

R. Lanier Britsch, "Taking the Gospel to Asia" Ensign, June 1980, pg. 7

## Taking the Gospel to Asia

The challenge is clear: "Teach all nations" (Matt. 28:19). That charge, given anciently and reiterated by a living prophet in our day, requires that the gospel be taken to the world—to people not even familiar with Christianity.

With renewed direction from President Spencer W. Kimball to prepare to take the gospel to all peoples of the world, we may wonder just who these people are. Who lives, for example, in Pakistan? And what do they believe? What challenges do we face in taking them the gospel of Jesus Christ, as revealed to Joseph Smith and later prophets?

An Ensign article published in March 1980 ("From Burundi to Zaire: Taking the Gospel to Africa") discussed the challenges the Church faces as we approach Africa. This month, we discuss the challenge of taking the gospel to Asia.

Half of the world's population lives between Karachi and Tokyo. The inhabitants of China, India, Pakistan, Japan, Indonesia, and South Korea together comprise almost 2 billion people. Almost without exception, they are a people without the full gospel of Jesus Christ.

For example, with 958 million people, China is the most populous country in the world. Approximately one-fourth of the world's people speak Chinese. Yet Latter-day Saints are unheard of in mainland China. And although approximately 250 Indians near Coimbatore, India, are baptized Latter-day Saints, most of India's 667 million people have yet to be introduced to the restored gospel. The peoples of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Laos, Maldives, Cambodia, Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet, Vietnam, Mongolia, and eastern Russia too, lie beyond the bounds of concentrated LDS missionary work. The number of LDS missionaries in Indonesia is very small in comparison with the 145 million people in this far-flung island nation. Obviously the major part of the Lord's children wait for messengers who can communicate the restored gospel to them.

But although Asia is not impenetrable to LDS and other Christian missionary efforts, it does present problems and circumstances that are quite different from those found in other parts of the world. A look at those challenges will help us to prepare, as a Church, for the missionary work that must take place there.

### Established Religions

The world's five largest religions were born in Asia, including both Christianity and Islam. Many of us may be surprised to learn that [page 8] Asia is a very old center of Christian missionary activity—during the first few centuries of Christianity the greatest

dissemination of the gospel was to the east, not to the west. Legends say that the apostle Thomas taught the gospel in India, and by the third century a community of Syrian Christians were established along India's Malabar Coast. During the seventh century, Nestorian Christians established a thriving church in China. More recently, Roman Catholic and Protestant missions have been established in many lands of Asia. Latter-day Saints owe gratitude to the men and women who brought the Bible and their versions of Christianity, as well as literacy and medical services, to many of Asia's peoples.

Yet Asia is by no means Christian. Only the Philippine Islands (92 percent Christian) in all of Asia is a Christian country. The other successful areas of Christian evangelization are South Korea (10 percent), Indonesia (9–10 percent), Taiwan (4 percent), and South Vietnam (until its collapse, 10 percent).

It is noteworthy that the three areas of greatest current Christian success were never fully converted to Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism, or Buddhism. About 75 percent of the Korean people are Shamanists. In Indonesia the major pockets of Christian success have occurred where the people are still animists (animism holds that even inanimate objects have souls). The Roman Catholic Spanish subjugated the Philippines before Islam spread far into that land. Most Filipinos moved directly from tribal religions to Catholicism. On the other hand, the areas where the great religions hold sway have not easily converted to Christianity. At its height there were over 4 million Christians in China, but they totalled only .7 percent of the population. Less than 1 percent of the Japanese, 1 percent of the Thais, and 2.4 percent of the Indian people are Christian. The established religions of Asia have not easily yielded to Christianity.

Why has it been so difficult for general Christianity? One reason is the Asian world-view. Asian civilizations date back three, four, or even five thousand years. Most Asians consider their civilizations superior to Western culture in everything but technology—including religion.

For example, for millennia the Chinese viewed their nation as the center of everything: culture, political power, philosophy, art, architecture, and so on. Outsiders were considered barbarians, and in comparison with the Chinese, they generally were. That feeling still persists among many Chinese, and they are usually slow to leave their old beliefs.

The religious systems of south and east Asia predate the early Apostolic era. Based on logical and consistent premises, Hinduism and Buddhism are not merely systems of idol worshipping. Their scriptures contain profound ethical, psychological, and religious insights, providing comfort and meaning in the lives of their followers. The Asian faiths, like true Christianity, provide answers to the "why" [page 9] questions of life, even though their answers may not agree with those given by the Master.

Religious Relativity

However, Asian religions and Christianity have much in common, though they also have major points of disagreement. Some of these points have sparked serious and ongoing confrontations between representatives of the two groups. Asian beliefs that Christians argue against are caste in India and ancestor worship in China, Japan, and other parts of Asia. Still another point of disagreement is Asian relativity as opposed to Christian exclusiveness. This means that while most Christian sects believe Christ is the only Way, the Asian faiths (excepting Islam), all insist that a variety of beliefs are equally worthwhile.

Hindus are the most tolerant of all. Their belief that ultimate truth is beyond the grasp of any man is illustrated by the story of the six blind men inspecting an elephant. The elephant represents God or Truth, and each blind man perceives just a portion of the whole—a leg, the trunk, the tail, a side, or a tusk. The men felt what they respectively thought was a tree, a hose, a rope, a wall, and so forth. All seemed to be partially correct, but none knew the truth as a whole. So it is with all men, the Hindus tell us. We all have but a partial view of the whole truth or of God. We must be tolerant of each other's perception.

A problem with such views is that they are sometimes enforced through law. At this writing, opponents of Christian missionaries are sponsoring a bill in India that would make conversion to any religion through "force," "fraud," or "inducement" a punishable offense. "Under the bill, force includes threat of divine displeasure," writes Mohan Ram in the *Christian Science Monitor* (7 May 1979). "Divine displeasure is part of the theology of most religions [including Mormonism]." Conversion, some Hindus reason, implies the rightness of one religion over another, and since they do not believe any religion has a corner on truth, conversion obviously leads to intolerance. At the present, Indian national law bars new missionary groups from the country. Similar laws exist in Nepal, Sikkim, and Burma; and national policies also prohibit missionary work by new churches in Pakistan and some other nations.

The Chinese and Japanese have little or no history of conflict between faiths. In pre-Communist China, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism lived side by side and served different purposes in society. In Japan three faiths—Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism—have for many people been blended into one religion. It is said that in Japan the Shinto priest blesses a child at its birth and later performs its marriage. During life most decisions are made in accordance with Confucian ethics. Then at death the Buddhist priest presides.

### Colonialism and Imperialism

One of the most serious problems Christian missions and also Latter-day Saints have encountered in Asia is the linking of western churches with colonialism and imperialism. With the exception of Japan and Thailand, all of the countries of south, southeast, and

east Asia were sometime part of one colonial empire or another, most of them European. Caucasian missionaries today are a grim reminder to Asians of a by-gone era.

Three forms of imperialism were deeply resented: political, brought by diplomats; economic, brought by merchants; and cultural, brought by Christian missionaries.

Most Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century did not consider colonialism inherently evil; to them it seemed to be God's way of opening up Asia and Africa to the gospel. Because early Christian missionaries usually considered Western civilization superior to any other, they often regarded themselves as civilizers as well as [page 10] Christianizers. But as they shared their political ideals in the mission schools, teaching about individual dignity and freedoms, they sowed the seeds that pushed off the colonial yoke. Once the Asian peoples mastered these ideas, they demanded freedom from their colonial governors and the right to pursue their own national course. Asian nationalists also imposed their own interpretations on some age-old Western concepts. While most Western nations interpreted freedom of religion to mean freedom of belief and preaching, many Asian governments felt freedom of religion meant that every man was free to be left completely alone.

Latter-day Saints sometimes get the impression that unfriendly countries are particularly hostile to the Church. This is usually not true. We Latter-day Saints are simply regarded as a part of a bigger issue. The stigma of neocolonialism has been attached to all Christian faiths, including Mormonism.

### Cultural Difficulties

An additional problem is culture. Cultural differences invariably confront missionaries from Western countries. Often hard to overcome, cultural differences can be as small as whether you shake hands or bow—and how you do it. And they can be as important as how marriage companions are selected, home sites are chosen, and the older generation is cared for. Preferences in food, clothing, housing, hair styles, cosmetics, music, art, literature, love, law, and many other areas of life fit under the general heading of culture.

Missionaries, Latter-day Saint and others, have sometimes failed to distinguish between cultural patterns that are matters of preference and those that are matters of principle (law or doctrine).

### Languages

Asian languages have created some of the greatest difficulties in cross-cultural communication. Ever since the Tower of Babel men have suffered the hardship of trying to communicate with linguistic symbols that are at best inadequate and at worst terribly confusing. The world today holds more than 200 countries and territories, with people that speak over 3,000 languages and dialects. To understand the breadth of the

problem consider this: As of 1973, at least one book of the Bible had been translated into 1,526 languages or dialects, making it accessible to over 97 percent of the world's people. But the entire Bible had been translated into only 225 languages, and the New Testament into only 359 more. The Book of Mormon is in print or is being prepared in fewer than fifty languages. The Book of Mormon is not in print in any Indian languages, and India has at least twenty languages that are spoken by more than one million people. It is yet to be published in Tagalog (or Filipino), the major language of the Philippines, in Hindi, Sinhala (Sri Lanka), Urdu (Pakistan), Burmese, Vietnamese, and so forth. Obviously, the written scriptures are not presently available to all the world's population.

### Communism

Yet another serious problem inhibiting missionary success in Asia is communism, particularly in Russia and China. Prior to the Communist Chinese takeover of mainland China in 1949, thousands of Protestant and Catholic missionaries had converted over 4 million Chinese to Christianity. This number represented less than one percent of the populace, but it was a significant beginning. Between 1949 and 1953 the Chinese Communist government forced ten thousand missionaries to leave the country. Since that time the government has almost completely suppressed Christianity, as well as other forms of religion.

Nevertheless, since U.S. President Richard M. Nixon's visit to China in 1972, and particularly since the death of Chairman Mao, there seems to be a more relaxed attitude toward religion in the People's Republic. Some church services have been resumed on a small scale in homes and halls. As President Kimball noted in an address to the Regional Representatives of the Twelve on 30 March 1979, there seems to be some evidence of improved Chinese Communist-Christian relations.

### Missionary Work

Despite the loss since World War II of Communist China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos as missionary fields, in that same period Latter-day Saint missionaries have been able to proselyte in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The handful of Asian Saints in 1948 grew to well over eighty-five thousand by 1978. This fact notwithstanding, we have but begun the monumental task of taking the restored gospel to the multitudes of people in Asia.

This look at the great challenges facing the Church as it prepares to further the missionary effort in Asia may seem overwhelming. But the Lord knows his children, and as we exercise faith he will provide ways for all of them to eventually hear the gospel—and for the honest in heart to receive it. The field is vast, but it will gradually open as we seek that blessing in prayer and reach out with the gospel to all peoples.