group, caste’” (2017:70). In a recent Khmer-French dictionary by Antelme and Bru-net (2013), *sāsana* is still designated as race or ethnic group. It is interesting that in these dictionary entries, *sas* and *sasna* are synonymous, because today, in everyday parlance *sas*, the root word of *sasna* primarily denotes race or heritage, while *sasna* is commonly translated as religion, although in Headley’s Khmer-English Dictionary, *sas* is rendered as religion, nationality, race. It is noted that in the Khmer script, the difference in spelling between the two words សាសនា (*sasna*, religion) and សាសន៍ (*sas*, race) is just a diacritic which silences the last consonant – this shows how closely the words religion and race are connected. It is highly probable that in the indigenous vocabulary, before the influence of the Western dichotomies of the sacred/secular and church/state, the understanding of *sasna* (‘religion’) was intrinsically associated with ethnicity and nationality.

Although many Cambodians nowadays *linguistically* separate race (*sas*) and religion (*sasna*), among the Cambodian Buddhists—less so among Christians—religion is still intimately associated with identity. This is clearly evident in the 2023 study on religion by the Pew Research Center, where it showed that 97% of Cambodians view that Buddhism is inseparable from national identity. In Cambodian’s lived practice, *sasna* refers to an all-encompassing, holistic way of life that is inherently religious. This holistic conception of ‘religion’ was cemented in the 1930-40s, when Cambodia was struggling for its independence from colonial rule. Religion, identity, and nationhood became compounded together as the concept of *sasna-jiet* (‘national religion’) and was officially incorporated into the very first National Constitution in 1947.

It was in the twilight of the French colonial era (1863–1953), the puppet kingdom of Cambodia was fraught with anti-French idioms, demonstrations, and millennialist rebellions. The conflict between the French and the Khmers could be put down, in part, to a divergence in the way the two cultures conceived religion. When the French sought to reform what they thought was areligious such as romanising the Khmer script, village organisation, educational, administrative, economic and political structures, the Khmers felt that the foreigners were changing something fundamentally Khmer – their quintessential Buddhist way of life. The French colonizers did not understand, or maybe disregarded, the unity of religion and other societal sectors; they dismantled the indigenous religio-socio-political structures and put in place a system that stripped the *sāsana* from the praxis of life. The Khmers refused to be subservient to this *adhammic* approach; they did not want a *religion* sealed off and relegated as merely a peripheral aspect of life. Overwhelmed by the fear of losing their Khmerness-and-Buddhist way of life, the Cambodians were compelled to defend their way of life. The people revolted and there were many uprisings.

One of the most prominent independence movements was led by Ven. Chuon Nath, a young and scholarly monk, who showed that the pen was mightier than the sword. He fronted a number of initiatives: instead of allowing the French to Romanise Khmer, he further developed Khmer language, created more new words based on Pali and published the very first Khmer dictionary. He pruned off many superstitious elements in Cambodian rituals and moralized them and also translated many Pali ritual liturgies into Khmer, so that the

Cambodians can have a better understanding of the Buddhist rituals. He simplified many Buddhist teachings and printed booklets to disseminate the teachings of the Buddha. By ‘Khmerizing’ Buddhism and ‘Buddhifying’ Khmer culture, Ven. Chuon Nath articulated a compelling nationalistic narrative defined in Buddhist categories, in which religion, culture and national identity coalesced to form the new neologized term *sasna-jiet* (‘national religion’). *Sasna-jiet* is commonly translated as ‘national religion’, but it is more meaningfully understood as ‘the sacred teachings, values, and practices that characterize the Khmer people.’ Importantly, through the concept of *sasna-jiet*, Cambodians collectively were able to assert their sovereignty through this renewed and shared understanding of what it meant to be Khmer and Buddhist.

Researchers may find it uncanny how the Cambodians turned the tables on the French: the French imposed the foreign category of religion on the Khmers with the purpose of supplanting traditional administrative structures with modern foreign policies. However, the Khmers wielded the category to articulate their own vision of who they wanted to be and redefined what it means to be a modern Cambodian Buddhist citizen. The secularizing politics of ritual displacement did not achieve its objectives, instead it backfired. *Sasna-jiet* arose during a time of an existential crisis, through which religion became enmeshed with national identity. ‘Buddhist nationalism’ emerged as a backlash of colonialism.

Within this context readers might better understand the Khmer term *sasna* (‘religion’). For the Cambodians, *sasna* is not about a reified system of doctrinal beliefs and practices. Rather, in the collective consciousness of the Khmer people, *sasna* draws its import considerably from the historical understanding of *sasna-jiet*. Set against this background, *sasna-jiet* is not so much a religious category as it is an emotionally charged term that connotes cultural sovereignty and national identity, bearing the pain of the past and the hope of a future. It is most poetically captured in the popular maxim, ‘to be Khmer is to be Buddhist.’ Importantly, it gave, and continues to give, the Cambodian populace a steadfast handle they can hold onto. By grounding nationhood on Buddhist ideals, *sasna-jiet* enables Cambodians to reaffirm a distinctive and unique Khmer Buddhist identity which instils national pride and unites the people towards nation building.

The Intertwinement of Buddhism, Identity, and Nationhood in Theravada Worlds

This phenomenon of redefining the modern nation-state in Buddhist categories was also observed in other Theravada worlds, namely colonial Burma (Turner 2014), Laos (Holt 2009), Siam (Vella and Vella 1978), and Ceylon (Berkwitz 2008). Although Thailand was not technically colonized, it faced similar pressures by Western expansionism. Thai King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925) avowed: “We must remember that we Thai have characteristics basically different from those of foreigners... We must nurture the merits and the good characteristics of our race and not let it be said that we are inferior and not the equals of others” (Vella and Vella 1978:186–87). It is noted how the themes of race, moral practice, religion are braided together in this declaration. As with the rise of Buddhist nationalism in Laos, Burma, and Ceylon, Buddhism was “a resource of resistance to colonialism...[and] a foundation for nation building” (Ladwig 2022:79). Studying Buddhist encounters with Western powers from the 16th–20th centuries, Berkwitz shows how foreign—and Christian—provocation precipitated the “crystallization and ‘densification’ of Buddhist identities” in Asia (2018:27). As Chatterjee explains, the colonized “could not do so simply by imitating the alien culture, for them the nation would lose its distinctive identity. The search therefore

was for a regeneration of the national culture, adapted to the requirements of progress but retaining at the same time its distinctiveness” (1993:2).

The centrality of Buddhism in Theravada societies is empirically evident in the 2023 Pew Research survey on religion. The majority of Buddhists consider Buddhism as important for national identity. Buddhism in these societies are said to be “a culture one is part of” and “a family tradition one must follow,” and “an ethnicity one is born into” (11). Interestingly, “respect for country” is a more important ‘religious’ value than following the Buddhist precept of not drinking alcohol (67). These datapoints show us that in Theravada societies, religion diverges from the Western definitions and is delineated by different parameters. It is not so much a system of religious beliefs as it is an embodiment of history, tradition, and culture. It is not so much a private faith as it is about a public practice that is crucial for collective identity. As the eminent Buddhist scholar, Richard Gombrich, contends, Buddhism is “a matter of allegiance, of identity, “group loyalties... [and] national interests... the social allegiance appears to be the true determinant of action and the religious language to be an obfuscation” (1988:15). In other words, there are many things in Buddhist societies that will appear religious, but at the core of it, it is not religious.

Implications for Christian Mission: A Renewed Godly Response to Religious Cultures

The intertwinement of religion, identity, and nationhood raises a pertinent question: how do we do mission in such contexts? Extractionary methods which have been the dominant approach for the last four centuries in Theravada Southeast Asia has proven to be ineffective. Christianity in this region is still averagely less than 1%. Religion is not a system of beliefs or truth-claims to which one intellectually assents to. People cannot leave Buddhism because it is intrinsic to their culture and identity. Segregationist methods are also highly problematic, because isolating Christian converts from their local community and culture is perceived as a taboo. Many Christians are ‘persecuted’ not because of Christ *per se* but because the larger community views Christianity as a social and cultural threat. How might we re-envision a non-extractionary mission approach in which followers of Jesus can remain loyal to their home cultures which are inherently religious?

In the 16th century, the Jesuits adopted a distinctive mission approach in China known as *Il Modo Soave* or The Gentle Way. The founding father St. Ignatius of Loyola counselled his missionaries to be gentle in helping novices conform to the Christian faith “without any violence to souls long accustomed to another way of life” (Young 1959:387). Rather than condemning Chinese traditions, the Jesuits sought to deeply understand the enigmatic culture, affirm what was good and prudently engage with the Chinese, avoiding aggressive proselytism and imposition of European Christianity. In this essay, I shall reflect on the biblical notion of gentleness in the New Testament.

There are two Greek words often translated into English as gentle: *prautés* and *epieikés*. There are subtle differences between them but I shall focus here on their shared meanings. These Greek words, unlike the English word gentle, do not carry the connotations of feebleness or vulnerability; they are not characteristics of the weak but the strong such as gods or rulers. Specifically, they refer to the very self-controlled and measured way of treating others who are frail or wrong. In the broader Greek literature, *prautés* describes a mighty yet benevolent god who wields his power with deliberate restraint towards humans in such a controlled way that when he unleashes his might, it does not destroy or harm people. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus uses this very word to describe Himself. *Epieikés*, on the other hand,

refers to a specific aspect of gentleness—a virtuous quality of not being rigidly insistent on strict compliance to the letter of the law, but exercising graciousness while maintaining the spirit of the law. *Epieikés* is variedly translated as moderate, reasonable, forbearing, accommodating, or yielding. It invites disciples to be willing to make allowance for each other’s faults (Eph 4:2), bearing with one another in love (Col 3:12-13). Gentleness is a hallmark of a follower of Jesus.

While Jesus is the epitome of gentleness, this essay focuses on Paul and the way he related to the pagan Gentiles. The Gospel was spreading rapidly across Achaia and Macedonia (modern Greece), Asia Minor (Turkey), and Syria, so swiftly that the mother church in Jerusalem could not keep pace with the Holy Spirit’s movement. As Gentiles turned to Christ, they established churches and faith practices in their own cultural ways. One of the most contentious issues that arose was whether Gentile believers should be circumcised—a command originally given by God Himself in Genesis 17 as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham’s household, which included purchased foreign servants not born of his lineage. However, circumcision “troubled” and “upset” the Gentiles and made it “difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19, 24; NLT). Paul listened carefully and empathized with the Gentiles, and instead of imposing the full constitution of Jewish Christianity upon them, he responded with *epieikés* through reasonable and gracious accommodation. At the Jerusalem Council, a negotiated resolution was reached: circumcision would not be required but certain dietary and moral laws would be upheld to maintain a shared Christian identity with the Jewish Church. Moreover, through this episode, Paul discerned that God was working in a new way among the Gentiles, and he reinterpreted the doctrine of circumcision, from one that revolved around an act of the flesh to that of the heart. Similarly, James renewed the theological interpretation of what it means to be the people of God, from one that was exclusively centered on the Jews as the chosen people to one that inclusively embraces all peoples who turn to God.

Another illustration of *epieikés* in action is found in Acts 17. Even though Paul was deeply distressed by the rampant idolatry of the Athenians, he nevertheless treated them with dignity and respect (vs 16, 22). In sharing the Gospel with the Greeks, Paul engaged them in subjects that they were interested in, such as their pantheon of gods, cosmology, anthropology, history, and geography, rather than recounting the history of Israel as he did when speaking with a Jewish audience (Acts 13). Furthermore, Paul conversed with the Greeks in their philosophical and religious vocabulary, avoiding terms like baptism, salvation, forgiveness of sin, and justification, that framed his message to the Jews. Additionally, instead of appealing to the Old Testament as the source of authority as he did in Acts 13, Paul quoted from ‘religious’² poems about the Greek god, Zeus. Through these rhetorical methods, Paul employed conceptual and religious categories familiar to his Greek listeners to explain the true nature of God and the work of the resurrected Christ. Paul engaged Greek religion in a profound and judicious way to communicate meaningfully across cultural and religious boundaries. Paul’s contextualized approach embodies the same spirit that John Calvin would later systematize in his doctrine of *accommodatio*, which in turn is founded on the doctrine of the Incarnation: just as God condescends to our limited and flawed human categories in order to make Himself known, Paul accommodated to the Greek worldview so that the Gospel could be intelligible to them.

² I would imagine that there was no sacred-secular dichotomy and ‘secular’ poems were also ‘religious.’

Paul's *epieikés* approach—marked by reasonableness and gracious accommodation—offers a vital model for mission today, especially in societies where religion is the grammar of meaning through which people understand themselves and their world. For people to embrace Jesus in such contexts, we cannot take a condemnatory and rejectionist approach towards religious cultures. Like Paul among the Gentiles, we need to engage respectfully and discern how God might already be at work within the cultural and religious fabric of the people. In this way, mission may be re-envisioned as a gradual yet profound transformation from within, rather than a radical conversion from one identity to another, accompanied by the supplanting of the home culture. A renewed mission approach requires the negotiation of hybrid identities—rooted in Christ yet resonant with one's ethnicity—through the affirmation, adoption, and creative renewal of traditional practices that express love for Jesus in locally meaningful ways.

The construction of such a contextual Christian witness has to be decided by a local hermeneutical community. The case study I offer below is a compilation of various contextual activities conducted by different Cambodian Christians.

Pchumben is a Cambodian festival that is celebrated over 15 days and is considered by many as the most important Khmer custom. It is the time of the year when Cambodians pay obeisance to their parents and elders—living and deceased. It involves several rituals performed at the Buddhist temple in people's hometowns. For Cambodian Buddhists, *Pchumben* is a cherished tradition that has been passed down from antiquity and a vital marker of Khmer identity and belonging. For Cambodian Christians, however, it often creates tension, as missionaries have labelled it as a religious practice to be avoided, resulting in a deep sense of cultural dissonance. Yet, some pastors and Christians disagree with the foreigners' interpretation and have found ways to uphold tradition as faithful followers of Jesus.

Reaksmey has been a Christian for three years and attends a church whose pastor promotes the integration of faith and culture. She has discussed her new found faith with her parents and sought her parents understanding and approval on the Buddhist customs she will refrain from doing. During *Pchumben*, she would follow her extended family of about twenty people to her grandfather's hometown. She helps her Buddhist mother with the preparation of food to be offered to the monks. During the merit-making rituals, she sits behind the family and selectively participates in them. She modifies some ritual gestural: instead of bowing three times, head to the ground, she does one long deep bow.³ When other family members offer incense to the Buddha, she volunteers to take photographs for them. After the temple ceremonies, she joins her family in the communal meal at the temple, although the food has been 'blessed' by the monks. She actively helps with various 'temple duties' like laying out and keeping the mats and washing the dishes. For her, the temple is not solely a religious place of worship but a community center of the village. During *Pchumben*, she will also join other youths and young adults to cook food at the church and distribute to the elderly and needy in the neighborhood.

³ Chong and Tep (2022) "Can Cambodian Christians 'Worship' their Parents?" *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 30(1):37-41.

Conclusion

Understanding ‘religion’ through the eyes of the local people compels us to re-examine our preconceived understanding of religion. In Theravada Southeast Asia, where religion, culture, and identity are woven into the fabric of society, mission methods that extract and isolate converts from the larger community is problematic for the flourishing of the Gospel. This essay puts forward instead a ‘gentle’ (*epieikés*) way, following Paul’s example. To love and follow Christ need not entail a total rejection of one’s home culture, albeit it religiously imbued. Rather an *epieikés* approach beckons Christians to discern and acknowledge whatever that is noble and praiseworthy (Phil 4:8) within one’s religious culture and redeem whatever that falls short of God’s Way, Truth, and Life. Mission then becomes a gentle transformation of the familiar rhythms of local life, and faith in Christ may not only take root in local soils but also flourish in the local environment.

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