

Article: DA010-1

SHARING YOUR FAITH WITH ASIAN AMERICANS (PART ONE)

This article first appeared in the Witnessing Tips column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 15, number 1 (1992). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

After the Japanese air force treacherously decimated the American fleet in Pearl Harbor, considerable social and physical hostility erupted against Japanese Americans. In one case a mob of Anglo-Americans broke into a small store in Fresno, California, dragged the proprietor out into the street, and bludgeoned him to death with pipes and bottles. When one of the attackers was told that the victim was not a Japanese American but a Chinese American, he responded by declaring: "So what! They're all the same to me."

Although no true Christian of any race would demonstrate such violent racism, unfortunately there still persists a tendency among many Anglo-Americans to stereotype Asian Americans as being a single group of people with the same cultural background, behavioral characteristics, and religious beliefs. Having lived on the West Coast, the East Coast, and in the Midwest, and having visited 49 states, I can say from firsthand experience that this mentality does exist. What is grievous about this type of subtle prejudice is that it not only angers Asian Americans, it also closes their hearts and minds to the gospel, which they perceive as merely the dogma of the West.

In this three-part series we will consider several important steps in sharing the gospel effectively with Asian Americans. To begin with it is important that we establish some awareness of the many distinctions that exist among these people.

Cultural Diversity. For decades after the first Asian immigrants crossed the Pacific, Chinese and Japanese Americans would have nothing to do with each other. If one member of each culture married the other, they were treated as outcasts. Today, that barrier has for the most part vanished. Yet, we can still read about the gang wars in Southern California between the Cambodians and the Thais.

My point is that Asian Americans derive their heritage not from being Asian, but from being a descendent of a particular culture. It is much the same with Anglo-Americans who would not say their heritage is European, but rather Swiss or Italian or Russian. Can you imagine an Irish or English person wanting to be thought of as having the same culture, or a French person grouped with a German? That same feeling extends to Asian Americans as well.

Generational Diversity. My grandparents came to this country nearly a century ago. Not only were their experiences, attitudes, goals, and interests distinctly different from those of my parents, but they were even further removed from my own. For many of us who are third and fourth-generation Americans, we have been absorbed into the American melting pot.

Since most of the first generation and many of the second generation Chinese and Japanese Americans have passed away, this factor of generational diversity may not seem significant. We must realize, however, that a new wave of Asian immigrants are settling throughout the United States. Moreover, this population is large, and their struggles and needs are very different from those of my generation.

Doctrinal Diversity. Buddhism is the central belief system of most Asian countries, and most Asian Americans will say they are Buddhists no matter what their cultural heritage may be. It must be understood, however, that Buddhism was, and still is, quite successful in merging with the established

religions of various Asian societies — such as Boen in Tibet, Taoism in China, and Shinto in Japan. Thus, what we discover is that a Buddhist of one school is very different from a Buddhist of another school. The religious beliefs and practices of Tibetan Buddhists, for instance, can appear just as strange to my relatives (who are Jodo Buddhists) as to Christians.

Regarding doctrinal diversity, one additional observation warrants mention. Buddhism is well known as a tolerant religion. Indeed, both Hinduism and Buddhism enjoy this reputation in the West, but Buddhism even more so. Quite frankly, however, this is a myth. I can still recall my experiences in Japan when I was able to observe the hostility between various sects of Japanese Buddhism, typified in a film that described the wars that have occurred between Buddhist monasteries throughout the centuries. There are not only differences, but also in some cases dislike between different Buddhists.

Religious Diversity. My paternal grandparents were devoutly religious, and trained their children to be strict Buddhists. My grandfather even helped establish a Buddhist church in California and received special recognition from the head monastery in Japan when he died. Consequently my relatives on my father's side are strong in their Buddhist convictions. My maternal grandparents, however, were nominal Buddhists who attended Buddhist services for only weddings and funerals. Their sons developed no interest in any religions while their daughters accepted the Christian faith.

Hence, if you want to witness to my cousins on my *father's* side, you better be armed with some basic knowledge of the Buddhist faith, particularly Amida Buddhism. If you are to witness to my nonbelieving cousins on my *mother's* side, however, no knowledge of Buddhism is really necessary. If you don't know my relatives, how would you be able to distinguish between the two groups? You wouldn't, unless you first developed a friendship with them.

When all is said and done, *friendship* must be the second step in effective evangelism. First realize that Asian Americans are quite diverse. And then, be good friends with them — just as were my Anglo Christian brothers and sisters who led me to the Lord.

-- J. Isamu Yamamoto