**Living Mission #32 (5 September 2024)**

It usually surprises—and sometimes shocks—people in the United States to learn that Christmas day is a work day in Cambodia. Cambodia is 94% Buddhist and although western Christmas commercialism is increasing here, there is little understanding that Christmas has anything to do with Jesus.

However, probably the biggest difference between the religious attitudes and the practices of Christianity and Buddhism is the prominent place of Buddhism in Cambodian society and culture. It might parallel the Christendom of Europe a thousand years ago when everyone was Christian, the church was literally the center of the village and its life, and holydays were festive and joyful occasions.

Government stationery here has a royal seal and the words “Nation, Religion, King” beneath it. Religion means Buddhism which permeates every level of society.

Buddhist wats (pagodas) are everywhere, like the ethnic Catholic parishes in US cities 75-100 years ago. They are anchors for neighborhoods and landmarks for navigation.

The Buddhist monks are also conspicuously visible in their saffron robes. Every morning on the streets they beg food and money for themselves and for the poor. All big meetings and events start with multiple monks chanting. The monks are part of all the weddings and funerals which are celebrated in large tents erected in the streets.

And almost all Khmer men become a monk at some time—some for life, but most maybe just for two weeks or for a month or a year after the death of a parent—to earn merit for themselves and others.

We foreigners know we are not in a Christian culture when we are at work on a religious holiday like Christmas or when All Souls Day is not celebrated on November 2nd but in October during the Pchum Ben festival when the Buddhists honor and sacrifice for their dead.

On a larger scale, there are also fewer church structures. We don’t have a Catholic Charities or marriage preparation weekends or Catholic schools. And even what looks the same can be different from a more established Catholic church. Cambodia has three “dioceses” (for 5,000 Cambodian Catholics!) but because we are still a mission country, two of our “dioceses” are actually prefectures and their bishops are actually prefects, not full bishops.

The religious differences we Catholics experience here basically derive from two circumstances.

First, Buddhism is so deeply embedded in the society that what we might think of as religious elements have become cultural. The whole of society does those things, not just people with religious intent.

Cambodian people take off their shoes when entering a wat so Cambodian Catholics also remove their shoes for mass and prayers. Buddhist faithful sit on the floor at the feet of the presiding monk so Catholics sit on the floor. In Buddhist ceremonies people do not stand or move about, so at mass no one stands or changes position except to go to the altar for communion.

A second reason for the religious differences here is somewhat political. In a national culture where everyone and everything is linked by Buddhism, to become a Christian is almost like treason. Christianity is seen as a foreign religion, not something for Cambodian people. Thus our removing shoes, sitting on the floor, wearing vestments differently, using Khmer architecture for church buildings creates familiarity and helps the local people to feel comfortable with Christianity and to be open to this new and different expression of the holy.

We live and work in a Buddhist culture but society is generally open to us Christians and we can learn from them and in turn offer them the God who loves all of us.

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