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AND NO FIRE WAS COMING DOWN FROM HEAVEN

By

Cammy Wilson

Buddhists are too tolerant.

"They are no match for the Communists and for some western charlatans," says a missionary who once lived in Cambodia and who has spent much of the last five years in refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. Don Cormack, who teaches Bible in the camps for the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF), a fundamentalist group, said, "The Khmers (Cambodians) have an easy-going society that has no absolutes. It's a philosophy of life that's very individualistic. There's nothing in the society to whip it into shape like Islam or Christianity (does in other countries). They don't want to shed blood; they don't want to hurt animals. They don't want to hurt your feelings. They don't want to say, 'No.'

"So they get wiped out."

Buddhism -- the gentle religion of a gentle people -- was as unprepared as the Khmers were for an absolutist like Pol Pot, the deposed former head of state, whose bloody regime left the country -- and Buddhism -- in a shambles. Once reportedly a monk, himself, Pol Pot inadvertently helped condition his people to accept a religion that most Cambodians had rejected long before Pol Pot came to power.

"Cambodians were notoriously resistant to the gospel," Cormack, a 34-year-old Canadian, told a world evangelism convention held this year in Pattaya, Thailand. Another speaker, a pastor in one of the refugee camps, told the convention: "The church has never had a better opportunity."

A tenet in proselytizing is that potential converts who experience trauma of one sort or another are more amenable to switching religions than if they have not been so "softened," as missionary lingo puts it. A follow-up is that some fundamentalist missionaries are preaching that the Cambodians' experiences over the last 10 years have little to do with politics or Pol Pot,

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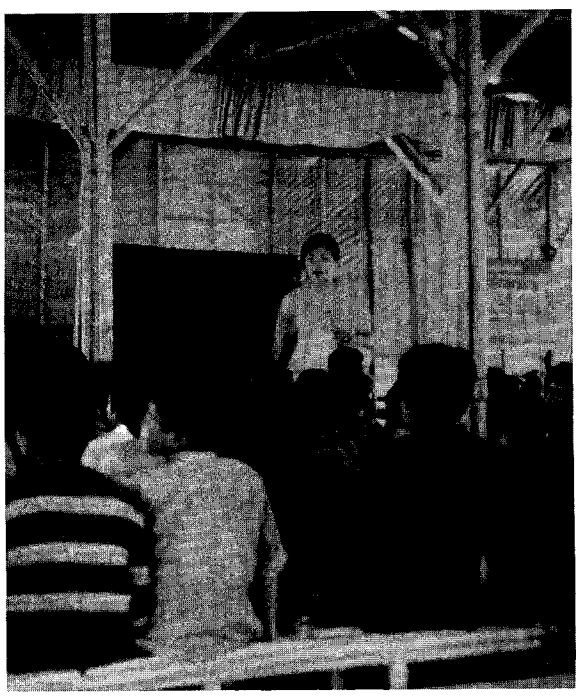
per se, but are the natural consequences of having failed to adopt Christianity.

"One who's seeing it through Christian eyes would say that God is pouring out his wrath on people who have resisted Him for years," Cormack said. "Some of the pastors say this. I don't think the Khmers say this too much, but...westerners say this. I think it is dangerous to say that this is definitely so. '...Why hasn't God done it to America?' I'd say, 'Maybe yes, maybe no.'"

He conceded that, "Buddhism did not die a natural death." Speaking from the home of another missionary in Aranyaprathet, a village a few miles from half a dozen of the border area refugee camps, he noted that, "Buddhist idols were taken and actually ground into dust, and icons were beaten down to make bases for roads. They went out of their way to destroy and desecrate. They went out of their way to wipe every trace of Buddhism out except Angkor Wat. In Phnom Penh, even the museum they painted over. They were fanatically anti-religious."



Some missionaries say suffering is the price the Cambodians paid for not adopting Christianity.

The Pol Pot faction that prevailed in 1975 imposed a radical reordering of Khmer society. People were driven out of cities and towns to farm and to labor on massive public works projects such as dams. Children were separated from parents; husbands and wives were assigned to different localities for months at a time; to espouse a belief, much less a cause other than a faith in the regime, was to risk death. Religion -- particularly the Buddhism the Khmers loved so well -- became a target. But Buddhism was not the only religion to suffer.

"The Catholic Church (in Phnom Penh) they took down brick by brick and blasted away the foundation," Cormack said. "Every old vestige of capitalism, like the Central Bank, they just blew to pieces. With the latter, money was floating all over the streets.

"If people in the United States saw their churches going up in smoke as the Khmers saw their temples doing, if Americans

saw their ministers being killed and nothing happening, Americans, too, might turn to a new religion. Being cosmopolitan, Americans might be wary and say, 'I don't think religion is the answer.' But if they were seeing testimony— people who seemed to have found mercy—, if there were teachers available to them, if people seemed to have an answer, then I would say it would be very attractive (to change religions)."

By 1970, after more than 50 years of missionary efforts, there were no more than a few hundred Christians in Cambodia, mostly in Phnom Penh. But it was a time of flux and the missionaries who arrived in the early 1970s worked hard to establish Christianity. The Khmer Christian church was founded by the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CAMA), which Cormack described as a solid, American organization. *

"They got the Bible translated. They started a Bible school. They were thorough, they were serious, they were disciplined.

"Suddenly, quite suddenly," Cormack recalled, "the ground rules of Buddhism were broken and the Khmer Rouge were winning and destroying temples and killing monks and they were winning, and no fire was coming down from Heaven. People were losing everything: their land, their Buddhism, their God-King (Prince Norodom Sihanouk) and their families. The young people were looking for answers, for their roots. Their temples were going up in smoke and their idols were going up in smoke. All the props of their society were being wiped away. They were left in a spiritual vacuum and this is what accounted for the great coming of Christianity in the 70s."

Cambodian refugee children stand outside the Christian church in which Don Cormack teaches Bible.

Cormack left Cambodia in 1975, the year after he had arrived and six weeks before Pol Pot forces triumphed. With him, he brought one copy of every religious book from the mission library because he suspected the Khmers would destroy the library and the books. Cormack later set up his mission effort across the border, in Thailand.

* Cormack's description of the founding of the church and the number of converts refer to primarily fundamentalist Christian groups and does not include Roman Catholics.

"There weren't the great numbers (of refugees) then," he recalled. "We had clothing projects, we had medical projects. There were few relief workers at the border then. There was (a French group);and the International Rescue Committee had a nurse or two in established camps. The U.N. sort of always oversaw things. But there were no real relief workers. We had the language, we (in the OMF) had the visas, we had the superstructure. Our team had been in Cambodia before."

When the Vietnamese attacked, diverting and then driving the Khmer Rouge to the Thai border, refugees began to pour into Thailand, including Christians, and they're still coming.

"In Khao I-Dang, where the church is, we had a pastor and 300 Christians escape (from Cambodia) last fall, a minister and his flock," Cormack said. "They had hidden an old Bible that was tattered and torn. They had secretly kept together through the Pol Pot times. There's one lady there of 80. They came out and after being under that government for four years, suddenly they were able to celebrate Christmas. We were able to give them their Bibles and their hymn books and their literature. They were just so zealous to be free. Several Bible students showed up and they founded a Khmer church. They were in the forefront; they had found something to belong to."

Faced with great adversity, the Khmers naturally look for answers in the spiritual realm. Most of them believe in spirits, as they do in Buddhism, and some even in certain tenets of Brahmanism.

"The Khmers are super religious and sensitive to spiritual things," Cormack said. "They know there is a God. They know there are angels. They know there are demons. You don't have to convince the Khmers of that. They're going to look for an answer in the spiritual realm. They'll instinctively cry out for the supernatural."

Much as they reach out for the spiritual, the result may not be what the Christians, for one, have in mind. Buddhism tends to absorb what comes along, and its very tolerance is a form of defence. Confronted by Christianity, Buddhism is like an oyster sensing a grain of sand in its midst: the oyster accepts the sand as an inevitability -- then slowly begins to coat it with layer on layer of veneer -- until the sand is transformed into a pearl of the oyster's making. Some Christians see the risk. "If you said to a Khmer, 'Here's the Lord Jesus Christ and He's the Son of God,' the god in his head isn't the one in your head," Cormack said. "Every Thai and Cambodian will say, 'This Jesus is a good man and these Christians are good people. It's all good; we'll take Jesus, too. We'll add him to the god shelf (a home alter).' And the next day they'll go back to their temples and fall down and worship their idols."

Khmers may accept Christianity on their own terms. But whether the Christian God winds up on the god shelf, along with Buddha, perhaps Vishnu, and an offering of papaya to placate the house spirits remains to be seen.

The Khmers have a saying. It goes like this: "Many ships come down the river and anchor at the river bank. They pass by, but the river bank remains the same."

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