

Introduction

During the last months of 1868, Nan Inta, the first northern Thai to receive the Christian sacrament of baptism, labored over his decision to convert to Christianity. The fact that his decision involved cosmological as well as religious issues made it a particularly difficult one. He first encountered Christianity through Daniel and Sophia McGilvary, American Presbyterian missionaries who arrived in the semi-independent northern Thai state of Chiang Mai in April 1867; and in their discussions with him the McGilvays taught him not only the Protestant Christian religion but also their Newtonian world view. For them the religion of the West and Western cosmology were two aspects of one truth. If Nan Inta accepted the one, they argued, he must accept the other as well. He evidently agreed; and when Daniel McGilvary correctly predicted a solar eclipse, he felt compelled to accept a Western scientific worldview and the Christian faith.¹

Having taken the momentous decision to accept the "Jesus religion," Nan Inta sought to define the meaning of "conversion" in the context of his own life. He tried to make of it a personal and private matter, arguing with McGilvary that he would have more success in bringing others to Christianity if he did not have to declare openly his new faith and thereby reject Buddhism. He also did not want to give up the advantages and special privileges that pertained to being a former abbot. The possibility of governmental repression of the new religion must have also loomed large in his thinking. McGilvary, however, rejected his suggestion out of hand and later wrote, "But the assurance that duty was his—consequences God's—that he was

¹ See McGilvary to Brother Sherwood, 31 December 1868, *North Carolina Presbyterian New Series* 2, 77 (23 June 1869): 2; McGilvary, "Our First Convert," *North Carolina Presbyterian New Series* 2, 85 (18 August 1869): 4; McGilvary, undated letter in *Foreign Missionary* 28, 3 (August 1869): 58-63; and Daniel McGilvary, *A Half Century Among the Siamese and the Lao* (New York: Revell, 1912), 96-9. See also Lillian Johnson Curtis, *The Laos of North Siam* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1903), 264-65.

able to take care of his own cause, decided him early in December [1868] to delay no longer."²

McGilvary's insistence that Nan Inta make a full, public break with Buddhism had momentous consequences for him and for the later northern Thai church. The willingness of Nan Inta and other early converts to Christianity to accede to the demand that they make public professions of faith set the northern Thai church on a course of separation from its society from which it has not deviated down to the present.³ This decision was required of Nan Inta against his better judgment. He initially proposed that Christianity start out in Siam's northern dependencies as a Buddhist reform sect that would only gradually emerge into the full light of day as a separate religion. He argued for a quiet form of conversion, surely drawing on the northern Thai ability to ignore "facts," such as changing one's religion, if those facts have not been declared facts in public. Nan Inta, that is, wanted to *be* a Christian privately but delay *saying* he was a Christian publicly.

The McGilvarys had other ideas, ones shaped in the hot house of American evangelical thought. Dr. Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary, mentor to both Daniel McGilvary and the other senior clergy member of the Laos Mission⁴, the Rev. Jonathan Wilson, addresses the question of "soft" conversions in *The Way of Life*, a popular evangelical treatise that we may presume both McGilvary and Wilson had read. Hodge condemns those who try to escape the obligation of public profession of faith for their weak faith and claims that a large portion of converts must face the pain of ridicule and chastisement. Christianity, he states flatly, cannot remain hidden. The Bible, if nothing else, demands public profession, and Hodge insists that

²McGilvary, undated letter in *Foreign Missionary* 28, 3 (August 1869): 60.

³ See Kummool Chinawong and Herbert R. Swanson, "Religion and the Formation of Community in Northern Thailand: The Case of Christianity in Nan Province" (Unpublished paper, Fifth International Conference on Thai Studies, London, July 1993).

⁴ Wilson and his family arrived in Chiang Mai in 1868, and the Presbyterian mission in the northern states was subsequently known as the "Laos Mission." Among Westerners living in Siam, the northern Thai were generally known as the Laos.

converts profess their allegiance to Christ their King publicly. They must take Christ as their father and must give him public honor and obedience. He states,

But what kind of worshipper is he who is ashamed or afraid to acknowledge his God? All the relations, therefore, in which a Christian stands to Christ, as his king, as the head of the family of God and as the object of divine worship, involve the necessity of confessing him before men; and we practically reject him in all these relations by neglecting or refusing this public profession of him and his religion.

Being a Christian, Hodge argues further, cannot be hidden in any event because Christians have to behave in ways utterly alien to general social conventions. He writes, "This is one of the reasons why the people of God are called saints. They are distinguished, separated from others and consecrated to God. When they cease to be distinguished from those around them, they cease to be saints."⁵

The saints must be distinguished from those around them, if they are to remain saints. Northern Thai Christians are a people called, therefore, to live apart from the world around them. Thai Protestants have lived something of a ghetto existence both religiously and socially since the very beginning. While several factors drove the converts to the fringes of northern Thai society, the most important factor, at least initially, was missionary attitudes about traditional northern Thai religion, particularly Buddhism and how the converts should relate to that religion. The missionaries believed that Buddhism is a lifeless, false religion, which infected every aspect of northern Thai daily life and trapped its adherents in a web of idolatrous superstition. Those who would not separate themselves from the insidious influences of Buddhism, the missionaries held, were bound to live a life of spiritual poverty before death and suffer eternal damnation after death.

Missionary attitudes towards Buddhism strongly influenced the formation of Christian identity throughout Thailand, including in the North. It can be argued that the Protestant church became a counter-culture, which rejected important cultural values and created a distinctive set of institutions, ceremonies and rituals, and even social relations. This is not to say that northern Thai Christians ceased being northern

⁵ Charles Hodge, *The Way of Life*, ed. Mark Noll (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 180-83. The quotations are from page 183.

Thai. It is to say that in some ways they expressed their "northern Thai-ness" quite differently from their Buddhist neighbors.

The purpose of this essay is to describe nineteenth and early twentieth-century Presbyterian missionary views of Thai Buddhism because of the importance of those views to the formation of Protestant Christian identity in northern Thailand. Two important points should be made from the outset. First, the author does not share the views of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century missionaries and presents them here only because of their historical importance. This article should not in any sense be construed as endorsing anti-Buddhist sentiment, covert or overt. Second and as will be seen below, the Presbyterian missionaries themselves over the course of several decades softened their attitudes towards Buddhism. It should be further noted that while the focus of this essay is on northern Thai Buddhism, it also draws on the views of Presbyterian missionaries working in central and southern Thailand. Those views are the same as the northern missionaries and help us to better understand the attitudes towards Buddhism of the members of the Laos Mission.

Sources of Missionary Attitudes Towards Buddhism

If Presbyterian missionary attitudes concerning Buddhism in Siam and northern Siam comprise an important context for the formation of Protestant identity in Thailand, those attitudes themselves had their own context rooted in a broader Protestant historical experience and theological understanding. The missionary analysis of Buddhism drew on a pool of Protestant ideas and attitudes taken from at least two key sources, first, Protestant Christianity's historical struggle against Catholicism and, second, the Bible. The Presbyterian missionaries serving in all of Siam, that is, judged Thai Buddhism on the basis of concepts that had nothing to do with Buddhism itself. Their views represent a classic example of how centuries' old attitudes derived from prior experience in other contexts can shape one's perceptions in new, alien settings.⁶

⁶ See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, reprint with a new Afterward (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 58, 92-93.

Giant Pope and Giant Pagan

The study of the Presbyterian missionary approach to Buddhism in Siam, thus, begins with Protestant attitudes towards Catholicism, attitudes that emerged at the time of the Protestant Reformation. The temples, yellow robes, palm leaf religious texts, and incomprehensible rituals of Thai Buddhism should have been astonishingly alien to the Presbyterian missionaries, but they were not. A sense of familiarity, instead, marked their initial exposure to Thai Buddhism. As heirs to the Protestant rebellion against Catholicism, they felt that in Buddhism they had discovered simply one more manifestation of their centuries' old nemesis, the Church of Rome.

Protestantism began in the sixteenth century as a protest against Rome and for centuries thereafter engaged in a frequently violent religious brawl with Catholicism for ecclesiastical dominion over Europe and the rest of the world. Protestant European immigrants to North America took with them to the "New" World attitudes born of the Protestant struggle against Catholicism, and there had still been no evident diminishing of American Protestant anti-Catholicism by the time the Laos Mission was founded in 1867. Handy argues that, if anything, anti-Catholic sentiment was on the rise in the later nineteenth century as American Protestants felt profoundly threatened by the rapid growth of immigrant Catholicism in the United States. The long history of Protestant-Catholic antagonism, he states, persisted in American Protestant consciousness so that, "The ugly trails of anti-Catholicism and nativism wind together through nineteenth-century history."⁷ Wolfe goes so far as to claim that among both British and American evangelicals (which would include Presbyterians) anti-Catholicism was "very much of the essence of evangelicalism." He observes that, "Indeed, antagonism to 'popery' served, in a positive as well as a negative sense, to help define evangelical identity."⁸ "Anti-Buddhism" has similarly functioned as one indicator of identity for northern Thai Protestant Christians.

⁷ Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 51.

⁸ John Wolffe, "Anti-Catholicism and Evangelical Identity in Britain and the United States, 1830-1860," in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, eds. Mark

Just as the Protestant European colonists had carried anti-Catholicism with them to the American colonies, so the Presbyterian missionaries took that same set of feelings and attitudes to Siam. Catholicism *remained* the enemy, and Buddhism, with its stark similarities to "papalism," *became* the enemy. Writing in 1855, the Rev. Stephen Mattoon of the Siam Mission informed the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in New York City of a recent meeting between the King of Siam and a group of Catholic missionaries. In the course of that meeting, King Mongkut complimented the Catholics on their work in Siam and then complained to them about the way in which Protestant missionaries interfered in Siamese politics. Mattoon commented, "This is Giant Pope and Giant Pagan shaking hands agreeing together to slander their common adversary."⁹

The Presbyterian missionaries, moreover, did not see Buddhism and Catholicism as being merely allies. They were two expressions, rather, of the same phenomenon, which meant that the Catholic Church provided them with a ready model for interpreting Buddhism in Siam. Dr. Marion and Sarah Cheek of the Laos Mission wrote in 1884 that, "Among [the northern Thai] we can see examples in daily life of those hideous spectres of superstition such as served to guide the pitiful gropings of the intellectual and moral life of Europe three centuries ago."¹⁰ The condition of northern Siam in the 1880s, that is, supposedly reflected the low moral and directionless intellectual state of Catholic Europe before the Protestant Reformation. Mary Cort, writing just a few years earlier made a similar observation. Speaking of the "foolishness" and "wickedness" of Siamese funeral rites, she observed that, "They pray for the dead as do the Roman Catholics, and make offerings to the Buddhist priests and to the evil spirits. It is altogether one of the greatest

A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 179

⁹ Mattoon to House, 25 October 1885, v. 2, Records of the Board of Foreign Missions. Microfilm copy at the Payap University Archives. Hereafter cited as BFM.

¹⁰ Dr. & Mrs. Cheek, "Superstitions of the Laos," in *Siam and Laos as Seen by Our American Presbyterian Missionaries*, ed. Mary Backus (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1884), 505.

displays of heathenism which this country affords."¹¹ We will find that the concepts of superstition and of heathenism represented a central aspect of the ideological foundation upon which the missionaries built their interpretation of Buddhism. Both concepts called Catholicism to mind for the Cheeks and Cort.

These attitudes of anti-Catholicism are readily apparent in the Presbyterian missionary record in Siam. They suggest that, first, the feelings of antipathy the missionaries had towards Catholicism were deeply held. Dr. James B. Thompson of the Siam Mission captured the missionary feelings of revulsion regarding the Catholic Church when he wrote in 1891 that, "I am perfectly satisfied if Catholics never cross my path. No child of mine shall ever marry such idolaters."¹² Buddhism's apparent similarities to Catholicism also engendered deep feelings of disgust and antagonism that had been part of the Protestant psyche since the sixteenth century. Second, the depth of those feelings helps to explain the sometimes harsh, even angry words the missionaries used concerning Buddhism. They judged Buddhism, not so much in terms of itself, as in terms of an inherited set of feelings and attitudes about Catholicism. One almost wants to say that their religious and ideological war on Buddhism was not actually a war on Buddhism at all; the "real" enemy was that age-old ally of Satan, "Romanism," also known as "poppery." It is difficult to account for the bitter attitudes the missionaries sometimes expressed about Buddhism—a relatively mild religious faith that in and of itself had done them and their converts little if any harm—apart from their anti-Catholicism. Third, the missionaries used Buddhism in Siam in much the same way Protestants in America used Catholicism, namely to define Protestant Christian identity. Protestants *are* certain things, and one important way to know what those things are is by comparing Protestant religious faith to Buddhism (and Catholicism). What Buddhists (and Catholics) *are* Protestants *are not*.

¹¹ Mary L. Cort, letter dated July 1876, *Foreign Missionary* 35, 5 (October 1876): 151. For more detailed comparisons between Catholicism and Buddhism, see Mary L. Cort, *Siam or The Heart of Further India* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Company, 1886), 67, 151-52.

¹² Thompson to Mitchell, 18 August 1891, v. 8, BFM.

The list of those things that Catholics were in the missionary mind offers an excellent inventory of their understanding of Buddhism as well. High on the list was the charge of idolatry. The Rev. Samuel G. McFarland of the Siam Mission's Phet Buri Station, for example, wrote that conversion from Buddhism to Catholicism was, "little more than a change of name—or as some have called it, baptized idolatry."¹³ Writing some 35 years after McFarland, the Rev. C. R. Callender of the Laos Mission noted that northern Thai Buddhists worshipped their Buddha images, something that contradicted classical Buddhism itself and called to mind Catholicism rather than classical Buddhism.¹⁴ Otherwise, as we have already suggested above, the missionaries felt that Catholic thought and practices in Siam were foolish, wicked, ignorant, benighted, superstitious, morally deficient, and intellectually dead. The Catholic missionaries' supposed methods of evangelism by using financial gain and social benefits as lures to convert gave further definition to the Presbyterians' antipathy to their religion. Presbyterian missionaries also claimed that the Catholics failed to preach and teach the Christian faith, and they did not expect their converts to show a genuine change of heart and behavior.¹⁵ Which is to say, that according to the Presbyterian missionaries in Siam the Catholics practiced greed rather than grace and in the process failed to teach their converts right doctrines and correct moral behavior.

The Presbyterian missionaries' attitudes towards Catholicism, in sum, reveal the larger Western Protestant context in which they carried out their attacks on Buddhism in Siam and northern Siam. That context was immediately real to them because of the presence of the Catholic priests and churches both in Siam and in neighboring French Indo-China. The specter of Catholic competition, real or imagined, haunted them, and over the course of the years Presbyterian missionaries wrote any number of letters warning the Board of Foreign Missions of the fearful possibility that the Catholics might "occupy" one place or another in Siam before the

¹³ McFarland to Lowrie, 22 August 1864, v. 2, BFM.

¹⁴ C. R. Callender to Dear Friends, 9 May 1899, v. 15, BFM.

¹⁵ McDonald to Mitchell, 9 March 1885, v. 5, BFM; J. W. Van Dyke, undated letter, *Foreign Missionary* 30, 4 (September 1871): 111; and, Wachter to Speer, 1 July 1895, v. 10, BFM.

Presbyterians did. Dr. William A. Briggs, as one example, wrote to the Board in 1893 that he had information indicating that French Catholic priests were about to open work in Phrae, one of the chief cities of the North. Alluding to supposed Catholic methods of buying off slaves to gain converts and relying on money as their chief engine for evangelism, he wrote, "The fact is we must take the vantage ground & plant our standard now or the standard of the Cross in a very different sense will be planted."¹⁶ While it is likely that Briggs and other missionaries raised the dire prospect of Catholic competition partly as a tactic to gain more money and personnel for their work in Siam; the fact that they used this tactic suggests how important Catholicism was as a negative element in the formation of American Protestant identity.

The Bible

If the Protestant experience of Catholicism provided the Presbyterian missionaries in Siam with one important model for interpreting Siamese Buddhism, the Bible offered a second, equally important model. This second model is summed up in the idea of "heathenism," a concept found frequently in the pages of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, the English translation of the Bible current throughout the period under study. The Rev. Stephen Mattoon offered an unusually detailed biblical analysis of the condition of the heathen in an 1859 article published in the *North Carolina Presbyterian*, one that exemplifies the way in which the missionaries used the Bible to comprehend the condition of the people in Siam. Mattoon made three points. First, just as Psalms 115:8 shows, those who make idols themselves become useless and worthless like idols. Second, citing Isaiah 44:19, he argued that the worship of wooden idols is foolish because the same wood is also used for more mundane purposes, such as for fuel to bake bread. Finally, Mattoon claimed

¹⁶ Briggs to Grant, 20 June 1893, v. 9, BFM. See also, McGilvary to Irving, 28 February 1873, v. 3, BFM; Irwin to Presbyterian Societies of Iowa, 8 May 1891, v. 8, BFM; Peoples to Speer, 30 April 1894, v. 11, BFM; and Peoples to Speer, 15 May 1894, v. 11, BFM. Very rarely, a Presbyterian missionary saw an advantage to Catholic missions. Ella Cooper, for example, suggested that sometimes Catholic converts so "let their light shine" among their Buddhist neighbors that they actually prepared the way for a fuller presentation of Protestantism. Ella Parker Cooper, "Bi-Monthly letter of the Rajaburee Station," 12 January 1898, v. 14, BFM.

that Romans 1 reveals the truly miserable moral condition of the heathen. Mattoon went on to avow that after 1,800 years heathenism had not changed. He wrote,

After 12 years residence in a heathen land, I am constrained to testify that the descriptions of the Psalmist, the Prophet and the Apostle are true. The state of the heathen is the same now as then. To-day they are morally dead and helpless. After all their advantages, they are socially wretched; they have no strength to elevate themselves, and they are feeding on ashes still.¹⁷

The phrase "feeding on ashes" introduces still another biblical image, taken from Isaiah 44:20, where the prophet emphasizes the delusion and foolishness that ensnares idolaters. Mattoon's article contains two unspoken assumptions regarding Buddhism in Siam. It assumes that the biblical category of "heathen" aptly described the religious conditions of the people of Siam. It also assumes that the Bible was a useful guide for understanding that condition. This analysis reflects a Protestant perspective, which looks to the Bible as the one authoritative guide for Christian faith and practice.

The missionary record seldom contains as detailed a biblical analysis as that presented by Mattoon; the missionaries tended, rather, to use simple biblical images to illustrate their assessment of Buddhism. The Rev. William P. Buell drew one of the most stark of those images when he wrote in 1841, "We see the awful situation of these perishing heathen. They are passing rapidly to the judgment and yet unprepared for that awful moment." He continued, "We can, while standing here, see how pure a work is the church engaged in while offering these poor wretches salvation & eternal life."¹⁸ Although the exact term "perishing heathen" does not appear in the King James Bible, these two words are paired in at least two places in the KJV, namely Psalm 10:16 and Isaiah 60:12. The term also reflects a number of other passages, which individually predict that wickedness, sin, sinners, the desires of the wicked, those who die without repenting, and other forms of evil will "perish."

¹⁷ Stephen Mattoon, "Synodical Missionary Meeting," *North Carolina Presbyterian* 2, 47 (19 November 1859), 2.

¹⁸ Buell to Wells, 15 May 1841, v. 1, BFM. See also, House, "Annual Report of the Siam Mission for the year ending Sept. 30th 1853," v. 2, BFM; Wilson to Lowrie, 21 January 1860, v. 2, BFM; and, Dunlap to Irving [February 1883], v. 4, BFM.

Another biblical image occasionally used by the missionaries was taken from Jesus' instruction in the Sermon on the Mount not to pray with "vain repetitions" as the heathen pray. (Matthew 6:7 KJV) McGilvary once condemned Buddhist merit-making ceremonies as being "vain repetitions" and "senseless theatricals." Mary Cort applied the same charge of mouthing vain repetitions to monks who purportedly chanted whole books worth of rituals without knowing the meaning of the words they spoke.¹⁹

Still other biblical images and concepts provided the missionaries with a sense of their own identity vis-à-vis the idolatrous, foolish, and immoral heathenism of Siam. Drawing primarily on Jesus' Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:3-23, the missionaries conceived of themselves as sowers who spread the seed of Christian truth among the dark-minded heathens.²⁰ They assumed this biblical identity of seed-sowers and entered into their attendant duties with a sense of hope taken from yet another set of biblical passages, many of which are found in the Psalms. Psalm 126.6, they thought, instructed them to expect that they would have to go out into the fields weeping if they hoped to return joyfully with a harvest. Psalm 72.6 promised them that the small handful of converts they started with would one day result in an "abundant harvest."²¹ The missionaries put great store in these biblical promises. The Rev. C. S. McClelland wrote to the Board in 1881 that Siam had been "Satan's seat" for many years and Satan would not give the country up easily or without a struggle. Alluding to Psalm 2.8 and quoting II Peter 3.9, however, he avowed, "The heathen have been promised to the Son [Jesus] for his inheritance & the uttermost

¹⁹ McGilvary to Lowrie, 24 June 1862, v. 2, BFM; and, Cort, *Heart of Further India*, 106. See also Cort to Irving, 15 January 1875, v. 3, BFM; and, Morse, "Merit-making in Siam: Journal of the Rev. A. B. Morse," *Foreign Missionary* 17, 5 (October 1858): 141.

²⁰ Buell to Lowrie, 4 December 1843, v. 1, BFM. See also, S. C. George, "Annual Report of the Mission Station at the city Wall Bangkok, for the year ending Oct. 1st 1870," 1 October 1870, v. 3, BFM.

²¹ See, J. Carrington, 22 February 1871, v. 3, BFM; and, P. L. Carder, "Report 1866 Bangkok, Siam," 1 October 1866, v. 3, BFM.

parts of the Earth for his possession & we can afford to patiently wait for the fulfillment of that promise, for 'the Lord is not slack concerning his promises.'"²²

Conclusion

This biblical repository of images and ideas served to make northern Thai Buddhism doubly familiar to the Presbyterian missionaries of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. It was not only the familiar Catholic nemesis dressed up in Siamese garb, but also it was yet another version of equally familiar biblical heathenism. From the beginning, that is, the missionaries judged Buddhism in Siam and northern Siam by a preconceived set of attitudes that reflected both the Protestant historical experience and a peculiarly Protestant interpretation of the Christian Scriptures. Wearing the blinders of their prejudice, they found in Buddhism what they expected to find—but not always. Now and again, the facts of life in heathen Siam overwhelmed their bias, such as when Buell wrote, "It is remarkable that a heathen nation like this should have their language written out, so systematized, such a number of native monks and such a very large proportion of them fluent readers."²³ McGilvary once observed that the mails in Siam were remarkably reliable for a heathen nation. McClellan wrote to the Board that he was surprised that things could be as calm and peaceful in a heathen land as they were in Siam.²⁴ Most striking of all, perhaps, are Kate Wilson's comments. She wrote that in comparison with other heathens, the northern Thai had patently good morals. They protected young girls, for example, and respected and cared for their elderly. She asked in puzzlement, "How have these virtues survived in the midst of ignorance, and superstition, and darkness of mind?"²⁵ Such was the strength of their prejudice, however, that instances when they could look beyond it to see a different Siam were few indeed compared to the

²² McClelland to Irving, 8 October 1881, v. 4, BFM.

²³ Buell to Lowrie, 10 December 1841, v. 1, BFM.

²⁴ McGilvary to Lowrie, 24 June 1862, v. 2, BFM; and, C. S. McClellan to Irving, 8 October 1881, v. 4 BFM

²⁵ Mrs. Wilson, undated letter in *Woman's Work for Woman* 10, 5 (May 1880): 152.

multitude of statements attacking heathenism and denigrating its religious expressions.

When the Presbyterian missionaries encountered Buddhism in Siam and northern Siam, in sum, their Protestant heritage equipped them with a ready-made understanding of what they saw, heard, and felt. It was an understanding built on Protestant historical experience as well as upon a number of key biblical images rooted in the concept of heathenism. While it is entirely appropriate to label their understanding as a prejudice, in the sense that they pre-judged Buddhism according to a set of standards that they brought with them, it would be incorrect to charge the missionaries with making a "snap" judgment regarding Buddhism. The Protestant judgment against the Catholic-like heathenism they found in Siam, on the contrary, had been built out of painful experiences and countless hours of careful study of the Bible. The result was an elaborate critical analysis of non-Protestant, non-Christian religions, such as Buddhism, in what we might style three movements: the theological movement, the intellectual movement, and the moral movement. Although individual missionaries at various times emphasized one or the other of these movements over the others, the three actually formed an inter-locking, self-reinforcing analysis, which the missionaries found profoundly persuasive.

The Missionary Analysis of Buddhism

The Theological Analysis

The Presbyterian missionaries built their analysis of Buddhism on the premise that the twin, interlocking Protestant historical models of Romanism and heathenism corresponded precisely to the Buddhism they encountered in every region of Siam. Dr. Guy Hamilton wrote from Nakhon Si Tammarat in 1900 that although he enjoyed the loveliness of the city he was saddened and oppressed by "the incubus of idolatry and sin" that he found there. He elaborated, "Buttressed thus with temples and schools, Buddhism would seem all but impregnable here, but we are assured that evil and superstition however strongly entrenched, must yield before the God who is marching on."²⁶ Idolatry. Sin. Evil. Superstition. Until well into the twentieth

²⁶ Hamilton, "Bi-Monthly Station Letter," August 1900, v. 17, BFM.

century, the Presbyterians typically used these and related theological categories to describe Buddhism in Siam.

Even a cursory examination of the records of the Siam and Laos Missions reveals that the missionaries depended heavily on a form of Western dualistic thinking to shape their attitudes about Buddhism and about the peoples of Siam generally. Western dualism takes two basic forms, the first being Platonic dualism, which posits a fundamental division between flesh and spirit. While one supposes that Platonic dualism played its part in missionary thinking, it is the second form that appears most clearly and frequently in the missionary record. We might style this second form "Persian dualism," since its roots are found in ancient Persian religion with its vision of a grand cosmic duel between the gods of good and evil. This dualism divides all of reality into two spheres, one evil and the other good, the one of Satan and the other of God. Christian theology imposes a limit on this dualism since it holds that God necessarily must overcome Satan, but for all practical purposes the Presbyterians in Siam also viewed their lives and work as being but one campaign in God's war on Satan. McDonald wrote that Buddhism "is eminently the offspring of Satan, as all its bearings and workings on the heart and morals will abundantly show." Culbertson argued that many Buddhist doctrines are skillfully constructed by the "Prince of cunning" in order to win the favor of humans. Mrs. Jane McFarland stated simply, "It seems to me that Buddhism is Satan's grand master-piece—his most successful scheme for deluding and destroying souls."²⁷

Nothing symbolized the reign of Satan in Siam for the missionaries more than Buddha images, which they considered idols. We have already seen, above, the close association in missionary thinking between the "baptized" idolatry of Catholicism on the one hand and heathenism and idolatry on the other. Jonathan Wilson, one of the

²⁷ N. A. McDonald, *Siam* (Philadelphia: Alfred Martien, 1871), 84; Culbertson to Irving, 6 November 1872, v. 3, BFM; and, Mrs. McFarland, "King of Siam on His Way to the Temple," *Foreign Missionary* 34, 1 (June 1875), 2. See Herbert R. Swanson, "This Heathen People: The Cognitive Sources of American Missionary Westernizing Activities in Northern Siam, 1867-1889" (M.A. thesis, University of Maryland, 1987) concerning missionary dualism, and Herbert R. Swanson, *Krischak Muang Nua* (Bangkok: Chuan Press, 1984), 40 regarding missionary militancy.

key figures in the early history of the Laos Mission, expressed a deep sadness over the loving obeisance the people of Siam gave to their idols, an obeisance that he considered to be worshipping "Budh". His colleague, Daniel McGilvary, added a feeling of disdain to the sadness. In an article published in the United States, he described a northern Thai Buddhist festival held during the cold season, which includes the wrapping of Buddha images to keep them warm. If the "Buddh" is a god, McGilvary asked, how could he feel the cold? He wrote, "The poor helpless annihilated yet cold man-god, dependent on the bonfires of his followers for one morning's comfortable warmth! How can he therefore benefit much less save his sinful worshippers?"²⁸ So deeply ingrained was this attitude towards the uselessness of idols that even missionary children could articulate it. Dr. S. C. Peoples related, with evident pride, a story concerning his young son, Ray, who visited a temple on his own in the city of Nan, where his parents were stationed. Peoples writes, "[Ray] did his mite of missionary work by refusing to worship an idol when being tempted by the priests on a visit alone to one of the temples, and telling them that the idol was nothing; it was only bricks and mud and it was not right to worship such a thing."²⁹

The missionaries used the term "idolatry" itself thus as a virtual synonym for Buddhism, frequently referring to Siamese idols and idolatry when they wrote about Buddhism. In an article published in 1887, as just one example, Laura Olmstead described the Buddha images that she saw at Wat Po in Bangkok and concluded her remarks by writing,

When we look upon these false gods, we unconsciously find ourselves repeating the words: "they that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them." [Psalm 115:8 KJV] May the day soon come when even the name of Buddha shall be forgotten and every

²⁸ Wilson to Rankin, 8 April 1862, v. 2, BFM; and, McGilvary, letter dated 21 February 1876, in *North Carolina Presbyterian* New Series 9, 440 (14 June 1876): 4. . For an excellent contemporary statement of the Presbyterian missionary understanding of idolatry, see the unsigned article, "Idolatry, and How it is Viewed in the Bible," *Foreign Missionary*, 36, 9 (February 1878): 268-272.

²⁹ S. C. Peoples, "The Annual Report of Nan Station—1897," v. 19, BFM.

heart and voice throughout the whole kingdom of Siam shall sing: "All hail the power of Jesus' name."³⁰

The strength of this one-to-one identification of Buddhism with idolatry can be seen by the missionaries' general refusal to accept the arguments of some Buddhists that they do not worship Buddha images but, rather, look through the image to the Buddha himself. Mary Cort termed such arguments "Satan's subterfuge," while Lillian Curtis wondered where these so-called "intelligent and highly spiritual" people who did not treat the images as idols might be found.³¹ Whatever individual Buddhists claimed to see in Buddha images, the missionaries saw idols.

The "fact" of Buddhist idolatry was not simply one fact among others, as far as the Presbyterian missionaries were concerned. It was a dominant fact. Cort saw idols so frequently and in so many places that they recalled for her the powerful biblical image in Jeremiah 2:20 (KJV) where an apostate Israel is portrayed as a harlot plying her trade by worshipping idols "on every high hill and under every green tree."³² McGilvary recalled still another biblical image, the vision of the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 to set off his own vision of northern Siam as "a nation given to idolatry."³³ In its idolatry, Mary Mattoon wrote in 1853, Siam had wandered far from God, who established her as a nation and still "showers" her with divine love. Mattoon avowed that those who did not believe in Jesus and failed to trust in God were living foolish lives, which folly was proven by the fact that Siam had taken a

³⁰ Laura A. Olmstead, "Wat Po," *Woman's Work for Woman & Our Mission Field* 2, 5 (May 1887): 119. See also McGilvary to Lowrie, 18 October 1861, v. 2, BFM; S. M. Coffman, 7 June 1876, v. 3, BFM; Mattoon, "Annual Report of the Siam Mission for the year ending Sept. 30th 1851," 1 October 1851, v. 2, BFM; Caldwell, undated letter, *Woman's Work for Woman Field* 9, 10 (October 1879): 337; W. A. Briggs, "Outfit for Laos Land," *Woman's Work for Woman* 8, 7 (July 1893): 189; and BFM-126.3.

³¹ Cort, *Heart of Further India*, 136; and, Curtis, *Laos of North Siam*, 198. See also, R. MacL. Gillies, "Notes on a Recent Tour in the northern parts of Lampang Province," *Laos News* 7, 2 (May 1910): 58.

³² Cort, undated letter, *Woman's Work for Woman*, 5, 5 (July 1875): 147.

³³ D. McGilvary, undated letter, *Foreign Missionary* 28, 4 (September 1869): 82.

mere human as its god and bowed down to images of him. Mary Hartwell evoked a more terrifying scenario, believing as she did that idolatry and wickedness have annihilated the very image of God in the Siamese.³⁴ The fact of idolatry was the most important "fact" the missionaries knew about Siam, in sum, and it was a fact that they believed had harrowing social and religious consequences.

The missionary theological analysis of Buddhism in Siam and northern Siam began with these basic dualistic ideas that it was but another version of Catholicism and that as such it was both heathen and idolatrous. The missionaries based this analysis, as we saw above, on their understanding of the Bible and on the Protestant historical experience of protest and persecution. Their assessment of Buddhism then elaborated these basic charges in a number of important ways, each of which added further texture to this fundamental perspective concerning Buddhist heathenism and idolatry.

One of the most important of those additional points was the missionary claim that Buddhism is atheistic. William Buell, in the first letter written to the Board of Foreign Missions from the field by a Presbyterian missionary appointed to Siam, described the supposedly atheistic nature of Buddhism. He depicted the "lofty spires" of Bangkok's "heathen temples" as being like lightening rods that brought the wrath of God down on the heads of the people. "Each temple," he wrote, "abounds with priests, whose lives are devoted to propagating atheism under another name." In a further letter written in 1843, he explained, "The inhabitants of this kingdom are Buddhists. Their religious belief is little else than atheism - i.e. a disbelief in the being of one Supreme God, who created and preserves all things, and to whom we must all give an account for the manner in which we live in this world." He went on to state that Buddhism, "is a false religion. It has too much the nature of a fable about it to allow the minds of men to be brought entirely under its power."³⁵

³⁴ Mary L. Mattoon, "Missionary Ladies in the King's Palace," *Foreign Missionary* 12, 3 (August 1853): 62-3; and, Hartwell, undated letter *Woman's Work for Woman* 11, 9 (September 1881): 294.

³⁵ Buell to Lowrie, 4 December 1840, v. 1, BFM; and, Buell to Lowrie, 25 September 1843, v. 1, BFM. Emphasis in the original.

We have seen, above, that at times the missionaries seem to think that the people of Siam had simply "forgotten" that God is the One who has powerfully created and graciously sustains all of reality. Buell, however, did not think that Buddhists have simply or passively forgotten God; its adherents actively disbelieve in God while its functionaries devote themselves to promulgating atheism. The one consequence he notes is that the people stand thus under the wrath of God. The Rev. William C. Dodd agreed with Buell and argued that Buddhism's failure to recognize God means that it has no divine sanctions for its ethical system, no "just Judge" to make its precepts ultimately binding. He wondered if such a system could be properly called a religion. McGilvary answered Dodd's question, arguing that Buddhism lacks the essential attribute of a religion, namely the sense of dependence on a higher power.³⁶ In 1940, a century after Buell first arrived in Bangkok, the Rev. Horace Ryburn was still arguing that Buddhism failed to compel people to face God and, indeed, evades the only "real fact, God." As a result, it contributes nothing spiritually or morally to the Thai people and is powerless to call men to live above the world. He considered it a shallow and hopeless religion when viewed from the perspective of fundamental Christian doctrines.³⁷

To only make matters worse, as far as the missionaries were concerned, Buddhism in Siam had replaced God with merit making. Mattoon, writing in 1853, stated that, "Practically the Siamese are Atheists and have no God, or perhaps I should rather say, their real gods are merit and demerit. The former the author of all good, and the latter of all evil." He went on to charge that merit making comprises the very foundation of the Buddhist religious system and is more important to it than the worship of any God or other set of beliefs. Merit-making, according to Mattoon,

³⁶ Dodd, quoted in Curtis, *Laos of North Siam*, 184; and, McGilvary, *Half Century*, 204. See also, Culbertson's argument that atheism—the idea that there is no creator—is "the first truth" from which all of Buddhism's doctrines are developed. Culbertson, "Report of Presbyterian Mission of Siam," 4 November 1874, v. 3, BFM. And, Robert Irwin's description of "this mighty atheistic and agnostic system of Buddhism." Irwin, "On the Maa Wung River, Below Lakawn," *Woman's Work for Woman* 7, 5 (May 1892): 127.

³⁷ Ryburn to Hutchinson, 21 October 1940, in the Research Papers of Maen Pongudom, at the Payap University Archives.

holds the same place in Buddhism that Christ holds in Christianity, namely it is the source of hope for this life and the next; for that reason Buddhists invest a great deal of money in making merit. Mattoon ended his description of merit making with the comment that even the youngest of his Protestant readers knew that every person is a sinner and sinners cannot be saved by their own works. Therefore, he concluded, the Thai could not be saved.³⁸ Dr. Thompson, writing nearly forty years later, fully agreed with Mattoon. He believed that merit making was one of the most important factors that crippled Buddhism and made it a decaying structure. It led to nothing but pride, conceit, and selfishness. He concluded, "Self- interest is thus the basis of all their works."³⁹

The Presbyterian missionaries' theological analysis of Buddhism in Siam was not, as we have observed already, tightly constructed and well ordered. It rested on a set of general propositions and principles, which particular missionaries weighted differently. Some focused on idolatry as being the chief characteristic of Buddhism. Others thought that it was primarily a religion of merit making or atheism. They all agreed, however, that the consequences of idolatrous, meritocratic, and atheistic Buddhism is the complete loss of hope—hope for a better life in this world and salvation in the one to come. Buddhism, according to the missionaries, posits endless cycles of birth and death with the only hope of escape being a life-denying nirvana. There is, they claimed, no love in this religion and no comfort, which means that in times of crisis Buddhists cannot take refuge in their religion.⁴⁰ This supposedly cheerless religion, furthermore, cannot save the people from their sins; it gives them no hope of the divine pardon necessary to escape damnation, which means that when Buddhists in Siam and northern Siam face death, they have to face it without hope of

³⁸ Mattoon, letter dated 21 February 1853, in *Foreign Missionary* 12, 4 (September 1853): 76-7. See Mattoon to J. C. and W. Lowrie, 28 January 1854, v. 2, BFM, where Mattoon equates merit making with idolatry.

³⁹ Jas. B. Thompson, "The Scared Tree of Siam," *Woman's Work for Woman* 9, 5 (May 1894): 120.

⁴⁰ Coffman to Irving, 4 August 1875, v. 3, BFM; and, Emma W. Dunlap, "Bangkok Station Bi-monthly letter," August 1893, v. 10, BFM.

eternal life.⁴¹ In a brief paper published in the collected papers of the 1893 Chicago World Parliament of Religions, the Rev. S. G. McFarland of the Siam Mission, chose precisely this point to encapsulate his views on Buddhism: it is a religion that gives its adherents no hope, no light, no comfort or consolation. Buddhism provides no strength or encouragement to those struggling through life.⁴²

The Rev. John H. Freeman summarized the missionary case against Buddhism by making a number of theological points, points that recall the above analysis. He argued that Buddhism denies the existence of the soul, teaches nothing about God, and has been known for its atheism since it first arose as a protest against Indian polytheism. Therefore, "The Buddhist is not taught to lift the soul to anything above man himself." The only basis for altruism in a Buddhist society, in consequence, is merit making, which involves no religious motives. Generally, Buddhists in Siam were not taught to follow the teachings of the Buddha. In sum, then, Freeman contended that Buddhism cannot be considered a true religion, especially because it gives little or nothing to satisfy real cravings of the human heart.⁴³ Freeman and his Presbyterian colleagues in Siam based this type of analysis on a set of dualistic, Protestant theological categories and the assumption that those categories are universally true and applicable to all religions. Given that assumption, it was inevitable that the missionaries' analysis would find Buddhism entirely wanting to the point that they denied it even the status of religion.

The Intellectual Analysis

The nineteenth and early twentieth-century Presbyterian missionaries in Siam and northern Siam rooted their analysis of Buddhism, as we have seen, in their

⁴¹ McGilvary, *Half Century*, 174-75; J. A. Eakin, "A Buddhist Revival," *Assembly Herald* 22, 5 (May 1916): 251-52; Sarah Wirt Peoples, "The Prince of Nan and 'Lord of Life'," *Assembly Herald* 14, 5 (May 1908): 222-23; and, Dodd to Mitchell, 19 April 1892, v. 9, BFM.

⁴² S. G. McFarland, "Buddhism and Christianity," in *The World's Parliament of Religions*, ed. John Henry Barrows (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), 1297.

⁴³ John H. Freeman, *An Oriental Land of the Free* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1910), 36-40.

theology. Their analysis, when stripped of its rhetoric, found Thai and northern Thai Buddhism wanting on only one essential point, namely that it was not Christian and therefore could not deliver the peoples of Siam from their sins and misery. The missionaries did not stop, however, with this apparently sectarian theological analysis. They, rather, built from it a larger case against Buddhism that placed considerable importance on the life of the mind and on science. That case presupposed and drew upon yet another element of the missionaries' Western heritage, the Enlightenment.

Over the last four decades or more, American historians have increasingly realized that the European Enlightenment had an immense impact on nineteenth-century American history, one that centrally shaped the ways in which Americans generally and evangelical Protestants in particular looked at their world. The "Enlightenment" that so profoundly influenced American Protestantism, however, was not that of the classical European Enlightenment. May's study of the Enlightenment in America identifies four types of the Enlightenment and argues that it was the last of these four, the "Didactic Enlightenment," that flourished in the United States. May describes this fourth category of the Enlightenment as being,

...a variety of thought which was opposed both to skepticism and revolution, but tried to save from what it saw as the debacle of the Enlightenment the intelligible universe, clear and certain moral judgments, and progress. Its chief center was Scotland. It began before the middle of the eighteenth century, but its principal triumphs in American took place in the first quarter of the nineteenth.⁴⁴

May argues that eighteenth-century Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, also known as Common Sense Realism, lay at the heart of the American didactic Enlightenment and notes that Presbyterian seminary professors and clergy were among that philosophy's most fervent adherents.⁴⁵ To that number we may add the Presbyterian missionaries in Siam. Ahlstrom sums up the role Common Sense Philosophy played in American life by noting, simply, "It came to exist in America, therefore, as a vast

⁴⁴ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), xvi.

⁴⁵ May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 342-48.

subterranean influence, a sort of water-table nourishing dogmatics in an age of increasing doubt."⁴⁶

Scottish Common Sense Philosophy emerged in the eighteenth century as a moderate, religiously oriented response to the skeptical philosophy of, among others, David Hume (1711-1776). Associated particularly with the writings of Thomas Reid (1710-1796), Common Sense thought addresses fundamental issues in epistemology, the study of knowledge. It argues that humans can know a great deal about the world around them with a certainty (denied by Hume) that relies on simple common sense. Common Sense Philosophy contends that the human senses and mind are divinely created instruments for understanding reality as it actually exists. We know, for example, that each of us is an independent entity with a memory of our identity. We know that the things we see and touch exist independently of us and are what we perceive them to be. Such knowledge is a matter of common sense, and to deny our knowledge of them leads to contradictions and nonsensical impossibilities. There are, furthermore, certain first principles of knowledge, which can be known by a careful, inductive study of the facts of reality around us, most especially the inner realities of the human mind.⁴⁷

It should be noted that Common Sense Philosophy promoted a sense of trust in humanity's ability to know the truth about reality, including moral and religious realities. It encouraged those who accepted its arguments, indeed, to treat moral and religious knowledge as being the same as knowledge of the physical universe. Geology and theology are but two branches of knowledge, essentially the same in their subject matter and method of knowing. Common Sense Philosophy also taught that true knowledge is universal, timeless, and comprises a single unity. What was

⁴⁶ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology." *Church History* 24 (1955): 268.

⁴⁷ Knud Haakonssen, "Reid's Philosophy," in Thomas Reid, *Practical Ethics*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 38-85; Paul Helm, "Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism," in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Henrik Hart, et. al. (University of America Press, 1983), 72-5; Ronald E. Beanblossom, "Introduction," in *Thomas Reid's Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), xix-lvii.

true in biblical times, thus, is true today. If, to anticipate the thinking of the missionaries in Siam, Christianity is true in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh then it must necessarily be true in Bangkok and Chiang Mai—and true in precisely the same way. Common Sense Philosophy also fostered a profound trust in a brand of scientific thought known in the United States as "Baconianism," a form of inductive study that works from a careful collection of individual facts on a given subject of study to equally carefully stated conclusions.⁴⁸ It should be emphasized that nineteenth-century American Presbyterians, in particular, held science in very high regard and believed that true science confirms rather than contradicts the Bible. They, including members of the Laos Mission, were frequently well read in the various sciences.⁴⁹

The Presbyterian missionaries in Siam, thus, brought with them a conservative, peculiarly American version of the Enlightenment *philosophes*. They believed in their own ability to know the truth. They believed in reason. They rejected all forms of religious superstition with the understanding that their own faith was grounded in truth, reason, and the Bible and in no way could be classified as superstitious. Of equal importance, they believed in science. Gay has typified the Enlightenment as being devoted to fact, opposed to superstition, and willing to acknowledge no master other than truth.⁵⁰ So long as it was understood that fact and truth led back to God and that superstition meant "heathenism," the Presbyterian missionaries in Siam fit Gays' description perfectly.

Buell aptly set the stage for later Presbyterian views on Buddhism and the intellect when, in 1842, he described Buddhism as being nothing less than a darkness of the mind, which no light has ever penetrated. According to him, it is fabulous,

⁴⁸ See Walter H. Conser, Jr., *God and the Natural World: Religion and Science in Antebellum America* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); and, Herbert Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America, 1800-1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978).

⁴⁹ See Herbert R. Swanson, "Introduction," in Daniel McGilvary *A Half Century Among the Siamese and Lao* (1912; reprint, Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2002), xxff.

⁵⁰ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 150.

contradictory, and has nothing to do with reason or with God. Alluding to the first chapter of Romans, Buell explained that the Siamese were in a dangerous situation because they have no knowledge of God and have given themselves over to unrighteousness.⁵¹ John Culbertson, writing more than thirty years later, urged the importance of Christian schools as a means for "...revealing scientific truth, such as geography, geology, and astronomy, thus showing by the contrast how much of Buddhism is monstrous absurdity; 'old wives fables.'" He looked for the day when Buddhism would no longer command the confidence of "sober reason" and when intelligent people would no longer put their faith in its false system, which was riddled with errors.⁵² Writing in 1884, just ten years after Culbertson, Dr. Marion and Mrs. Sarah Cheek described the superstitions of the northern Thai, stating, "...their reasoning facilities are entirely in subjection to the imagination in accounting for the most ordinary natural phenomena." The northern Thai, according to the Cheeks, lived in a "benighted" condition mentally, believed in "hideous" superstitions, and were willing to believe any absurdity if only it had to do with supernatural causes. Cheek, in another article, referred to one specific northern Thai "superstition" as being a "degrading prostitution of the human intellect"⁵³

The operative word for the Presbyterians in Siam, just as for the advocates of the Enlightenment in Europe, was the term, "superstition". Frequently paired with it was the concept of ignorance, suggesting that the Siamese believed in a stifling and unscientific system of teaching.⁵⁴ The Rev. C. N. Denman, of the Laos Mission, clarified the connection between superstition and the failure to accept Western scientific thinking when he observed that the mission had produced a few geography texts and other books that expand the northern Thai world view and, thus, clear away

⁵¹ William P. Buell to Lowrie, 31 August 1842, v. 1, BFM.

⁵² Culbertson to Irving, 10 November 1876, v. 3, BFM. Portions of this letter are reprinted in *Foreign Missionary* 36, 1 (June 1877): 21-3.

⁵³ Dr. and Mrs. Cheek, "Superstitions of the Laos," 504-05; and, M. R. Cheek, "Treatment of the Sick," in *Siam and Laos*, 520.

⁵⁴ See John Culbertson to Irving 24 December 1874, v. 3, BFM; and, Mrs. Egon [Rebecca] Wachter to Speer, 16 April 1895, v. 10, BFM.

the "mass of superstition" that had ruled their lives.⁵⁵ McGilvary voiced similar sentiments, arguing that missionary schools had the task of eradicating superstition and tearing down the false notions of philosophy on which Buddhism is founded. Dr. House, of the Siam Mission, played an active role in introducing the sciences to Siamese royalty on the premise that by doing so he helped to demonstrate the falsity of Buddhism, its rites, and its gods.⁵⁶

Nothing better symbolized the degraded state of the peoples of Siam and northern Siam in Presbyterian missionary eyes than their superstitious medical practices. Nothing, by the same token, more aptly proved the superiority of Christian civilization than the effectiveness of Western medicine. The Rev. Dr. J. S. Thomas, a missionary doctor as well as clergyman, described in an 1897 letter to the Board two medical cases he had recently treated, both of which were aggravated by a lack of care and concern by the relatives of the patients. The patients were each beyond hope when they were finally brought to him, which in Thomas' eyes illustrated the degrading effects of heathenism and superstition on the people. In additional letters that year, Thomas lamented the superstitious and animistic inclinations of the people, who in their ignorance actually preferred "native" doctors to missionary care. That ignorance infected people in high places as much as it did the general populace.⁵⁷ Daisy Park, of the Laos Mission's Nan Station, spoke for all of the missionaries when she described how people allowed their children to die without proper medical care, stating, "You can see from these instances how much these people need the blessings of the gospel, and that they will never get rid of their dreadful superstitions until its light shines down deep into their hearts." Dr. Edwin McDaniel summed up the matter

⁵⁵ C. M. Denman, "A Balance Sheet from Laos," *Assembly Herald* 4, 5 (May 1901): 163.

⁵⁶ Daniel McGilvary to Orange Presbytery, 5 March 1859, in *North Carolina Presbyterian* 2, 29 (16 July 1859): 1; and, George Haws Feltus, *Samuel Reynolds House of Siam* (New York: Revell, 1924), 61-2.

⁵⁷ J. S. Thomas to Dear Friends, 23 February 1897, v. 13, BFM; J. S. Thomas to Dear Friends, 11 March 1897, v. 13, BFM; and, J. S. and Amy S. Thomas to Dear Friends, 27 October 1897, v. 13, BFM.

in his avowal that Presbyterian missionary medical work stood in opposition to superstition.⁵⁸

The missionaries in northern Siam took special aim at northern Thai animistic practices in their condemnation of superstition in the North. Dr. Cheek denounced northern Thai beliefs in "witchcraft" as being one of their greatest social evils. He described in detail the way in which spirit doctors applied physical torture to exorcise the evil spirits of those accused of being possessed by "demons". Cheek also recounted the injustices forced on whole families accused of practicing witchcraft, relating how they were frequently forced to abandon their homes without even the opportunity to sell their land or possessions. The missionaries, he wrote, "have attempted to aid individual victims by making our premises places of refuge and enabling those who had been driven from home to find work and protection..."⁵⁹

In the end, however, the missionaries' theological analysis of heathenism still drove its critique of the Thai and northern Thai mind. The missionaries especially linked the concept of superstition to animism and idolatry, making it clear that the Thai and northern Thai failure to accept the Christian religion lay at the heart of their ignorance and superstition. As late as 1913, the Laos Mission used medical care to win a substantial number of conversions, and the annual report for that year observed of medical care that, "Nothing else so readily breaks the bonds of spirit superstition, the vast hold of Satan in their land."⁶⁰ The relationship of idolatry to superstition stood out even more clearly in missionary thinking. The Bangkok Station report for

⁵⁸ Daisy B. Park, "One of the Deprivations of a Religion of Fear," *Woman's Work for Woman* 18, 5 (May 1903): 107; and, E. B. McDaniels, *Assembly Herald* "Pages from a Physician's Note-book in Siam," 15, 5 (May 1909): 219-221.

⁵⁹ M. A. Cheek, "Medical Missions Among the Laos," *Foreign Missionary*, 42, 3(August 1883): 117-18. See also Cort, *Heart of Farther India*, 171-72.

⁶⁰ "Annual Report of the Laos Mission for the Year ending Sept. 30, 1913," in Records of the American Presbyterian Mission, at the Payap University Archives. Hereafter cited as APM.

1866 stated simply, "Ignorance and superstition, the necessary attendants of idolatry, are here [in Bangkok] in their grossest forms..."⁶¹

The advocates of the European Enlightenment believed that it was, indeed, enlightenment that they were recovering for a continent that after the fall of Rome had suffered through long ages of superstitious, ignorant darkness. The Presbyterian missionaries, heirs to the Enlightenment in Siam, believed precisely the same thing. They brought light to a dark continent and nation. The Rev. D. G. McClure, of the Siam Mission, wrote in 1900 that Christ makes a great difference to the world and that

a world of darkness is dispelled, the terribly degrading power of superstition is broken if not wholly removed, and a hearty sympathy for others has birth and constant exercise. We are made aware of this difference between even the best of the heathen and the members of our little group of Christians, often and in many ways.⁶²

In their article on the superstitions of northern Siam, the Cheeks echoed McClure's sentiments and struck one of the most common themes in the missionary record, namely that the northern Thai lived in a "benighted condition" marked by their blind faith in various "miserable absurdities entertained by them as sober and fundamental truths."⁶³ Buell, in the earliest days of Presbyterian missions in Siam, sounded that same theme. He argued that the Siamese believed in a fabulous, contradictory cosmology based on mere jargon and devoid of all reason. The people lived in a state of cognitive darkness that had not been penetrated by the "light of revelation" or the "light of truth." Jane McFarland cried out, "Oh, when will the Sun of Righteousness

⁶¹ P. L. Carder, "Report 1866 Bangkok, Siam," 1 October 1866, v. 3, BFM. See also House, "Annual Report of the Siam Mission for the Year ending Sept. 30th 1858," v. 2, BFM; McDonald, "Report of the Mission of the Pres. Board at Bangkok Siam for mission year ending Oct 1st A.D. 1862, v. 2, BFM; and, Coffman to Board, 7 June 1876, v. 3, BFM.

⁶² W. G. McClure, "Petchaburee Bi-Monthly Letter," March 1900, v. 17, BFM.

⁶³ Dr. and Mrs. Cheek, "Superstitions of the Laos," 504.

arise on poor Siam and dispel this night of fearful darkness, superstition and idolatry?"⁶⁴

Yet, as all of these sentiments suggest and as we have already seen, the missionaries' Enlightenment analysis of the intellectual state of Siam reflected the prior, more fundamental theological analysis that found Siam essentially wanting, before all else, because it was not Christian. Since truth was assumed to be unitary, universal, and timeless and since Christianity was the very essence of truth, the missionaries came to the "obvious" conclusion that the people of Siam were ignorant and superstitious. The missionaries knew even before they arrived that they were going to a land of darkness. The truth of the matter is that Catholicism, too, lingered hauntingly in the missionary analysis of Thai superstition, for it was against Catholicism that the European Enlightenment *philosophes* launched their program to save Europe from the darkness of superstition. While the American missionaries, as Protestants, rejected the anti-religious flavor of the European Enlightenment, they felt deeply committed to its project of rooting out the superstitions of a supposedly false religion.

The Ethical Analysis

The missionary description of Siamese morals preserved the central unity of its three-pronged theological, intellectual, and ethical analysis. The idolatrous heathenism and ignorant superstitions of the peoples of Siam, the missionaries believed, profoundly corrupted their moral condition. We have already seen how this theme of immorality runs like a constant thread through the Presbyterian missionary analysis of Buddhism. The missionaries, as described above, believed that Satan played a central role in Buddhist thought and practice, making Buddhism inherently evil. The constant mention of idolatry lent further weight to the perception that there is something fundamentally corrupt about Thai religion. We recall Dodd's charge that atheistic Buddhism lacked a divine judge and, therefore, divine sanctions for its code of morals. We recall Dr. Thompson's assertion that Buddhism, as a religion of merit making, is inherently based on self-interest and results only in pride, conceit, and

⁶⁴ Buell to Lowrie, 31 August 1842, v. 1, BFM; and, J. E. McFarland, "The Image of a Shadow," *Foreign Missionary* 25, 9 (February 1867): 248.

selfishness. Mary Cort agreed with Thompson, describing Buddhism as a selfish, indifferent, indolent, and vice-ridden religion. It is, she claimed, a religion that has no heart and no soul.⁶⁵ The missionaries, as we also saw above, believed that Buddhism is a loveless, cheerless religion unable to free its adherents from sin. Buell considered the people of Siam to be unrighteous. Thomas, Cheek, and Daisy Park as described earlier, all lamented the fact that Buddhism superstitions led to the most shameful acts of physical abuse.

Dr. Edwin Cort of the Chiang Mai Station in the North summarized the ethical case against Buddhism in a letter published in *Woman's Work* in 1913. European newspapers, he observed, were then publishing numerous stories on the "beauties of Buddhism," which stories failed to tell the truth of the matter. Cort described in some detail the case of a man whose wife died in childbirth and who, subsequently, abandoned the infant daughter in the forest because of his superstitious fear that the ghost of his dead wife would come back looking for the baby. He noted that Thai law made it difficult to prosecute the man and concluded, "So much for the tenderness of Buddhism."⁶⁶ Writing some thirty years before Cort, Jane McFarland complained that temple boys in Siam were generally "naughty" because they lived in an environment where their chief companions were idleness and viciousness and their time was taken up with unsavory activities, such as cock-fighting, gambling, and swearing. Temple life, she stated, was a school of idleness and vice and the "graduates" of this school were fit only for a lazy, aimless existence.⁶⁷ She and nearly all of her many missionary colleagues over the years would join heartily in Cort's pejorative rejoinder, "So much for the tenderness of Buddhism."

If anything, however, this ethical analysis of the state of the peoples of Siam was even more a function of the missionaries' theological prejudices than was their intellectual analysis. The actual realities of life in Siam so obviously contradicted the wholesale condemnation of Thai ethics, as we have also seen, that even the

⁶⁵ Cort, *Heart of Further India*, 114.

⁶⁶ Dr. Cort, undated letter, in *Woman's Work* 28, 11 (November 1913): 259.

⁶⁷ Mrs. S. G. McFarland, "The Schools of Siam," in, *Siam and Laos*, 212.

missionaries themselves had to acknowledge the happier, better side of Thai life. McClellan, above, described Siam as being a calm and peaceful country. Kate Wilson puzzled over the fact that the northern Thai had demonstrably good morals. Other missionaries contributed similar observations. Mary Cort, perhaps unintentionally, cast doubts on missionary descriptions of the total spiritual, intellectual, and moral darkness of Siam when she wrote that King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), "must be ranked among the most humane and liberal of heathen monarchs, and his government is of the mildest form."⁶⁸ Mrs. J. W. Van Dyke shed still more doubt on the missionary analysis of Siam's moral condition with her observation that, in spite of polygamy and other evils related to marriage, she knew of many happy, trusting Siamese marriages.⁶⁹

Still, these various puzzled observations did not influence the missionaries' general analysis that Buddhism causes immorality. As late as 1915, the Rev. Dr. S. C. Peoples, a physician as well as a clergyman, could write from Nan that it was Buddhism "with its Godlessness and profound egotism" that prevented the northern Thai from accepting Christianity. While taking specific note that Buddhism offers no place or hope for lepers, he felt that Buddhism deadens the souls of its people and is a stumbling block to their achieving an abundant life, as well as salvation.⁷⁰ Altha Eakin, writing in 1913, described the dirty homes of the Siamese including the massive cobwebs, corners filled with debris, black pillows that were once white, and filthy straw mats that give one an itchy feeling. She concluded that, "Following the evil one brings man lower than the dumb brutes about him." She went on to note that outside of Thai villages nature is sweet and clean with birds singling and flowers

⁶⁸ Cort, *Heart of Further India*, 91.

⁶⁹ Mrs. J. W. Van Dyke, "A Siamese Wedding," in, *Siam and Laos*, 174.

⁷⁰ S. C. Peoples to Pollock, 8 December 1915, The Papers of S. C. and Sarah Peoples, at the Payap University Archives.

blooming, "but in the village filth is in sight, filth is in scent, and moral filth is in sound!"⁷¹.

Conclusion

In spite of evidence to the contrary, the Presbyterian missionaries who served the Siam and the Laos Missions continued to cast aspersions on Buddhism as the source of moral degradation well into the twentieth century. The equation was simply too certain, too clear for them to deny its logic. Buddhism, they argued, was idolatrous and atheistic. It fostered superstition and ignorance. It caused immorality. The great mass of the missionaries' records in Siam and northern Siam up to roughly 1920 convey this same message, all but overwhelming the occasional observations that seemed strangely at odds with the received, imported wisdom of the missions.

Maen Pongudom strongly criticizes the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Presbyterian missionaries in Siam for their failure to take Buddhism seriously, to study it, and to learn from it. Their negative views on Buddhism and ignorance of it stand in marked contrast, he argues, to the apologetical methods of the great apologists of the early church.⁷² Although, as we will see below, some missionaries did engage in a serious study of Buddhism, Maen is generally correct in his critique of missionary ignorance on the subject. We should not be surprised at that ignorance. For many decades, the majority of missionaries felt little motivation to study a system of religion that they believed was in and of itself heathen and that promoted superstition and immorality. Their sense that Buddhism was nothing more than an atheistic version of their old archenemy, Catholicism, and that it amounted to the same system of heathenism described in the New Testament meant they did not feel ignorant of Buddhism at all. They thought they understood perfectly well what it "really was."

⁷¹ Altha L. Eakin, "Women Waking in Siam," *Woman's Work* 28, 5 (May 1913): 111.

⁷² Maen Pongudom. "Apologetic and Missionary Proclamation: Exemplified by American Presbyterian Missionaries to Thailand (1828-1978), Early Church Apologists: Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, and the Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikku, a Thai Buddhist Monk-Apologist" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Otago, 1979).

Still, as the years passed, personal experiences accumulated, and changes took place both in Siam and the United States, Presbyterian missionary thinking began to shift. The absolute rejection of Buddhism softened. That shift is important in its own right and because it sheds even sharper relief on the earlier attitudes we have described here.

Changes in Missionary Attitudes

Presbyterian missionary attitudes towards the peoples of Siam and northern Siam, we have repeatedly argued, were a set of prejudices drawn from the American Protestant historical experience going back to its European foundations. That their attitudes did in fact constitute a prejudice is confirmed, in part, by the manner in which those attitudes slowly softened, especially after World War I. Missionary rhetoric became less strident, more balanced. Derogatory terms such as "heathen," "godless," and "benighted" fell by the wayside. This change, as we shall see shortly, was not uniform, but it was real. By 1940, the American Presbyterian Mission in Siam, a union of the Siam and Laos Missions finalized in 1921, generally eschewed the old missionary rhetoric and attitudes. It took, in particular, a less overtly antagonistic attitude towards Buddhism as well as Thai culture generally.

The change in attitude in Siam was foreshadowed in the United States by an equally striking change in Presbyterian attitudes towards Catholics, esp. Catholic immigrants. Tracking the rhetoric contained in the Presbyterian magazine, *Home Mission Monthly*, over a period of several decades, Benkart argues that a sea change took place in Presbyterian attitudes towards Catholicism between 1895 and 1900. Before 1895, articles in the *Home Mission Monthly* consistently attacked it as a danger to American morals, social life, and political system. She calls the attitude towards Catholicism exhibited in those articles "xenophobic". After 1900, the tone changed dramatically. Presbyterians developed a more moderate attitude and a greater diversity of opinions regarding Catholic immigrants. There was less fear of them expressed, and the authors of the *Home Mission Monthly* took a more critical attitude towards American society while showing greater sympathy for the

immigrants.⁷³ It should be noted, however, that this increased diversity of opinion concerning Catholics did not lead to a change in the tactics that the Presbyterian Church USA and other Reformed denominations applied in their ministries to Catholic immigrants. According to Smith, they still believed that the traditional approach, which evangelized Catholics by calling on them to convert to Protestantism, was the best tactic for dealing with the social ills facing Catholic immigrants.⁷⁴

The contrast between Benkart's findings and those of Smith is important. It suggests that a change in attitudes does not necessarily lead to a change in ecclesiastical behavior or methodologies—at least, not immediately. Changes in missionary attitudes in Siam, likewise, did not mean that the Presbyterian Mission incorporated those changes into the way it conducted its work. The older attitudes concerning Buddhism continued to influence the course of church history in Siam long after the majority of missionaries had worked out new attitudes. We will see that there was an attempt to change patterns of behavior as well, especially with regard to evangelistic methods, but even there the results were somewhat uneven.

Still, it cannot be denied that Presbyterian attitudes in the United States went through a period of change after 1900. We have seen that the nineteenth and early twentieth-century missionary analysis of Thai Buddhism relied on a strongly dualistic theology that consigned idolatrous, superstitions, and immoral Buddhism to the realm of Satan. In the 1890s, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. reaffirmed the denomination's commitment to narrowly constructed theological positions of this nature, especially in 1893 when it moved to defrock a Presbyterian professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York, for "modernist" (i.e. liberal) theological opinions. After 1900, however, the denomination increasingly moved towards theological moderation, but only in the face of continued theological

⁷³ Paula K. Benkart, "Changing Attitudes of Presbyterians Towards Southern and Eastern European Immigrants, 1880-1914," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 49, 3 (Fall 1971): 222-45.

⁷⁴ Gary Scott Smith, "The Cross and the Social Order: Calvinist Strategies for Social Improvement, 1870-1920," *Fides et Historia* 17, 1 (Fall-Winter 1984): 39-55.

controversy with the conservative wing of the church. Matters came to a head in 1929 when the moderates were able to force a reorganization of Princeton Theological Seminary, previously a center of conservative Presbyterian orthodoxy. Acrimonious debate continued, however, into the mid-1930s, by which time moderates had gained a dominant voice in denominational affairs.⁷⁵

The situation in Siam almost exactly paralleled events in the United States. Where the older, strongly dualistic attitudes towards Buddhism prevailed throughout the 1890s and into the early twentieth century, the missionary record reveals an increasingly moderate tone as the years went by. As early as 1900, for example, Thai converts were beginning to take a limited part in certain Buddhist rites without drawing censure from missionaries who knew they had done so.⁷⁶ Even more striking was the difficult case of Dr. C. C. Hansen of the Laos Mission's Lampang Station. Dr. Hansen was forced to resign from the mission in 1909 because of his attitudes towards Buddhism, which were taken by his colleagues to be too positive. Still the Rev. D. G. Collins, who himself disagreed with Hansen's views, could write to the Board expressing his sorrow at seeing Hansen leave the field and declare that he had been treated unjustly. Collins observed that several other very capable members of the mission, besides Hansen, had also studied Buddhist writings and consequently saw more good in Buddhist teachings than did those missionaries who had never studied Buddhism.⁷⁷

Collins' comments reveal that a change was taking place, quietly for the most part, in missionary thinking. Hansen's mistake was that he expressed his views too openly and unabashedly. Some other missionaries had also studied Buddhism more

⁷⁵ See Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jean Miller Schmidt, *Souls or the Social Order: The Two-Party System in American Protestantism* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1991), 155-201; and, John W. Hart, "Princeton Theological Seminary: The Reorganization of 1929," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 58, 2 (Summer 1980): 124-40.

⁷⁶ See Ella Parker Cooper to Brown, 31 July 1900, v. 17, BFM.

⁷⁷ D. G. Collins to Brown, 31 August 1908, v. 277, BFM.

carefully and gained a greater appreciation for its good qualities, and even those who still took a generally disparaging attitude towards Buddhism could, at points, almost sound like Hansen himself. At one point, for example, Hansen urged the Laos Mission to take a more patient, positive approach to evangelism and show greater appreciation for the positive elements in Buddhist thinking. He wrote,

In the Laos Buddhist may be found all the elements which are worthy in the service of Christ. Of this there are already many proofs in our native church, and in the fullness of time we hope to see much progress of the Kingdom of the True Redeemer in this land.⁷⁸

It was for views of this nature that Hansen had to leave the mission. Yet, in that same year the Rev. David Park of the Nan Station also commented positively on the quality of the northern Thai converts, observing that they compared favorably with Christians in the United States. Park cited this fact in proof of his statement that there was good in the northern Thai people. What distinguished his comments from those of Hansen was that Park still argued that Buddhism's ethical code, however high it was, did not meet the needs of the people. They failed to live up to the Buddha's teachings and exhibited a generally low standard of morality.⁷⁹ The tone of his comments regarding Buddhism still sounds and feels negative, obscuring his more positive views on northern Thai Buddhist society. Park admitted, if somewhat lamely, that Buddhism itself has a high ethical code and that the moral problem facing the northern Thai was that they could not live up to that code. He also admitted that the northern Thai had good qualities about them. That goodness, he thought, was especially reflected in northern Thai Christians.

In the years after 1900, then, there is a gradual, significant shift in Presbyterian missionary rhetoric of which Park's combination of negative and positive comments concerning Buddhism is a harbinger. The Rev. William G. McClure, writing in 1908, provides another important example. He claimed that there was very little friction among the students in the missionary school where he taught, in spite of

⁷⁸ C. C. Hansen, "The Temple of the Crystal Buddha," enclosed in Hansen to Brown, 5 March 1906, v. 275, BFM.

⁷⁹ David Park to Bostwick, 10 March 1906, v. 275, BFM.

the school's ethnic diversity. He wrote, "Buddhist tolerance and conditions of life in Siam make easy what would be impossible in other lands. Control and discipline are probably less taxing than with an equal number of American boys."⁸⁰ As we have seen, nineteenth-century missionaries occasionally referred to positive facets of Thai or northern Thai society, but they invariably took those facets to be aberrations that occurred despite Siam's Buddhist heritage. McClure, in 1908, expresses no such assumption and seems to take for granted the fact that Buddhism had a positive impact on certain aspects of Thai society.

This shift in emphasis was still somewhat subtle in the first decade of the twentieth century, which is why, as we saw, Dr. Hansen had trouble with the majority of his colleagues. By the 1930s, however, the shift to a more positive attitude in missionary rhetoric and thinking had almost become the official stance of the Presbyterian Mission. It certainly had achieved the status of being the majority attitude, exemplified best perhaps by the Rev. Paul A. Eakin, who served as Executive Secretary of the mission from 1930 to 1941. In 1931, he published an article in the *International Review of Missions* that describes religious changes taking place in Siam. The article discusses at length the positive contributions Buddhism was making to the nation and argued that there was a Buddhist reform spirit abroad in Siam, which sought to protect a pure and simple Dhamma. He states that Thai Buddhism was experiencing a time of striving and seething that led to a new emphasis on the inner spirit, which movement he speculates may be due "to the brooding presence of the Spirit of Truth ever leading men out of darkness into the light."⁸¹ Just thirty years earlier, it would have been unthinkable for a Presbyterian missionary to suggest in print that the Holy Spirit might be at work in a positive way in Buddhism.

⁸⁰ W. G. McClure, "The Bangkok Christian High School," *Assembly Herald* 14, 5 (May 1908): 226.

⁸¹ Paul A. Eakin, "Wheels Within the 'Wheel of the Law' in Siam," *International Review of Missions* 20 (1931), 440-449. See also Paul A. Eakin, "Fundamental Christian Convictions, Guiding Principles and Policies Especially Applicable to Thailand," n.d., Eakin Papers. For somewhat similar sentiments by a missionary in northern Siam, see Newell T. Preston, "Buddhism and New Siam," *Siam Outlook* 5, 1 (July 1925): 6-10.

Further evidence of the changing nature of Presbyterian missionary attitudes towards Buddhism in Siam can be found in the records of the dwindling number of conservative Presbyterian missionaries. Dr. Edwin B. McDaniel, as a notable example, found himself increasingly at odds with his colleagues in the Presbyterian Mission and with some Thai church leaders as well. He lamented what he called in a letter to missionary colleagues "the apostasy that for years has been creeping into our mission and misleading the nationals in many places." Edna Brunner identified that apostasy with Paul Eakin and expressed feelings that the small group of "evangelicals" in the mission was being threatened by soul-less modernism.⁸² While these sentiments did not directly address the issue of attitudes towards Buddhism, they did decry a set of "modernist" ideas that included a more positive attitude towards people of other faiths.

It would be incorrect, however, to leave the impression that one could easily distinguish between those who held the new attitudes and those who held on to the old ones. At times, a champion of the older judgment on Buddhism expressed attitudes that contrasted surprisingly with the classical views of the nineteenth century. Those who were considered "new age," by the same token, still reflected attitudes that were sometimes quite conservative. The Rev. Allen Bassett, one of the so-called conservatives, wrote a general letter to "Friends" in 1935 that betrays just this mix of the old and the new. He wrote that a century of missionary work had helped to turn Siam from "an isolated puppet nation, dominated by an egoistic religion" into a modern nation with ideals permeated by Christian missionary teachings. He wrote that there was a revival of Buddhism going on that had actually been caused by the gradual infiltration of Christian ideas into Buddhism. Bassett then warned that there was a growing sentiment in some quarters that brought Christ down to the level of the Buddha, that is to the level of a mere man. He urged the Presbyterian Church to only send missionaries thoroughly convinced that the divine Christ is the only Saviour of humanity. All of this sounds comfortably nineteenth century, although some of the more derogatory rhetorical flourishes regarding benighted heathenism, superstition,

⁸² Bertha McFarland to McAfee, 8 August 1932, Maen Papers; and, Edna Bulkley to Dr. McAfee, 1 October 1932, Maen Papers.

and idolatry are noticeably absent. Bassett went on to write, however, that new missionaries to Siam also had to be sympathetic to the ideas the Thai "nationals" have about their own religion. They had to be able to show the people that Buddhism and Christianity are not at odds with each other; there is no enmity between them. Buddhism, he avowed, is infinitely better than animism. He concluded that Buddhism's ideals are "wonderful," but that Buddhism is a human creation of inadequate power and only Christianity could bring Buddhism's ideals "to their full fruition."⁸³ Old-time Buddhism was an "egoistic religion," but new-time Buddhism is "wonderful," if still inadequate. Missionaries, Bassett contends, have to believe that only Christ saves, but they must be sympathetic in a positive way to the attachment of the Thai people to Buddhism.

There lies within Bassett's views on Buddhism a tension of sorts, a tugging in two directions. Buddhism, he seems to be saying, is good—but not good enough. He affirms the perennial Christian battle cry that "only Christ saves," and yet wants to convince the people of Siam that Christianity is not in conflict with Buddhism. Bassett wants only missionaries who are theologically orthodox sent to the field, but he wants those orthodox missionaries to be sympathetic to the religious views of the people. The sharply focused missionary critique of Thai heathenism, superstition, and immorality had become by the 1930s a less sharply focused mixture of views that might be styled "sympathetic judgmentalism" for want of a better term.

The moderates also shared in this increasing fuzziness in the missionaries' views on Buddhism. Paul Eakin, as we have seen, was widely known for his positive attitudes towards Buddhism. On one occasion, however, he could write, "Buddhism is not so much based on falsehood as on half-truths used as complete truths." He thought this is especially true in Siam since Thai Buddhism had departed from the original teachings of Gautama. He listed four errors in Buddhism, contrasted those errors to the Christian message, and wrote that when he discussed Christianity with Buddhists he would, "... lead to the Holy Spirit, who is shown to be the dynamic which is so wanting in Buddhism. After all it is not more knowledge that is needed—rather more power to live up to the knowledge and light they already have." Trying to

⁸³ Bassett to Friends, 17 August 1935, Maen Papers.

capture the difference between the two religions, he wrote, "The incompleteness of Buddhism is well brought out by the illustration of the farmer who still clings to his team of oxen when he might take the train. But if he takes the train he must give up the oxen and comply with the new condition." He concluded with the thought that Buddhism is good but incomplete.⁸⁴ As in the case of Bassett, then, Eakin's writings betray something of a tension, that same tugging in two directions. That which distinguished the conservative from the moderate was the degree to which they leaned in the direction of more or less acceptance of Buddhism as a sister religion.

The shift that took place in missionary attitudes between the 1890s and 1940 is aptly revealed by an event that took place in 1931 when Prince Damrong, the Siamese Minister of the Interior, complained to the Presbyterian Mission about a tract it was distributing that made derogatory comments about Buddhism. It turned out that a young, enthusiastic missionary had re-published an old tract without anyone's permission. Prince Damrong was upset and stated adamantly that the Siamese government would not permit the defamation or belittlement of Buddhism. In reporting the incident to the Board in New York, Paul Eakin wrote, "There is certainly no place for any missionary that so feels the superiority of Christianity that disparaging remarks about Buddhism are natural to him in his presenting of the Gospel."⁸⁵ In his letter of apology to Prince Damrong, Eakin pleaded that the mission had a policy of re-issuing older tracts only after it removed doctrines about Buddhism preached by earlier missionaries. He informed the prince that the mission now taught along a different line and concluded his letter by assuring the prince that the missionaries had come to Siam to share the blessings of their religion without insulting their Siamese friends or defaming their religion.⁸⁶ Eakin's remarks to the Board and to Prince Damrong reflect a decision made in 1930 by the mission's Literature Committee to drop from its list of publications a few tracts that made

⁸⁴ Eakin to Edna S. Cole, 28 April 1924, Eakin Papers.

⁸⁵ P. A. Eakin to McAfee, 6 July 1931, Maen Papers. Compare, E. P. Dunlap to Prince Damrong, 31 January 1912, Maen Papers.

⁸⁶ Paul A. Eakin to H. R. H. Prince Damrong, 22 June 1931, APM.

"odious comparisons" between Christianity and Buddhism, which comparisons were "bitterly resented by the people into whose hands they fell."⁸⁷

In spite of the 1930 policy decision and the 1931 incident, some elements in the mission continued to publish items that were derogatory towards Buddhism. In 1935, the Rev. Kenneth Wells complained to Eakin about a Sunday school publication issued by a conservative missionary and one of the more inflammatory of the Thai church's leaders. The publication branded Buddhism as being idolatrous and dead and called on the Thai people to leave their idols and come to Christ. Wells asked that such "stuff" be censored and observed that "wild statements" of that kind weakened the Christian cause. He stated, "Surely it is not necessary to anger those whom we would win."⁸⁸ Wells' comments recall an article written by one of the most traditional of all of the missionaries, the Rev. Hugh Taylor, who worked in Lampang and then Nan, northern Siam. At the start of a 1922 excursion into French Laos, Taylor and the evangelists who accompanied him discussed their approach, some advocating the older method of directly attacking Laotian Buddhism and then raising up Christianity in its place. The majority decided, however, that the old-fashioned method only angered people, and it was agreed that the team would preach the Christian message without attacking Buddhism. Taylor fully supported the decision and reported that the result was a "blessed experience."⁸⁹

In important part, the changed attitudes of the Presbyterian missionaries had to do with rhetoric and sensitivities. It responded to government pressure and public opinion. It intended a different, better evangelistic approach. It drew on the old tracts and the old ideas and cleansed them of certain "wild statements" concerning Buddhism. The mission sought to be a better friend and neighbor in Siam and to refrain from saying things that would hurt people's feelings or displease the government. Not every missionary agreed with this less aggressive approach, and the

⁸⁷ "Minutes of the Mission Meeting at Chiangmai, November 21-27, 1930," APM.

⁸⁸ Kenneth E. Wells to Eakin, 4 March 1935, APM.

⁸⁹ Hugh Taylor, "The Gospel Message Given to the Eastern Laos," *Siam Outlook* 1, 4 (1922): 122.

approach itself was more of a recasting of the past rather than a break from it. The mission, in a sense, attempted to clean up its act without changing the script, except in a few places that might offend the audience. Given the radical rhetoric of earlier missionary generations, nevertheless, this change in attitude is substantive if limited. As late as 1940, a freshman missionary, the Rev. Horace W. Ryburn could write that "God is not known redemptively except in Jesus Christ, and any other partial lights only increase our consciousness of separation from him." Buddhism, he contended, is shallow and hopeless when seen from a Christian perspective concerning the forgiveness of sins and redemption.⁹⁰

Maen Pongudom makes it clear that it was only after World War II that some American Presbyterian missionaries began to articulate a more accepting, thoughtful attitude towards Thai Buddhism. He quotes, for example, the Rev. Francis Seely's statement that

The main force in Thailand to this day that God has used to counteract these evils has been Buddhism. Through Christianity we believe God is now providing an alternative to defeat the common enemy in Thailand. The fact that we believe this Christian alternative is more realistic, more effective, more true than Buddhism, should not blind us to the fact that the true Buddhist is our ally, nor our enemy.⁹¹

However correct Maen may be in his appraisal of the shift in missionary thinking after 1950, the seeds of that shift are clearly visible even forty or fifty years earlier. The initial dualistic prejudices that the Presbyterian missionaries brought with them to Siam slowly succumbed to a combination of changes taking place in American Protestant thinking in the United States, theological changes in the Presbyterian Church, and the realities of an ongoing encounter with Thai society, culture, and religion.

⁹⁰ Ryburn to Hutchinson, 21 October 1940, Maen Papers.

⁹¹ Maen "Apologetic and Missionary Proclamation," 80. For one of the most insightful statements of a receptive attitude towards Buddhism, see Herbert W. Grether, "The Cross and the Bodhi Tree," *Theology Today* 16, 4 (January 1960): 446-58.

Conclusion

When the Laos Mission's first convert, Nan Inta, wanted to become a Christian gradually and quietly, Daniel McGilvary, as we saw in the introduction to this article, demanded of him a full, public conversion. Conversion in McGilvary's eyes meant rejecting Buddhism and animism as much as it meant affirming the Christian faith. The records of the Siam and Laos Missions for the years up to roughly 1920 suggest that most of the Presbyterian missionaries in Siam felt that there had to be a complete rejection of Buddhism and all of its social and cultural ramifications before conversion could take place. Accepting Christianity meant rejecting Buddhism. In 1899, for example, Dr. Thomas at Phrae described an evangelism tour he made into the rural areas outside the city, during which he exhorted country people to leave their idolatry and animistic practices and accept Jesus as Saviour.⁹² The Siam Mission, at the end of World War I employed a policy that required those who declared a serious intention to convert to take a pledge that they would cut themselves off entirely from their old religion and all its practices and practice the duties of the Christian life instead.⁹³

While missionary conversion demanded a total rejection of Buddhism as part of the process to becoming a Christian, most northern Thais were not interested in accepting Christianity on such terms. Writing from Lampang in 1929, Dr. and Mrs. Charles H. Crooks described their attempts to have every patient who entered the mission hospital in Lampang learn something about the Christian faith. They stated that many of the patients professed to know Christ but were not willing to take the "last, drastic step" of making a full religious break with their relatives and friends.⁹⁴ Daniel McGilvary makes a similar observation in his autobiography, writing that he knew of many individuals, "who believed our doctrine, though they were never

⁹² J. S. Thomas to Dear Friends, January 1899, v. 15, BFM. See also, Mrs. Roderick Gillies, "A Visit to Some New Converts," *Laos News* 6, 2 (May 1909): 49.

⁹³ Paul A. Eakin to Brown, 31 March 1917, Maen Papers.

⁹⁴ Dr. & Mrs. Charles H. Crooks, "Report of Dr. & Mrs. Charles H. Crooks, Lampang Station; for Year Ending September Thirtieth, Nineteen Twenty-nine," Maen Papers.

enrolled in our church." These individuals sometimes even urged others to convert, a step "from various causes, they themselves were prevented from taking." In context, it is clear that he had in mind people who were not willing to make the break with their culture and society that missionary conversion demanded.⁹⁵

The Rev. Roderick Gillies, Dean of the McGilvary Theological Seminary, discussed the consequences of this dualistic conception of conversion in a 1935 article published in the *Siam Outlook*. He observed that one of the obstacles northern Thais faced when contemplating conversion was that Christianity still seemed foreign to them while Buddhism had become native to the people of Siam. Becoming a Christian, thus, meant making a radical break with the establish order of things. He wrote, "It has been difficult to bring home the fact that the Christian way is not to destroy but to fulfill, that it seeks to destroy nothing and opposes nothing save what is untrue and bad, that its aim is rather the fulfillment of all righteousness and all good wherever found."⁹⁶ The reason it was still difficult in the mid-1930s to convince northern Thais that Christianity did not come as a destroyer is that for most of its history in northern Siam it *did* intend to destroy Buddhism and everything related to Buddhism in northern Thai culture and society. The attitudes and policies of the Laos Mission long adhered to the principle articulated by its founding father, McGilvary, in a report published in the American religious press in 1869. He explained that missionary evangelism requires patience because,

...there is a double process to be carried on, a double work to be accomplished—just as if we were to be required to rear an edifice on the grounds occupied by some ancient stronghold, some fortress or palace, which must be rased to the very foundations before the new superstructure can be reared...Yet, difficult as this is, it is the first thing done; it is what we demand of the heathen as an indispensable prerequisite towards embracing the gospel."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ McGilvary, *Half-Century*, 188.

⁹⁶ Roderick M. Gillies, "Christian Evangelism in Northern Siam," *Siam Outlook* 11, 2 (April 1935): 76.

⁹⁷ Summary of an extract of a report by Daniel McGilvary in "Missionary," *Foreign Missionary* 28, 2 (July 1869): 31. See also, McGilvary, "Medical Missions

The Laos Mission, throughout most of its history from 1867 to 1921 did not intend to fulfill Buddhism. It intended to destroy it and all of its works. Most northern Thais, consequently, were not interested.

The consequences of the missionary attitudes towards Buddhism were manifold. Given the centrality of Buddhism to northern Thai social life, their attitudes transformed conversion into a sociocultural process that meant rejecting the northern Thai social and cultural heritage as much as it meant taking Jesus Christ to be Lord and Saviour. The northern Thai church, in turn, found itself inhabiting a social and religious ghetto, which reinforced the reluctance of people to convert to Christianity. Christianity, as Gillies observed, remained an alien religion, and there seems to have been very few conscious efforts to adapt American Protestant forms to the northern Thai cultural setting.

Missionary attitudes towards Thai Buddhism, then, profoundly influenced the course of northern Thai church history and continues, even now, to force the question of Christianity and culture on the student of Protestantism in Thailand.⁹⁸ Those attitudes were not the only factor, and at various points in the history of the Laos Mission and its churches, they receded somewhat into the background. During the 1880s and again in the 1910s, for example, there were surges in the numbers of conversions, primarily gained from the mission's medical work.⁹⁹ Still, as we have seen, the missionary record itself suggests that the missionaries' deeply antagonistic attitudes towards Buddhism and the consequent demand that conversion include public rejection of Buddhism hindered their evangelistic efforts. Prince Damrong made that point himself in 1928 when he observed that missionary schools in the

and Missionary Physicians—No. V," *North Carolina Presbyterian* New Series 2, 81 (21 July 1869): 1.

⁹⁸ See Philip J. Hughes, "Christianity and Culture: A Case Study in Northern Thailand" (Th.D. dissertation, South East Asia Graduate School of Theology, 1983).

⁹⁹ For the expansion of the church in the 1880s, see Herb Swanson, "Dodd's Narrative: The State of the Northern Thai Church in 1887," *Herb's Research Bulletin (HeRB)* 2 (June 2002): 17-27; and for the 1910s, see Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, 138-41.

nineteenth century had only limited influence because the missionaries showed open contempt for Buddhism and seemed bent on teaching their pupils to despise it.¹⁰⁰

The issue of its relationship to its Buddhist context, in sum, continues to be a central, perhaps the central, issue facing the northern Thai church today. It impinges on the very identity as Thais of individual Christians and shapes northern Thai Christian social relationships as well as religious behavior and attitudes. While the church is not simply the product of its missionary heritage, we must insist again, that heritage is a key source for the ongoing life of the churches. Missionary attitudes and teaching were an immensely important factor in setting the religious and social course of northern Thai Protestantism and set the stage for how Christians, individually and as a minority community, would relate to their Buddhist context.

¹⁰⁰ Prince Damrong, "Introduction," in *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam 1828-1928*, ed. George B. McFarland (Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press, 1928), 13.