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A Small Future

In 1992, Walter Jon Williams published a strange, in some ways compelling science fiction novel entitled, *Aristo*i (New York: Tom Doherty Associates). In this "fictional" world of the future, people live in both real time and virtual time. Internet is no longer merely global; it is interplanetary. Schizophrenia is considered not only commonplace, but perfectly normal. Everything is strange by our early 21st century standards, be it art or medicine or pets. The technology that dominates the novel more than any other, however, is what is loosely called "nanotechnology" today. For those of us who cannot grasp the science behind nanotechnology, it is simply a technology that has to do with molecular scale creation of incredibly tiny "machines" that can (or, at least, one day will) do all sorts of wonderous things. Like, maybe, destroy a planet. In William's novel, the Earth no longer exists. It was gobbled up by a nano-bug (for want of a better term) that was self-replicating and ate anything and everything.

Pure scifi silliness, right? Wrong. If you do a Google search on "nanotechnology," you will come up with an impressive list of fascinating links. Taken together, they make the very clear point that nanotechnology is *not* a future technology; it exists now, and an increasingly impressive array of everyday products utilize nanotechnology, however crude the technology is by the near-future standards of just a decade or two from now. The example I remember best is a new paint finish for automobiles that never requires waxing and never loses its new car lustre. Such a paint exists. Now.

A second point these websites make collectively is that within twenty years nanotechnology will have an impact on our lives far beyond any technological change experienced in all of human history, far greater than the ancient and immensely influential invention of rice culture or the more recent and also immensely important invention of the book. A simple example: in the near future, nanotechnologists will invent a set of molecular sized nanomachines that can be injected into a person's body; once there they will seek out and identify cancer cells, disassemble said cells, and flush them out into that same bloodstream. No more cancer. Another little set of machines (or, mayhap, the same ones programmed to carry out more than one function) will roam around cleaning out fatty tissue. No more heart attacks. No more cholesterol worries. Others will repair gene deficiencies, physical deformaties (no more glasses or contact lens!), and the end result will be that human life will be extended indefinitely into the future. Nano technology will cure physical aging-maybe not by 2024, but perhaps so. Even if this apparent miracle is delayed by 25 or even 100 years, it is coming and it will have an incredible impact on human life. Nanotechnologists, similarly, will turn a specially engineered set of nanomachines loose on a pile of dirt, and within "x" number of hours or days you will have a house, or a factory, or a car. No more dirty, polluting factories (but, also, no more factory jobs). The possibilities are truly fantastic. Long life beyond any estimate of how long it can be. The abolishment of poverty. Cheap, incredibly cheap everything. The stars. Computers that are 1000s of times faster and more powerful than todays most powerful machines-and many times smaller. Lest you think this

is just a bunch of truly silly pie-in-the-sky nonsense, one of the sites providing information on nanotechnology is that of NASA, which website indicates that NASA is very seriously involved in nanotechnology research.

Unfortunately, the dangers posed by "microtechnology," to use another term, are just as real and just as serious as indicated in Williams' novel. In order to be cheap and effective, the nanomachines will have to be self-replicating and have to consume something as energy. Therein lies a major danger, because if some engineer misplaces a decimal point, those tiny machines could start "eating" things they aren't supposed to eat. Or, equally scary, some future terrorist group may just decide to set loose a nanobug that will "take out" America, or Britain, or China. All of it, whichever "it" it is. Less dramatic but also seriously worrisome are the possibilities for governments to manipulate our lives in ways never dreamed of before. Bureaucrats are, by definition, control freaks, and nanotechnology offers incredible possibilities for snooping, checking, and controlling with nanomachines the size of a molecule. Even if we put aside these doom and gloom scenarios, we will soon be faced with finding political, social, and theological answers to profound issues concerning prolonged life and access to the nanotechnologies that will make possible lives that will extend for thousands of years. Who will have access to life extension technology? Will the poor be left behind again? How will we control birth rates when mortality rates plummet to nearly zero? Are we looking towards a future where children will be a rare phenomenon? Will marriages last for hundreds of years? Or will it be common for people to establish new partnerships every couple of centuries or even every few decades?

How will all of this affect organized religion and the ways in which people construct their own faith? Christianity promises "eternal life," for example. But, you have to die first to obtain it. How compelling is such a promise when nanotechnicians can promise that life in this life will be so extended as to seem all but eternal? Christianity puts great store in the Resurrection, but nanotechnology offers the likelihood that even severe injuries, such as a bullet in the heart, will be repairable, perhaps by a set of medical nanobots prepositioned in the body to respond immediately to traumatic injuries and other life-threatening events. When each individual has a "resurrection bug" already in place, who will be interested in or place any importance on the biblical notion of resurrection? It seems likely that the explosive growth of nanotechnologies within the next two decades, if it takes place as predicted, will accelerate the process of "sheilazation" (according to the story, when a researcher asked what her religion is, Sheila responded, "Sheilaism"), that is the individualization of religious faith and weakening of religious institutions.

In the unlikely event that it should last so long, what themes and articles will *HeRB* contain in its June 2024 issue when we are supposed by most microtechnologists to be in the throes of the nano-revolution? How will it be formatted? Who will read it? What will Thai Christianity be like? Will it have sustained its growth trends? Will nanotechnology "hit" Thailand at the same time it does the West? Or, will there be a technological lag?

I can hear the cynics among you, dear readers, saying, "Come on, Herb, get real!" I can only respond by urging you to look at websites about nanotechnology. If nothing else, each of us needs to prepare ourselves for the world that is coming. If we are in our 50s (or, perhaps, 60s)

and above, it is very possible that we are the last generation that will die having lived a "normal" or "historical" life span of less than a century. If we are in our 30s and 40s, we need to think about the possibility of living for centuries (although it might not happen in our life time), and if we are under 30 we need to conceptualize and even plan for a life that may well extend into the next millennium, not just the next century. And all of us need to think about the political, social, and theological issues raised by microtechnology. We are entering a world bright with fantastic promise and overshadowed by incomprehensible threat. How will we as a single human race manage this future?

"Get real?" Well, yes, I'd like to "get real," but I'm not at all sure what "real" is going to be like even a decade or two from now. Consider how vastly different 2004 is from 1904, which was greatly different from 1804. What seems entirely possible is that 2024 or 2054 is going to be far more different from today than today is from a hundred years ago.

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Herb Swanson
Ban Dok Daeng
June 2004

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Articles

Interreligious Dialogue: Old Liquor in Standard New Bottles

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Dr. Parichart Suwanbubbha

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Dr. Parichart, an Assistant Professor in Mahidol University's Comparative Religion Department, delivered the following paper at a conference entitled "Visions for Religious Studies in the Next Century," which was sponsored by the Comparative Religion Department of Mahidol University and held in Bangkok on 20-21 January 1997. The original paper was in Thai, and Dr. Parichart has kindly given me permission to translate and present it here. My thanks to her.

Introduction

When confronted with the idea of interreligious dialogue, members of most of the world's religions might well argue that there is nothing new to such discussions; they have, historically, long been a part of each religious tradition. Many of the world's religions, that is, have an extended experience with interreligious dialogue, although they may not have developed the principles and the rationale for dialogue to the degree that those principles and that rationale are now understood. It can be said that contemporary interreligious dialogue has its "official" origins in Christian missionary attempts to develop relations with and achieve an understanding of other religions, as seen especially at the world missionary conference that met in Edinburgh in 1910.[1] While that conference is particularly noteworthy because it promoted the ecumenical movement as a way to improve relations between Christian denominations, it also gave attention to the inescapable involvement of Christian missionaries with people of other faiths. The next world missionary conference, meeting in Jerusalem in 1928, affirmed the "value" of other

religions and called on the adherents of the various religions to join together in addressing the problem of secularism, which the Jerusalem Conference saw as an attempt to solve world problems without any reliance on religion.[2]

Religious dialogue, broadly speaking, has taken two different forms. On the one hand, it has involved people of different religions in "interreligious dialogue." Dialogue, on the other hand, has also occurred between people who belong to different sects or denominations within the same larger religious tradition such as, for example, between Catholic and Protestant Christians or between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists. This second form of religious dialogue is termed "intrareligious dialogue." One important issue that must be considered is the extent to which these various discussions between people of faith provide us today with a creative, effective methodology for university religious studies programs. A second issue that "traditional" interfaith dialogue raises, and one we must consider here, is that of the very definition of interreligious dialogue itself.

What is Interreligious Dialogue?

We usually understand, initially, that interreligious dialogue amounts to discussions about religion that take place between people from two faith traditions for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of each other. This definition is partly correct, but it is incomplete because it fails to encompass all that is involved in interreligious dialogue. When the members of two different faith traditions engage in a comparison of points of the similarities and differences between them, for example, we normally term such discussions as "comparative religion" even though they also fit the general definition of "interreligious dialogue" as well. Comparative religious studies, however, is not interreligious dialogue in the sense we are using the term in this paper. Comparative studies attempt to use the instruments of the scientific method to objectively study religious data without any preconceptions, emotional input, or traditional religious perspectives involved. The unavoidable problem facing the students of comparative religion, we might add, is whether or not they can avoid prejudice when they make comparisons between the ideas and beliefs of another religion with their own faith.

Interreligious dialogue, in contrast to comparative religious studies, involves the expression of emotions and feelings as well as the personal religious beliefs of individuals. The tools for this type of dialogue are subjective, which is to say that interreligious dialogue involves each side in revealing and sharing their feelings concerning firmly held and deeply cherished beliefs. Such dialogue is good, and it has great value for those engaged in it because it provides each dialogue partner with an opportunity for learning.[3] Interreligious dialogue of this personal nature cannot avoid discussing differences in beliefs, and it is not necessary that it end in an agreement of opinions. It presents both partners, rather, with an opportunity to learn each other's beliefs and, in the process, to unlearn misapprehensions that one or both sides previously held.[4] Interreligious dialogue also offers those involved in dialogue with the possibility to change their own point of view concerning the actual faith of their partner in dialogue, thus gaining for themselves and that partner a clearer shared understanding. This is what we seek in every interreligious encounter, namely the opportunity to correct our own misunderstandings regarding the faith of those with whom we dialogue.

In spite of the fact that interreligious dialogue is based on an initial willingness to accept religious differences, it is always possible that the dialogue process will cause tension and conflict to arise between those involved in the process. The possibility of friction underscores the importance of learning how to engage in the dialogue process creatively and peacefully in the face of the difference in religious perspectives that both partners in dialogue bring to the process. Dialogue requires, in short, that those engaged in dialogue be sensitive to each other and behave towards each other in a positive manner. They must also avoid the "don'ts" of interreligious dialogue described below.

The Don'ts of Interreligious Dialogue

Participants in interreligious dialogue must particularly avoid the following negative patterns of behavior:

1. dialogue must not be a matter of superficially accepting disagreement and differences in order to avoid dissension, in what we might term "lazy tolerance."[5] Interreligious dialogue, that is, does not support the concept of relativism, the idea that everything and everything is acceptable.

2. dialogue must not be a confrontation as if those engaged in dialogue are enemies, and it must not involve argumentation for the sake of winning.

3. dialogue must not involve an "imperialistic" or prejudicial judgment on the dialogue partner that is made before dialogue even begins.[6] One must not enter into dialogue, that is, with a either a false sense of pride or of humility. Those involved in dialogue must also avoid belittling or extolling their own beliefs, nor should they judge the beliefs of their partner in dialogue before learning about the partner by listening to how they explain their faith. Individuals sometimes enter into dialogue with hidden feelings of absolutism, which is the idea that his or her own truth is the most correct, complete, and best truth. Such persons intend to rely on that "truth" to judge their dialogue partner, which means in the end that they approach that partner prejudicially.

4. dialogue must not be merely the exchange of religious data or be nothing more than superficial discussions between the adherents of two religions.

5. dialogue must not be driven by hidden agendas, for example as an opportunity to proselytize[7] or trick people in order to gain additional adherents. If changes in belief do take place, they should occur naturally as a part of the dialogue process itself. It is possible for one dialogue partner, for example, to learn about, understand, and come to prefer the beliefs of the other partner, but such a change must not be the basic purpose of dialogue. It is not the purpose of dialogue to be a tool for gaining adherents for one's own religion.

6. dialogue must not use a "mixing bowl" method,,[8] meaning that it should not merely takes good points from the various religions and blend them into one's own religion. This approach causes a syncretistic mixing of teachings, or so much combining takes place that a new religion entirely different from one's original beliefs is the result. Instead of being a "creative" approach to dialogue, approaches of this sort have a negative impact on dialogue because each person who engages in dialogue must be a faithful representative of their tradition and a witness to the

beliefs of that tradition. People who do not clearly declare themselves a believer in a particular religious tradition will not be able to explain to their dialogue partners what it is that inspires them in their own religion, why they see it as being good, and what they find in it that is personally meaningful in their lives. This is true even if they have closely studied the belief system of another particular religion. It is difficult for them to represent the faith of that religion and enter into a dialogue with other religious perspectives because they lack the value judgments that arise out of the unique religious experience of the faith that they are supposed to represent.

The Necessity of Dialogue in the Age of Globalization

The definition of interreligious dialogue with which this article began helps us to understand that dialogue has nothing in common with either absolutism or relativism. It does have a great deal in common, however, with a religiously pluralistic type of religious faith.[9] Such a faith accepts the fact that there are many religions in the world, that there is more than one religious belief system, and that each of those religions has its own way of solving human problems based on its own religious logic. The ultimate goals of the various religious faiths, according to this pluralistic mode of thinking, may or may not be the same. Ultimate reality, that is, may be the same for the various religions, for example, faith in One God; or, it might be something entirely different.[10] The important point is that religious pluralism is willing to accept diversity. The British religious scholar, John Hick, points out that the world's religions differ in three distinct ways. First, they differ according to their adherent's experience of the "divine," which for some religions such as Christianity and Islam is personal while for others it is non-personal, such as the belief in nippan (Nirvana) for Buddhists and The Way for Taoism. Second, the various religions differ in their religious doctrine and philosophies and are particularly conditioned by the various ways their teachings have developed historically and culturally. Finally, since each religion expresses its faith in ultimate reality differently each religion also has a particular set of commandments, ways of behaving, and rituals that respond to its particular expressions of faith.[11]

At this point, we can agree that the world's various religions have differences and a distinct identity each within themselves. We can also agree that interreligious dialogue affirms the plurality of beliefs, which means that it accepts diversity, differences, and the fact that there are many religions in the world. The willingness to accept different religious beliefs and practices also reflects the nature of globalization since one aspect of globalization itself is the willingness to accept cultural and religious variety. It is not possible for us to mandate that everyone should have the same culture or believe the same things, and we have to accept the reality of differences based on that diversity of cultures and religious beliefs. Modern communications and transportation brings that diversity of culture and beliefs into close proximity one with another. They now have close relations with each other in the "global village."

At the same time, however, the nature of globalization also enhances personal identity, local culture, and the uniqueness of local life as well. The same holds true for interreligious dialogue. The dialogue process is a process of accepting the reality that the spiritual values held by the faithful of the various religions are not encompassed in a single category. That process demonstrates, at the same time, a willingness to accept the differences between religions and the

particular religious identity of each religion. Yet, it is also possible to bring understanding, cooperation, and unity out of those differences, which we might term "unity amid diversity." It might be said that interreligious dialogue is thus an appropriate method for religious learning, whether it be dialogue between individuals of different faiths or between groups of individuals within the same faith. The problem is how to best establish an appropriate framework in dialogue, one that allows for differing ideas, that encourages people to both speak and listen, and that is a practice which leads to the highest levels of understanding and peace possible.

The Starting Point of Interreligious Dialogue

It was stated at the beginning of this paper that interreligious dialogue should avoid certain dangerous points. It, for example, should avoid using the standards of belief and praxis of one group to judge the beliefs and actions of others. Such an approach we can only label as "imperialistic." Judgmentalism of this sort takes place because those making the judgments are sure that the truth referred to in their own beliefs is the highest and most perfect truth. It is absolute truth. Partners in dialogue, however, must have a broad mind, one that gives others the opportunity to speak and is willing to listen to the expression of beliefs that differ from their own. Dialogue partners, at the same time, must have their own place to stand and be truly representatives of the faith they hold. These two aspects of dialogue, that one must be open to the other and yet representative of one's own faith, seem to contradict each other. But it is very important for those who would engage in dialogue to understand from the beginning that each dialogue encounter is not the final word in deciding that the beliefs of people of other faiths are mistaken, inferior, or defective. It is true that each participant in dialogue will try to explain the truth of her or his faith and explain why that truth is important, greatly influences their own life, and should be important or even necessary to the life of the dialogue partner as well. These arguments serve to confirm the faithful stance of the person presenting them and confirm that they are a representative of the faith they hold. At the same time, however, this does not mean that those engaged in dialogue will judge others before they give them an opportunity to explain their beliefs and show how those beliefs differ from their own perspective. Those who say, "I have the final, most complete answer, and those who have revealed my truth to me expect me to use their revealed truth to judge your truth""[12] do not give their dialogue partners a chance explain their own faith. They, instead, decide in advance that their dialogue partner's faith is not as complete or perfect as their own faith, which is taken to be the most correct form of religious beliefs. Opinions of this sort create endless dissension and are detrimental to interfaith understanding.

Those engaged in dialogue, moreover, must have the courage and insight to treat critically in a straightforward fashion the beliefs and practices of their own religion, which means that they must be honestly self-critical.[13] The process of examining one's own religion critically in order to correct particular practices will make that religion even more firm and stable. This advice concerning the need for critical self-awareness in dialogue does not conflict with the need for a person to preserve the unique identity of his or her own religion. Forthright criticism of one's own religion, furthermore, may take the form of new interpretations of religious teaching or encourage a new perspective on religious beliefs and practices that may well be more appropriate to a person's contemporary situation. It is certain, however, that such new perspectives must not

be in conflict with the important doctrines found in the scriptures of one's own religion. When a person taking part in dialogue has no prejudice against her or his own faith and also has no predisposition to favor it, dialogue can proceed in an honest and sincere fashion.[14] It will lead, furthermore, to trust that those engaged in the process will dialogue with each other sincerely to the end that something creative will take place. Creating trust of this nature is important because an important obstacle to interreligious dialogue occurs when there is the fear that if one speaks honestly one party or the other will use what they learn from dialogue in order to increase the number of their adherents. If interreligious dialogue begins with trust and sincerity, it will successfully attain the goals it has set out for itself.

Another important point to remember is that from the beginning of an interreligious dialogue encounter both sides should in fact want to dialogue with each other.[15] If that is not the case, dialogue will amount only to one side interviewing the other, or it will entail only an ordinary exchange of religious information. Those engaged in dialogue, furthermore, should always being talking with each other at the same level, meaning that if the subject of dialogue is doctrinal beliefs each partner must discuss doctrinal beliefs found in their scriptures. If, again, the subject of dialogue is popular beliefs and practices, the dialogue partners should not introduce abstract or technical theological material into the discussions. The point here is to keep misunderstandings from taking place, misunderstandings that will waste time in arguments that are aimed at different situations or concerns entirely.

From what has been said above, it can be seen that interreligious dialogue can take place with individuals of any level from academics who specialize in interreligious dialogue to local people who are not experts in their religion's scriptures but still practice their religion faithfully according to their understanding of it. Local people, too, can share their beliefs so that others will know and understand that set of beliefs.

Various Forms of Interreligious Dialogue[16]

The various forms of interreligious dialogue include:

1. dialogue at the level of scriptural beliefs (Dialogue of Study)

2. dialogue that emphasizes religious experience and practice (Dialogue of Prayer)

3. dialogue for life, which emphasizes solving problems (Dialogue of Life)

The first form of interreligious dialogue, *Dialogue of Study*, usually is conducted by scholars who want to know and understand, officially, the beliefs of the dialogue partner. Such dialogue encounters, for example, will refer to each religion's scriptures. The purpose of this form of dialogue is to increase wisdom through understanding, which may lead to cooperation in practice as well.

The second form of interreligious dialogue, *Dialogue of Prayer*, is dialogue by experimental actions. It begins with a sympathetic imagination that conducts experiments based on the implications that particular sets of beliefs have for religious praxis. For example, individuals

engaged in dialogue with Muslims might take John Dune's "Passing Over"[17] and practice fasting with their Muslim friends in order to understand the importance of how Muslims gain a strong faith based on faithful religious practice. They would do this (without any thought of changing their religious affiliation) to understand how their Muslim friends are able to fast, hold certain doctrines, and have the motivations that enable them to fast as they do. When a person engaged in dialogue tries this method of imagination and then experiments with the actual religious practice of another faith until he or she understands the ultimate truth underlying that practice, the person is then able to "pass back" into the practice of her or his own religion. This method is dialogue by imagination and by shared religious practice and may lead to a better understanding of the religious experience and highest religious truth or ultimate end of the dialogue partner's religion.

The last type of interreligious dialogue, *Dialogue of Life*, is a form that emphasizes solving problems that every person of whatever religious persuasion faces. Many people around the world, for example, face problems related to environmental pollution and human rights. These problems are challenging and require immediate attention. If members of the various religions enter into a dialogue that examines the conditions, causes, and possible solutions of these problems in light of the teachings of their own religion and if they cooperation in solving these common problems, interreligious dialogue will achive its goal. It will lead, that is, to mutual understanding and cooperation between religions. It will facilitate the bringing of different teachings together to help humanity as much as possible.

The first type of interreligious dialogue, Dialogue of Study, may seem to be merely a form that is conducted by academics dwelling in their ivory towers and involves only ideas without praxis. It is still, however, an important form of dialogue. The second and third forms, which do involve praxis, unavoidably depend on the knowledge and understanding gained from the dialogue of study, which provides them with a foundation for their praxis.

Is Dialogue Necessary & Appropriate for Thai Society?

Interreligious dialogue is necessary for Thai society because Thailand is under the influence of globalization and has been influenced by the fact of global unity. Thai society, which has its roots in Buddhism, is not going to be able to separate itself from Thais who are of other faiths than Buddhism. It is necessary, therefore, for it to develop a religious perspective and practice appropriate to its relationship with people of other faiths. Certain historical factors, furthermore, also give cause to the need for interreligious dialogue. Some groups in Thai society may have deeply rooted doubts about dialogue because of the way in which some other religions have tried to spread their religion in Thailand. There are segments of Thai society that are still fearful and uncertain when it comes to "dialogue between religions" with other religions. This is especially true of other religions that have been accused of having hidden purposes in wanting to learn about and understand Thai religion and society. Such feelings as these in Thai society should be an indication of the need for honest interreligious dialogue between Buddhism and other religions. They indicate the need for opportunities to discuss doubts and to understand each other's methodologies in order to do away with doubts and in order to gain a correct understanding of other religions.

Moreover, many groups and people claim that Thai society and religion has its own unique identity, one that preserves an underlying unity and is not characterized by being divided into many sects and denominations. Thailand does not, therefore, need an ecumenical movement as do some other religions. Thailand, furthermore, more or less has religious freedom and is religiously peaceful to a degree. There is, these groups and people claim, thus no need for interreligious dialogue, especially because they fear that the consequences of dialogue will be more negative than positive because dialogue might expose doubts and fears that are best left uncovered. In spite of such thoughts, Thai society should consider again its understanding of the usefulness of conducting interreligious dialogue. An event that took place in B.E. 2538 [C.E. 1995] gives clear indication of this need to reconsider the value of interreligious dialogue. In that year, a religious organization attempted to hold a seminar involving Buddhists and members of another religion from India. The seminar, however, was cancelled because of the suspicious behavior of the international organization that sponsored it. There was a fear that it might be trying to use Thailand as a stage for creating interreligious dissension for its own advantage. The problems concerning the intentions of the seminar's organizers is not a subject we need discuss here, but the important point that I want to point out here concerns an interview on the matter given by one highly placed Thai official. That official stated, "No one organizes interreligious dialogue seminars; they are a danger that can create dissension."[18] This statement reflects a failure to understand the true purpose of interreligious dialogue. It also reflects a widely spread suspicion or even fear in Thailand concerning the fallout that can follow from interreligious dialogue. This example points to the pressing need for an understanding of the principles, purposes, values, ways, and perspective regarding dialogue and interfaith relations that should be widely disseminated among students and the general public. The danger is that interfaith misunderstanding, suspicion, and mistrust might lead to a general unrest in society.

Conclusion

Each encounter in interreligious dialogue, in sum, is not necessarily an end in itself, and we cannot expect that each encounter will be completely successful. This is because of the complexity of the interreligious dialogue process itself and because of self-centered human nature, which causes people to look at dialogue as a process difficult to bring about successfully. It should be, however, a challenge for religious scholars and those with a broad mind to accept the reality of religious "variety and differences." They should be able to use the epistemological methods of interreligious dialogue and reap the benefits of those uses, which will enable them to solve the problems of interfaith dissension. The unofficial methods of dialogue of the past are worthy of study to the end that a proper official theory and praxis of dialogue can be obtained, a theory and praxis that reminds us of the old, long familiar "liquor" that is now placed in a "standardized" bottle for the common benefit of religious people of all faiths.

End Notes

[1] S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Interfaith Dialogue," *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement,* edited by Nicholas Lossky (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 281-282.

[2] Ariarajah, "Interfaith Dialogue," 282.
[3] Frederick J. Streng, *Understanding Religious Life* (3d ed., Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1985), 235.
[4] Leonard Swidler, "Intereligious and interideological Dialogue: The Matrix for all Systematic Reflection Today," *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* edited by Leonard Swidler (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 6.
[5] Brennan R. Hill, Paul Knitter, and William Madges, *Faith, Religion and Theology* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990), 190, 195.

[6] Hill, *et. al., Faith, Religion and Theology,* 196.
[7] Paul Mojzes, "The What and the How of Dialogue," *Interreligious Dialogue,* edited by M. Darrol Bryant and Frank Flinn (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 199.
[8] Hill, *et. al., Faith, Religion and Theology,* 195.
[9] Maurice Friedman, "The Dialogue of Touchstones as an Approach to Interreligious Dialogue," *Dialogue and Syncretism: an Interdisciplinary Approach,* edited by Jerald D. Gort, et. al. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 76.
[10] "Religious pluralism," in fact may differ from "perennial philosophy" in that this latter philosophy emphasizes that while the religious beliefs of each religion may differ in practice they lead to the same truth and are thus the same thing. See Streng, *Understanding Religious Life,* 239.
[11] John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India, 1981), 127-9.
[12] Hill, *et. al., Faith, Religion and Theology,* 210.
[13] Swidler, "Intereligious and interideological Dialogue," 15.
[14] Swidler, "Intereligious and interideological Dialogue," 14.
[15] Mojzes, "The What and the How of Dialogue," 204.
[16] Hill, *et. al., Faith, Religion and Theology,* 203-4.
[17] Hill, *et. al., Faith, Religion and Theology,* 207-8.
[18] *Mathichon,* Wednesday, 15 November 2538 (1995), in Thai.

A Typology of Thai Conversions to Evangelical Christianity

Dr. Edwin Zehner

This article focuses on typologies of Thai conversions to evangelicalism, and part of it appears in Chapter Three of Ed Zehner's recently completed doctoral dissertation. This typology is, I think, an important contribution to our understanding of why people convert to such an apparently alien religion for Thais as evangelical Christianity. I would like to thank Ed for allowing me to publish this article.

Introduction

Once upon a time I thought I knew a lot about religious conversion. I had been raised in devotedly evangelical churches, my parents had met through Youth for Christ activities, my mother had once planned to be a missionary, and my father had once trained for the ministry. Growing up, I was well-versed in the evangelical logic that conversion is a once-for-all born-again experience, the beginning of one's spiritual life. On Christian radio programs I can still hear, as I did growing up, that if I cannot name the exact date and time when I became a

Christian, I am not really "saved." I grew up believing this thoroughly, and assumed that this doctrine reflected the actual life experience of most evangelical Christians.

When I actually started asking evangelicals to tell me their conversion stories, I found that the stories often did not match the model. My father, for example, could not name a precise date and time. The closest he could come was to name a particular summer when he felt prompted to read the Bible intensively. At the beginning of the summer he was "not a Christian" (in the evangelical sense). At the end of the summer he knew that he was. My best friend in college, a Bible major attending a leading evangelical school, had a similar story — no specific date and time, but a period of intensive searching that resulted in the conviction that he and his relationship with God had changed. My girlfriend in my senior year of college, an evangelical raised in a non-evangelical family, had an even less mainstream story. She could not remember a time when she had not believed in God. And if she had to pick a time when her religious orientation became more like that of evangelicals, it would be the day she read the book of Ecclesiastes (not exactly the subject matter of evangelical tracts) and found to her pleasant surprise that the Bible had some intellectual and emotional depth. As for me, I "accepted Christ" at the age of five, and though my stay technically conforms to the model (only in Thailand have I ever heard an evangelical question the validity of my conversion), I later learned that in many religious traditions (both Christian and non-Christian) I would have been considered too young to be expected to make such a decision.

There is therefore a great deal of empirical variation around the modal evangelical story of a once-for-all life-changing experience ideally modeled on the Acts Chapter 9 story of Jesus' sudden encounter with Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus. Intriguingly, when I began studying conversion as an academic pursuit, I found that the secular authors made some of the same assumptions about conversion that evangelical preachers did. The scholarly literature did not require converts to name dates and times, and it did not voice the theology of spiritual rebirth that underlies the evangelical model, but it did, for the most part, assume that conversion was about personal and cultural transformation. One of the leading scholars of conversion defines it as "a total transformation of the person" that strikes "to the root of the human predicament" (Rambo 1993:xii). Others have defined it as "a radical reorganization of identity, meaning, life" (Travisano 1970:594), "the process of changing a sense of root reality" (Heirich 1977:674), a "deliberate turning" (Nock 1933:7), and a process "of self-transformation and commitment" (Stromberg 1993:ix). Similar assumptions underlie the claim, couched in terms of different language and issues, that "conversion is emphatically intransitive, a one-way street" that functions as a "general trope for both translation and appropriation, a sign of…epistemological violence" (Dirks 1996:121) and Talal Asad's remark that Christian conversion is something that happens to "subjects" who passively allow themselves to be subjected to Western religion "as a consequence of forces beyond their control" (1996:263, 265). These latter statements would certainly be challenged by most converts, as they are by many other scholars (for example, Jolly 1996, Meyer 1996, Sanneh 2003). But the assumption of conversion as psychologically transformative, as a radical turning point, is an assumption that remains strong, despite the evidence of socially and historically significant conversion movements that were more calculated than they were emotionally or cognitively transformative (for example, Kammerer 1990, Kipp 1995). Yet work with archival materials has shown that even in Christianity the norm of

conversion as a personally transformative event to be recounted in personal stories is a relatively recent development (Pollman 1996). And work on new religious movements in North America has brought to scholarly awareness a phenomenon surely familiar to many who work with converts and congregations, the fact that a large proportion of converts eventually fall away (Balch 1985, Richardson 1980).

Clearly, there is a variety of ways that people become Christians, and I do not mean to imply that this variety has been entirely overlooked. Whereas some students of Christianity and other converting movements have focused on personally transformative crises (Allison 1969, James 1985 [1902], Lofland and Stark 1965, Stromberg 1993), others have explained the growth of religious movements in terms of interpersonal networking effects (Lofland 1977, Lofland and Stark 1965) and other factors. Indeed, so diverse has been the array of religious options and movements in North America since the 1960s that some scholars of this diversity have abandoned the very notion of a modal type of conversion around which the other types must revolve. One of the clearest presentations highlighting the diverse styles of religious change is the set of six conversion "motifs" suggested by Lofland and Skonovd (1981). A similar recognition, though somewhat less explicit, can be found in Rambo's (1993) model of interactive webs of conversion processes (which he, unfortunately, refers to as "stages").

Readers interested in additional work on (non-Thai) conversion typologies are urged to look up Lofland and Skonovd's 1981 article on "conversion motifs." Also useful is Richardson's 1980 article on "conversion careers." Though it does not deal directly with typology, it presents, fairly directly, the notion that a person's personal and religious identity is constantly in process, an idea that parallels parts of the following discussion. As for readers who would like to study the broader literature on religious conversion, they would do well to start with the books written or edited by Buckser and Glazier (2003), Rambo (1993), and (though some of the articles get a bit tendentious) van der Veer (1996).

Thai Conversion Stories

Anybody who listens carefully to the stories that people tell about their conversions is sure to find a great variety of patterns and themes in those stories. This is especially the case in Thailand concerning conversions to Christianity from other religious backgrounds such as Buddhism. Whereas North American evangelicals who convert from less devoted commitments to more devoted ones can be expected to conform more or less to the norm (though, as I noted at the outset, even many North Americans conform more in their affirmations than in their personal experience), such is less likely among Thai who converted from Buddhism to Christianity. No matter how hard they may try to make their stories conform to the evangelical ideal (and many of them try very hard to do so), their actual experience reveals a variety of paths and patterns on the journey into Christian churches.

That is what I found in 1990 when I interviewed several dozen students in and near Bangkok who had been born in Buddhist families, converted to Christianity, and were now training for lay or professional Christian ministry. The process of collecting their conversion stories was a simple one. I obtained the permission of school administrators to interview these students, and in most cases the administrators not only gave permission but also provided the interview space and

scheduled the order of interviews. In the interview sessions I explained that I was studying conversion and invited the students to tell their conversion stories however they wanted to tell them, though I also conversed with them when I heard something that I thought especially interesting or needing clarification.

The interpretation of these stories was influenced by my four years of prior experience living and working in Thai evangelical churches. Readers interested in the larger set of discussions arising from this material should consult my Ph.D. thesis (Zehner 2003).[1] The remainder of the present article shares a typology of conversions that I derived from the stories and presented in the second half of the third chapter of the dissertation. Readers are warned that the typology is not meant to be comprehensive. I do not expect that it can be tied explicitly to any broader ideological grid or theory, nor should it be used as a means of classify converts or their conversions, as most converts' stories showed features of more than one type. In generating the types, I simply parsed out the patterns I noticed in the stories. Another writer working with this or a different set of stories would likely notice different patterns. I have no problem with that. The best use of this material is not to pigeonhole people or their experiences but rather to spark greater creativity in thinking about religious contact and personal change.

A Typology of Thai Conversions to Christianity

In the following typology I give special attention to the speed of movement into Christianity, the sequence of communal participation versus inner conviction (that is, which came first), the degree of experimentation or quest in the conversions, and the role of factors interpersonal processes. While the typology is meant to be descriptive rather than explanatory, some of the categories also take overt motivations into account. There are six main categories and a seventh combination category.

1. Gradual Conversions

For some converts, the process of exploration and conviction was so gradual that it was impossible to point to any particular moment when they became a Christian. These people tended to talk about the results of the process rather than identifying a turning point to belief. Several of these informants had attended church over an extended period, asking questions about Christian faith and practice. As one of them put it, she believed because in the end she found answers to many of her questions. Another said that she eventually found that she "could no longer deny God." The tellers of these kinds of stories had trouble providing specifics, and this difficulty suggests that much of their decision-making process was subconscious. For these people, Christian commitment emerged gradually out of the fog. These converts are usually much better at describing the beginning of their exploration of Christianity than they are at articulating how and why they switched from exploration to commitment. This group might be called "seekers," people who attended church, got to know Christians, and asked questions. These people typically used a combination of intellectual and social modes of entry. Their conversions usually focused on ideas and were mediated by relational ties, but, as I said, lacked clearly marked points of commitment. Though most of these informants probably prayed prayers of conversion, those prayers are not central to their stories.

2. "Experimental" Conversions

A second, more experiential kind of conversion might be called "experimental." Through their contacts with Christians, these converts learned of the Christian teachings about the power of God. They then tested the Christians' teachings by seeing if the power of God would apply in their own cases. Some of these experimenters tested by praying for things that they considered unlikely. One individual prayed that two family members who never spoke to each other would become reconciled. Another prayed for help in his studies. Yet others prayed about financial problems. Other experimenters prayed for change in their own personalities, for example praying that they would be able to overcome particular vices or that they would start to care more for other people. Some members of this second group were actively testing, while others were not consciously praying for these changes but were impressed when they noticed the changes occurring over time. One such passive tester noted her addiction to sniffing paint thinner had gone away, while another passive tester came to consider it the grace of God that she had been able to continue pursuing her studies.

Like the seekers, most experimenters were already in contact with Christian communities, and most could say why they began their experiments. While the passive experimenters were able to say what event grabbed their attention, the active ones usually could not. The active testers seemed instead to have experimented continually until convinced, just as the seekers asked questions until convinced. And both active and passive experimenters did their testing while in regular contact with Christian communities. For active experimenters it was important not to convert until they had tested Christianity's claims, and they spoke of this testing as *thot laung*, a phrase often used when talking of scientific experiments done in a lab or when trying out a sample of a new product. I had the impression that this explicit "testing" attitude was more common in Thailand than in the United States. It may be influenced by the Buddha's famous dictum to test all teachings, including his own, instead of taking things on faith. Active experimenters engaged in Christian practices specifically to see if they would work as advertised, and only if the practices worked did the experimenters become committed Christians. The formal ritual of rap chuea (the prayer of "accepting Christ as Savior") could happen at any point in this process, but subjectively it was not felt to be the main event in the conversion, for, subjectively, the testing was itself the conversion process. The results were not necessarily psychologically transformative in themselves, but they did provide the basis for a decision.

3. "Casual" or "Drifting" Conversions

A third conversion type might be called "casual conversions" or "drifting conversions," in that these converts had already been drifting in and out of the Christian community over time, and consequently, though they were fully committed at the time of interview, they might be expected to drift away again in the future. Of course, it is possible that any convert might someday drift away; impermanent conversions are quite common. But in the cases of which I speak the converts had already drifted in and out of churches at least once. In some cases the earlier commitments were so real and their participations in Christian community so intense that the earlier commitment would have been considered a genuine conversion at the time, and converts reporting these histories often struggled to decide which conversion was genuine. Some treated

their first conversions as genuine, but others did not. Whatever the case, convert claims that on the earlier occasions they had not "really believed" need not be taken at face value. An experienced missionary once told me he had noticed Thai young people rotating among a series of Christian and non-Christian religious groups. Each time they rejoined the Christian community, these young people seemed to join at a new level of maturity. None of my Thai informants fit this pattern exactly; when leaving the church they seemed to drop out of organized religious practice entirely. But the notion of rejoining at a new level of maturity may have validity, as each reentry into the Christian community draws on earlier life experiences. Nevertheless, this conversion type deviates from the modal expectation of a once-for-all-time conversion even more than do the first two (despite the informants' attempts to make their experience fit the punctiliar model). Participation in the Christian community may bring psychological satisfactions for a time, and for that period the individual may indeed seem to have been transformed. But then the commitment passes until the cycle is repeated later.

4. "Emotional" Conversions

A fourth type might be called "emotional conversion." The convert has an emotional experience, often unexpected, that gives a special personal importance to the transition to Christianity. One person unexpectedly broke down in tears as she was praying the conversion prayer suggested in a correspondence course. Another said she had "seen Jesus" (actually, she thought she had heard Jesus calling her), and at that moment she felt a flood of emotional experiences that convinced her that Jesus was alive and Christian teaching was true. Several said they had unexpectedly spoken in tongues at Christian revival meetings, events that are usually accompanied by emotional excitement.

Not all emotional experiences lead directly to conversion. For example, several informants said they had spoken in tongues repeatedly (always at Christian meetings) before formally deciding to convert. I suspect this happened not only because the experience was too new for them to commit to Christianity or even be aware of the meanings that Christians read into tongues-speaking, but also because the experiences were open to multiple interpretations and reinterpretations. Consequently, emotional experiences leading directly to conversion almost always happened when the convert was already in a relationship with one or more Christian friends with whom he or she was discussing Christianity. In several cases the emotion seemed to be an expression of the excitement of appropriating Christian teaching at a new level, while at the same time it justified that decision subjectively.

5. Social Conversions

A fifth type might be called "social conversion." These social conversions were consciously sparked by relationships with Christians, and were often motivated by respect for them or for the way they acted. Several of my informants reported converting after moving to live with older siblings who were Christians. Others told me of Christian families who gave them shelter from conflicted home situations. These close relations with Christian social superiors playing a parental role appeared more frequently than I expected. Similar dynamics happened within biological families, however. When a series of family members entered the church successively, it was usually by a process of the younger ones following their elders. This was not exclusively

the case, though, as there were reports of parents converting several years after their children had done so. Even so, younger following older was the most common pattern.

5.1. *Krengjai* Conversions

Two subtypes of social conversion merit special attention. One was the *krengjai* conversion. *Krengjai* is a quintessentially Thai term meaning to have consideration for the other person's feelings. In *krengjai* conversions people pray conversion prayers out of respect for the feelings of the people who are trying to convert them. One informant referred to this phenomenon as "acting to encourage the speaker." Most of these *krengjai* conversions are conversions in name only. But occasionally they lead to more serious commitment.

For one of my informants, the *krengjai* conversion was truly an act of respect, but it was also more than lip service. This informant had been performing for several months in a Christian musical troupe. When the missionary who had organized the troupe encouraged him to convert, the informant did so after just a few minutes' discussion, acting, he said, mostly out of *krengjai* for the missionary who was witnessing to him. However, the informant had also decided to be serious about the conversion. He stopped paying respects to the supernatural powers his family had once respected, and he decided to act in every way as a Christian. The informant felt that God honored his conversion by answering his prayers, and he solidified his commitment in the course of his practice.

5.2. Quasi-adoption Effects

Another type of social conversion was conversion as a counterpart of quasi-adoption arrangements. In Thailand it is common for children to move back and forth among families. Some may live with a nanny while the parents work. Some may stay with a relative when attending school. In still other cases, a child may stay with another family because the biological family can't or won't provide proper care. (These quasi-adoptions are almost never formalized legally.) And sometimes an older sibling will take in a younger sibling in hopes of correcting the sibling's behavior or with the intent of providing a warmer family environment. Sometimes these new living situations provided relationships that were deeply meaningful to the person taken in, especially if the new host (or hostess) was respected and was providing safety. Several informants reported converting only a few weeks or months after starting to live with such people who were Christians. In some cases these older Christians were the informants' brothers or sisters. In another case a student who was suffering at home was invited to live with her Christian schoolteacher. In yet another case, a young woman was given shelter by a Christian woman after an older sister had kicked her out of the house in the middle of the night. This last example helps illustrate the potential effect of these relationships. The informant said the Christian woman was phikan, meaning she was handicapped or physically deformed. At that time, handicaps tended to evoke pity, and they could seriously reduce social respect. Consequently, the informant initially had little regard for her hostess. Yet over time she became impressed that this woman, whom she did not love, continued to show love to her, and that realization opened her heart to considering Christianity.

6. Observation of Christians

A sixth and widely cited type, closely related to social conversion, centered on observation of Christians, usually over time. This type divides into several subtypes.

6.1. General Attraction

Several converts spoke highly of the personality or behavior of Christians they had known. One of them spoke fondly of a Christian evangelist who had been a family friend for many years. Eventually the informant began desiring a life like his, as the evangelist's life seemed to be full of peace and happiness. Another informant was moved by the attention shown her by a couple of young female missionaries. Others said they were impressed when they noticed Christians having fun together, especially since they did so without resorting to alcohol, and without using rough language among themselves. Yet another was impressed by the mother of a Christian roommate he had in college. When visiting her home on school break, he was impressed that she avoided harsh words when speaking with her children. In all these cases, the informants claimed that the attitudes they observed in Christians were different from what they had observed elsewhere.

6.2. Observing the Effects of Conversion

When a close relative converts, the change in behavior sometimes has especially striking effects. One informant said he was stunned when visiting an older brother who had become a Christian; not only had the brother given up his vices, but in general he had also acquired a more settled character. The informant could see that his brother's life was good, and he wanted some of that. Another informant was impressed simply by the stubbornness with which her older sister remained committed to her new faith despite opposition from her family. The sister spoke of peace, and it showed in her. Yet another informant said his older sister had begun treating other family members better. Whereas the sister used to get angry easily, she was now much easier to get along with. Another person noted that her mother had taken the breakup of her marriage very hard, but she seemed to become more settled after she became a Christian. Observations such as these were most salient for informants who were in their teens or older. Conversions that happened when the informants where younger than this were less likely to have a deep impact. In such cases, the children might follow their parents' lead in converting, but upon reflection did not consider it deeply meaningful. Informants called this form of Christianity chuea tam, that is, following the parents' lead without truly appropriating the faith for themselves. It was not until they were young adults that these informants made conversion decisions that they considered truly their own

6.3. Appreciating Treatment by Christians

Several informants said that they converted because they were simply happy with the way they were treated by Christians. Often these feelings came most to the fore when the informant was making a first visit to a Christian meeting. One informant, who had attended a Christian house meeting, said he was impressed that the other participants went out of their way to look after him, bringing him fruit and drinking water. I had considered this kind of hospitality to be general Thai custom, but the informant said he was surprised that they would do this for a

stranger, and he felt warmed in his heart. Another informant was impressed by a Thai pastor who persisted in offering to take the informant to a Christian institution that would help him to overcome his heroin addiction. The informant had essentially been abandoned to his own devices when he was aged thirteen, losing contact even with his brothers and sisters. Though he was not sure he could or even wanted to abandon his heroin addiction, he was impressed simply that this stranger showed interest. Others spoke of the "love and warmth" and the smiles bestowed on them by Christians, especially at Christian meetings. Many spoke of Christians being nice (*di*) toward them. Many also spoke of the "love" of Christians. It was often not clear what they meant by "love," but in general they seemed to be praising Christians for showing personal interest in themselves. Some also praised the approachability of older Christians, along with their availability for counseling and for answering questions. Several individuals mentioned feeling accepted in Christian settings, a consideration that was especially important for young people who had recently arrived from the provinces or who held low-status jobs.

6.4. Christians' Approachability for Counseling

Christians' availability for personal counseling was a major issue in several of the conversion stories I collected. Several people praised the approachability of older Christians, especially pastors, pastors' wives, and elders who made themselves available for advice and emotional comfort.[2] In a way, these individuals were merely acting out the normal expectations entailed for a person in their position, playing a benevolent, nurturing role toward their social inferiors. The informants found these people's behavior impressive and comforting nonetheless, and seemed to find the treatment unexpected. Sometimes informants were impressed at the persistence with which peers injected God into conversations. While many nonconverts might be repelled by such persistence, the people who eventually converted gave these people credit, first, for caring enough to listen and, second, for offering a means of hope.

7. Combinations of Types

The several conversion types I have just outlined rarely appear alone in the conversion stories. For example, an informant's story may show the importance of a relationship with a particular person while claiming that the conversion was motivated entirely by intellectual arguments. Or a person's initial interest in Christianity may have been sparked by observing a change in a family member, while in the course of conversion the person also attended church and raised cognitive and theological questions. Or a person may have had a sudden, emotional conversion that was preceded by extended discussion with Christian friends. The main purpose of detailing the conversion types at this point has been not to separate my informants into logical pigeonholes, but simply to draw attention to the fact that they experienced a variety of styles of conversion, while also indicating some additional points of attraction.

Final Comments

Asking people how they converted is a lot like asking people how they fell in love or how they developed their political perspective. They can tell stories, sometimes with great detail, conviction, and relish. But as for being able to name the precise moment when they, in their innermost being, went from "out of love" to "in love" (or Republican to Democrat, or Buddhist

to Christian), well, that's pretty rare. For evangelicals, this mismatch between experience and the theologically rooted ideal may always create tensions. One way around those tensions is to develop a more ambiguous, less late-twentieth-century model for understanding the relevant scriptures. Instead of understanding conversion in the black-and-white, is-or-is-not, ones-versus-zeros model of a computer program or legal proceeding or citizenship application, evangelicals might draw on earlier Christian (indeed, proto-evangelical) models such as a journey (consider Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress) or of developing a mystic's concern for the "practice of the presence of God" (to pick a metaphor favored among evangelicals) or a concern focused more on where one is going than on where one is or on how or when one got there.

In practice, many evangelicals think in precisely the ways I have just suggested. But they are also concerned with points of initiation into the faith, with stories of spiritual "birth" (or "adoption," to use another biblical term), with the personal assurance of knowing how and when one "truly believed" and truly became part of the family of God. Though I do not have the space to detail my reasons here, I suspect this enduring evangelical concern about precise thresholds of belief is rooted not only in theology but also in psychological needs for tangible assurances of belongingness, a need that we all share to some extent.

As for outreach strategies and research programs, the implication of the highly variegated typology I have outlined is to avoid putting all your conceptual or institutional eggs in the same basket. This article has dealt just with patterns of conversion, and only peripherally with motives. But suffice it to say that the motives are as diverse as the patterns. People enter Christianity (and Islam and Buddhism) via a variety of routes, and many of those routes are difficult to program by direct applications of resources (how, after all, can an "experimental" Christian be induced to speed the experimentation process?). As with any other kind of appeal, people are typically drawn to a particular new religion or church by a variety of contacts. A tract here (perhaps rejected as "ridiculous"), a Bible passage there, a friendship there, an experimental church membership somewhere else, here an argument, there a long-term friendship — the journey is hardly a straightforward path. An inexplicable desire to start searching, perhaps even (as one convert reported) a never-quite-understood fascination with the shape of the cross seen on churches she never bothered to enter — these too have been reported as contributing to the journey. The best an outreach-minded congregation can do is to have the welcome mat out, and, at a minimum, be actively responsive as people express their curiosity about Christianity and their desire for contact with caring people — though, of course, it hardly hurts to advertise as well.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Readers interested in learning more about scholarship on conversion can consult the books and articles listed in the references. Particularly good places to start include Rambo's (1993) review of the sociological and psychological literature (a review focused mostly on North America), Buckser and Glazier's (2003) collection of articles by anthropologists, and van der Veer's (1996) collection of articles by anthropologists and other scholars oriented to the concerns of postcolonial scholarship. Not only do these three sources provide a range of perspectives, but the

literature cited in their bibliographies will lead readers still deeper into the scholarly discussions to date

[2] Elders are lay people who were part of the church's formal leadership corps. Some of them also acted as de facto pastors.

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Short Items

Museums, the Past, and Truth

The 12 November 2003 issue of the Christian Science Monitor contains a story on the controversies surrounding Australia's new national museum in Canberra. The article, written by Janaki Kremmer, is entitled, "Is a museum obligated to tell the whole truth?" Some politially powerful Aussies feel that the museum gives too much attention to the aboriginal people and fails, thereby, to reflect the "inclusive" historical experience of Australia. The museum's exhibits, furthermore, are criticized by some because they focus on every day life and mix and match such things as clothing and the artifacts of daily living, sometimes without respect to periods or ethnicity. The article reports that some white Australians feel that their history and identity has not received sufficient attention compared to all of the space devoted to the aborigines. The article describes the difference of opinion as a political one, between conservatives and liberals, with the liberals defending the originality and ethnic balance of the museum. The liberals contend that Australian museums and histories marginalize the nation's indigenous peoples and that the Canberra museum is the first to give them the space they deserve. The museum itself has been very popular, drawing far more visitors than initially expected.

This article and the experience of the museum in Canberra raises the obviously prickly question of the ownership of the past. The fact is that Australia has a multiplicity of pasts and just as many ways of understanding the past. Which of these pasts takes precedence is indeed a political question. It is especially worth noting that the conservatives are using the rhetoric of inclusivenss to make their case, which rhetoric is usually the preserve of the liberals. If the article itself is fair, then what seems to be happening is that the conservatives are using that rhetoric of inclusiveness to actually preserve the un-inclusive, pro-white immigrant tradition of the other Australian historical museums. What, I wonder, is wrong with having at least one museum that devotes its primary attention to the aborigines?

Creating an Interplanetary Web

The 14 February 2004 website of I. T. Vibe carried an article written by Craig Beaumont entitled "NASA test Interplanetary Internet." The article, citing a NASA press release, reported that NASA and the European Space Agency (ESA) established direct contact between one of NASA's Martian exploration rovers and an ESA sattelite circling Mars, which ultimately involved the transfer of data back to Earth. This is the first time that a network has been established between two human extraterrestial communication systems. The article goes on to speculate that in the future a larger network could be established between Earth and human teams or settlements on the Moon and Mars. Presumably, such a network would include orbiting communities such as the International Space Station as well. The article concludes with the intriguing comment that, "So in years to come, you [may] find yourself chatting to someone online who might not be halfway round the world, but literally on another planet."

This is one of those news tidbits that reminds us of the future that is coming, if we can keep this old planet going. The Web, in short, may someday contain websites that originate from space or another planet. Scifi writers, I might add, have long since "invented" an intergalactic Web that spans many star systems. It's about time that reality started to catch up!

Preserving our Electronic Heritage

Internet and the Web are, effectively, only a little more than a decade old. Important as they are, they pose new challenges and problems as well, among them the problem of preserving data that are lost when websites shut down or are revised. Rick Weiss wrote an article entitled "On the Web, Research Work Proves Ephemeral" that was published in the 24 November 2003 issue of the Washington Post, which reports that while scholarly publications are increasingly citing online sources those sources themselves are constantly disappearing. By the time a book or an academic article is published, many of the websites it cites are gone. Refering to a study conducted by Robert Dellavalle and others into this problem, the article states, "Dellavalle's concerns reflect those of a growing number of scientists and scholars who are nervous about their increasing reliance on a medium that is proving far more ephemeral than archival."

The seriousness of the problem is demonstrated by the fact that increasingly there are no hardcopies for many documents found on the Web. They exist only electronically, and when they are cleaned off a site, that site moves, or it is shut down such documents are lost. (A cynic might observe, of course, that the loss of a lot of what is found on the Web is really no loss at all.) The article notes that there are now projects to archive old web pages and cites one by Kahle's Internet Archive (www.archive.org). Such projects cannot keep up, as the article points out, with the mass of data that seems to be passing regularly out of electronic existence; but they do represent a first effort to save the e-past.

As an experiment, I went to the internet archive site linked above and typed in "herbswanson.com." Low & behold, there were the two earliest versions of this website! I

wonder how they did that?

The Many Christs of America

The 23 December 2003 issue of the *Christian Science Monitor* contains a book review, written by Ron Charles, of the book *American Jesus: How the Son of God became a National Icon* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), written by Stephen Prothero. The book is a history of the ways in which various American groups and cultures have contextualized Jesus. From Presidents such as Thomas Jefferson in the early nineteenth century to groups as disparate as black Americans and Mormons, Americans have constantly redefined Jesus in their own terms. Prothero claims that in spite of the secularization of American society, Jesus is more "popular" than ever. (A claim that the huge popular interest in U.S. in the movie, "The Passion of Christ," seems to bear out). For those who are interested in the history of the contextualization of the Christian message, this sounds like an important book-one that may end up in the book review section of HeRB one day. Given the importance of the American religious consciousness on the founding and historical development of Protestantism in Thailand, this could well also be an important book for the study of Thai church history.

Another Small Window on the Thai World View

Last February 29th, Tambol (Sub-District) Sngabaan, of which Ban Dok Daeng is a part, held elections for the Tambol Council. On March 12th, the village held its own election for a new headman. On March 14th, Chiang Mai Province, of which Ban Dok Daeng is also a part, held elections for the Provincial Council. Somewhat bemused by this spate of electioneering, I naively asked a college-educated resident of Ban Dok Daeng why all of these elections could not be held on the same day. It would be easier and save time and money. His reply, "Oh, no, that would be confusing." He went on to explain that it would be confusing because it would not be right to hold elections for three different levels of government at the same time. The provincial elections, after all, are "higher" than the tambol and village ones.

This is a small case, but it reveals the continuing power of hierarchical thinking in Thailand, even in the patently democratic context of electioneering. This does not mean that the actual reason for holding three elections on three days instead of one is hierarchical. I suspect that a simple lack of coordination between levels of government is the proximate cause. What is revealing, rather, is the reason this one individual gave to justify the situation. He explained it as a matter of hierarchical propriety, thereby revealing the cognitive influence of hierarchical thinking as a tool for organizing reality.

News & Notes

herbswanson.com User Stats January-April 2004

The following table provides the user statistics for *herbswanson.com* for the first four months of 2004. These statistics are personally gratifying as they indicate a higher level of use of this website than I expected. The ratio of the number of "hits" to the number of users is especially important as it shows that the readers are not merely surfing through *herbswanson.com*. Readers are staying and using the website. Considering the specialized nature of the contents of this site, these statistics give me considerable *kamlangchai* (encouragement) to forge ahead.

User Statistics for herbswanson.com
January through April 2004

Month	Total Visitors	Daily Average Visitors	Total Pageviews	Daily Average Pageviews
January	822	26.5	1319	42.5
February	723	24.9	2181	75.2
March	1016	32.8	2169	70.0
April	731	24.4	1452	48.4
Totals	3292	27.2	7121	58.9

Marburger Missions Magazin issue on Thailand

The Marburger Mission's German-language website (www.margburger-mission.org) contains back issues of their mission magazine, Marburger Missions Magazin. The third issue for 2003 is dedicated to Marburger work in Thailand. The contents are all in German, and so I can't do more than point interested readers or researchers in the direction of this source.

"The Passion of Christ" - A Review Declined

I've had a couple of people ask me if I'm going to do a HeRB review of the "The Passion of the Christ." The answer is, "no." Call it squeamish if you like, but I've never been one for movie violence, gratuitous or otherwise, and it doesn't seem wise to review a movie one hasn't seen.

Many readers, I suspect, have probably had enough of the debate over the movie the way it is, and it does seem that as much has been said about the movie as is necessary.

If, however, some readers are interested in still more reviews of the movie, a good source for such reviews is the Rottentomatoes website page on the "Passion". As of 16 April 2004, Rottentomatoes had collected a total of 222 published reviews of the movie, 110 positive and 112 negative. The website, on that basis, gave it a rather mediocre rating. In a little side box entitled "Consensus," the website states, "The graphic details of Jesus' torture make the movie tough to sit through and obscure whatever message it is trying to convey." It features a *New York Times* review written by A. O. Scott published on 25 February 2004 that highlights a number of the more negative aspects of the movie. Just reading the review blurbs on the Rottentomatoes website page captures something of the controversy "Passion" has inspired.

Adventist News Network

Although access is somewhat indirect, the online Adventist News Network includes a substantial number of news items concerning Seventh Day Adventist work in Thailand. The news network is found on the SDA website (www.adventist.org), and you can access the News Network either by clicking on the news articles that rotate through at the very top of the homepage, or you can go to the pull down menu for World Church and go to news. In either case, you still have to do another click to get to the homepage for the News Network. When you do get there, however, you are able to do a search on "Thailand," which provides quite a list of items going back to 1997. I initially accessed the SDA news network through the news & society page of beliefnet.com, which has a list of links to religious and denominational news services.

Book Reviews

John R. Davis, *Poles Apart?* Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1993.

Few of the books on my bookshelf are as marked over and scribbled on as Davis' *Poles Apart?* It is a thoughtful and thought-provoking book written from an articulate, self-consciously evangelical perspective to the end that evangelicals might more faithfully and effectively communicate the Christian message in Thailand. In the process of making his case, Davis carefully considers perspectives usually considered inimical by evangelicals and even comments favorably on some of those perspectives. He is not afraid to draw on useful insights from them, and he challenges his evangelical audience to adapt a more open, accepting stance towards other viewpoints and towards the larger process of contextualization. I have "heard" that some evangelical missionaries in Thailand have felt ambivalent about *Poles Apart?*, and it is not hard to see why.

I must confess that I actually share their ambivalence albeit from an entirely different perspective. As a set of discrete "thought experiments," *Poles Apart?* spurs one to reflection. As an extended argument for contextualizing the Christian message in Thailand, however, it is fatally flawed by a number of hidden assumptions, which in the end provide yet another example of Western evangelicalism's inability to accept anything that isn't Western evangelicalism. If *Poles Apart?* is at all creative or innovative, it is in the fact that Davis takes a slightly broader view of what is safely evangelical than do most other evangelical missionaries in Thailand. In the end, it is much less innovative than it appears to be at first blush.

One has to balance a critical evaluation of Davis, however, with a serious appreciation for his willingness to think about what some, perhaps many other evangelicals reject out of hand. He takes his positions with integrity, and he does wrestle with issues that he himself acknowledges admit to no easy solution. He is also aware of the dangers of Protestant evangelicalism's tendency to epistemological arrogance. He sees some of the strengths of Buddhism and truly hungers after expressions of the Christian faith that will "reload" the Buddhist world view with what he considers to be biblical Christian truth.

Yet, it is precisely Davis' integrity, honesty, and sincerity that offer his readers a prime study in what we might call the "evangelical trap." Evangelical missionaries, church leaders, and probably many of the Thai evangelicals in the pews are necessarily out of sympathy with Thai Buddhism and Thai religious consciousness, and that lack of sympathy makes it virtually impossible for them to shape their message to fit the real-life spiritual needs of the Thai people. The evangelical version of the Good News has always been and continues to be bad news, or more precisely unwanted, uninteresting, incomprehensible, and somehow out-of-whack news to the vast majority of Thai people. In this regard, *Poles Apart?* does not differ at all from the long-standing evangelical tradition of evangelism in Thailand. It is simply not good news, let alone Good News, to Thai ears.

To go to the heart of the matter, the central failing of evangelicalism in general and Davis' *Poles Apart?* in particular is that both are fundamentally out of sympathy with the openly syncretistic, comfortably pluralistic Thai religious consciousness and world view. People in Thailand repeat endlessly the mantras that every religion is good and that every religion has the same basic purpose of teaching people to be good. People in Thailand also value smooth, accepting relationships based on mutual respect embedded within a society that loaths overt personal confrontation (subtle personal confrontation being another matter entirely). Within the Thai socio-religious context, Protestant evangelicalism is inherently combative and abrasive. It necessarily denies the premise that all religions are good and builds its personal relationships with people of other faiths around its evangelistic agenda, an agenda that takes a heavily, overtly negative attitude towards people of other faiths.

Davis tries to be different, but at heart he is not-not in any meaningful sense. He clearly believes that Christianity alone saves, and he takes a generally negative and unsympathetic attitude towards classical Theravada Buddhism, his chief protagonist. He echoes nearly two centuries of Protestant missionary complaints against Thai Buddhism in his contention that it is a dreary, hope-less faith that cannot meet the real spiritual needs of its adherents. As but one example, in his particularly anti-Buddhist chapter on "The Nature of Suffering," he writes, "Whereas the

Buddhist tries to disavow self and negate its importance, the Christian can enjoy God and His creation to the full as well as celebrate his selfhood." (page 66) Sentences like this one are scattered throughout *Poles Apart?* and make it a largely anti-contextual work in the Thai socio-religious context, however much Davis draws on ecumenical and dialogical sounding rhetoric from time to time.

Davis cannot help holding such views, so long as he maintains the integrity of his evangelical faith, for at the heart of that faith stands Jesus Christ, the world's Lord and Saviour. At the end of his chapter on "Local Theologies," Davis writes, "To infer that there is another way in which to resolve the problem of guilt, effectively reduces Christ to a mere Teacher of Religion, rather than the Saviour of the World." (page 54). Davis also contends that if Buddhism offers viable solutions to any of the important spiritual problems facing humanity, the Christian claim that Jesus is the divine Son of God is necessarily negated. In this and other related ways, he requires that contextualization must preserve the divinity of Christ and other essential Christian truths, which means that contextualization is first and foremost defensive and only secondarily exploratory. And while Davis readily agrees that much of Western missionary Christianity is rooted in Western culture and therefore not binding on Thai Christianity, he repeatedly affirms that there is a core of beliefs that are transcultural and must be preserved intact. He never questions the possibility that even his insistence on an "essential gospel" is itself culturally bound or that, at least, his assumed list of essences of the faith (divinity of Christ, authority of Scripture, the existence of a set of eternal truths, and other similar beliefs) are so bound.

In a passing comment, Davis also makes it clear that he is not in sympathy with the kind of contextualization that Thai Christians do on their own. He quotes the ecumenical theologian Kosuke Koyama to the effect that Thai Christians have replaced the dynamic biblical understanding of God with a Buddhist-like timeless but impotent God. He states, "Koyama clearly feels, and correctly so, that Thai Christians tend to over-contextualize the God of the Bible, so that their image of God would fit with the Buddhist ideas." (page 47) The point being made about Thai Christian views of God is highly debatable, but the more important issue reflected in Davis' views is that he implies that Thai Christians themselves are not competent to carry out contextualization. They do not know how to preserve the proper boundaries between the essence of the Christian faith and the (unacceptable) religious views of their own culture. Too much can be made of what is a single paragraph in *Poles Apart?*, but it is clear from the tenor of the whole book that Davis assumes that Thai Christians themselves have done little or nothing in terms of correct, creative contextualization of the type he is advocating. Early on, Davis also makes a passing critical reference to African contextualization, which he sees as being too syncretistic and proof of the need for "parameters" to preserve the distinctiveness of Christianity (pages 19-20). Western churches, apparently, do not share in the same untrustworthy, over-contextualizing tendencies. If I am reading Davis correctly, he stands firmly in the old-time missionary tradition that denigrates the theological integrity of the Thai church even as it assumes that Western missionaries are primarily responsible for the ways and forms by which Thai Christians are to express their faith.

Throughout the book, Davis' gaze is firmly fixed on the views of scholars and missiologists; his bibliography contains only a handful of Thai sources, few of which are Christian. He offers no cogent descriptions of how Thai Christians actually express their faiths and does not seem to

have considered the possibility of actually studying how the process of contextualization has and has not proceeded in Thai churches. His sources are mostly Western, frequently theoretical works, and the bulk of them have nothing to do with Thailand at all. With all due respect, I would suggest that Davis' essentialist theology all but programmed him to look to Western theological and missiological sources for guidance in his very genuine struggle to incarnate the Gospel in Asia. There is, sad to say, nothing new here. Evangelical missionaries have long looked on themselves and their Western traditions as the hope of the church in Thailand-usually overtly, sometimes implicitly.

In spite of the ocassional ecumenical and broad-minded tone of *Poles Apart?*, what we are left with is a deadend approach to contextualization. Davis, on the one hand, wants to fit the Christian package into the Thai socio-religious context. He pares that package down to its barebones minimum in order to maximize the possibilities of contextualization, which is why his approach is unacceptable to some other evangelicals. The very nature of his evangelical faith, however, ultimately frustrates his program because he necessarily continues to believe that the Thai Buddhist religious consciousness is inferior to the Western Christian one and because he supposes that Western Christians have maintained the essentials of the one faith that leads to salvation. Davis' version of the Gospel is still an alien Gospel, and he himself is still not willing to take the risks necessary to seriously relocate the Christian faith in Thai culture. The Gospel package according to Davis has to come from outside Thai society, and it has a definite shape, essentially un-Thai, that must be preserved at all costs. Anything taken from Thai society, rituals for example, must first be repackaged, reloaded, or reconceptualized according to the logic of the essential Christian package. Davis's essentialism and fundamental lack of sympathy with Thai religious consciousness, in sum, undermines his "evangelical minimalism," that is his attempt to keep the Christian essentials to a very minimum.

The central problem facing the evangelical approach to evangelism in Thailand, as reflected in *Poles Apart?* is that the Thai religious consciousness is syncretistic, pluralistic, and anti-essentialist. It is willing to borrow openly from many different sources to construct its faith. It acknowledges that there are numerous paths of religious truth and while, for it, Buddhism is the better path that does not mean that the Christian or Muslim or Hindu paths are invalid. Evangelical Christianity is the opposite; it is anti-syncretistic and essentialist. So long as it remains so, it remains unsympathetic to Thai religious consciousness and for just that long cannot tell the Good News of Jesus Christ to the people of Thailand. That is the evangelical trap.

Davis' approach to contextualization is made doubly doubtful by the fact that he almost entirely ignores the real Buddhism that is actually practiced by the people of Thailand. He aims his descriptions and criticisms of Buddhism at classical Theravada Buddhism. When he typifies Thai Buddhist thinking he does so on the basis of classical texts, and most of his authorities on Buddhism, though not all to be sure, write about Buddhism generally rather than real-life Thai village Buddhism. Thus, for example, Davis repeats, as we saw above, that age-old missionary description of dreary, formless Buddhism, which does not offer its adherents any hope for the future. Village Buddhism, in contrast, is frequently lively and local people constantly go to it for solutions to life's problems. Indeed, if one looks by way of comparison at the average Protestant worship service and the strictures placed on Protestant congregational life, the gay temple colors

and lively festivals of rural Buddhism offer far more in the way of joy and celebration. It is churches rather than temples that appear cheerless and dreary. Davis' failure to direct his contextualization study to local Thai village and urban life is a major methodological flaw, and it may be that it also reflects a deeper reluctance to acknowledge the value of Thai culture as a full, valued partner in contextualization.

Davis, has also failed, methodologically, to study how local Thai churches have actually gone about contextualizing their faith. He has failed to see, for example, that a central element in the Thai understanding of God as the All-Powerful Patron is drawn more from "secular" socio-political models of patron-client relations rather than on classical Theravada Buddhism. He has failed to see that King Bhumibol offers to Thai Christians an important model for the person of Christ. (There is, for example, the powerful photograph taken some years ago and widely shown in Thailand down to the present of an elderly, wrinkled village woman bowed low on the ground, her glowing face gazing in reverent awe on the King, who is on bended knee above her. Democratic Westerners may not feel comfortable with the image, but for Thai Christians it unconsciously models the love the royal Saviour has for his people.) Again, Davis' classical Theravada Buddhism is irrelevant.

Poles Apart? does not, thus, reflect the actual situation on the ground either in terms of Thai Buddhism as it is practiced at the local level or of the ways in which local Christians have already gone about making cultural sense of their religious faith. It is a theoretical theological treatise-removed from local life-that proposes a form of contextualization driven by the Western missionary agenda and aimed at classical Theravada Buddhism, an artificial construct that does not even exist as such in Thailand. To a large degree, *Poles Apart?* is representative of numerous other evangelical missionary studies of contextualization and the relationship of the church to Thai culture, most of which are actually more about the attempts of missionaries to make sense of the Thai religious scene than anything else. They are autobiographical records of the Western evangelical struggle to come to terms with Thailand, an ongoing struggle that reflects the "evangelical trap." Taken together, they seem to be striving for some strategy, some means to sneak the evangelical package past the Buddhist guardianship of the Thai religious consciousness.

Having said all of this, I would still strongly recommend Davis' *Poles Apart?* to those who are interested in the relationship of the Protestant churches to contemporary culture in Thailand. The author raises key issues that allow no easy solutions in a readable, direct manner that eschews self-important rhetoric. He presents a clear evangelical perspective that encourages readers to think through their own positions. Beyond superficialities, there is hardly anything in this book that I would agree with, but I still feel that it is an important work that deserves to be widely read and deeply studied. My only caveat would be that readers not take it at face value but use it as a stimulus for their own critical reflections.

Marcell Le Blanc, S.J., *History of Siam in 1688*. Translated and edited by Michael Smithies. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003.

This is not a book that I would normally choose to review for HeRB, but I was requested to do a review of it by a local Chiang Mai representative of the journal *Quest* and have decided to do a second, somewhat different review of the book here. It turns out that it is a book well worth reviewing. It raises issues and provides insights that are useful to the larger study of church history in Thailand..

Le Blanc (1653-1693) was a Jesuit mathematician sent out by the French government as a missionary to the court of King Narai of Siam (r. 1656-1688) in 1687. While he was in Siam, Le Blanc witnessed a virtual coup d'tat by which Narai's successor, Phra Phetracha (r. 1688-1703), seized the person of the King, executed some of his key supporters, and similarly disposed of two other claimants to the throne. In the process of these events, Phetracha also ousted and executed Narai's chief minister, a Greek adventurer by the name of Constantine Phaulkon (1647-1688) and forced the French troops that were Phaulkon's chief source of support to leave Siam. Not coincidently, Phetracha also severely limited the growing influence of European Catholic missionaries and the Christian community, which was composed almost exclusively of foreign Catholics including Japanese Christian refugees. Le Blanc provides one of a number of European descriptions of these events, one that is based on his own close proximity to them. *History of Siam in 1688* is thus an important primary source document for the study of a key event in seventeenth-century Thai history at a time when Siam successfully resisted French attempts to colonize and Christianize it. The value of this book for most readers, then, is what we might style a "secular" one because of its importance to general Thai history. The book's editor presents it in this light, and we can presume that Silkworm Book's chief interest in publishing this book is for its straight historical value..

Le Blanc's book, however, may also be looked upon as a theological treatise and an ideological "snapshot" of Catholic missionary religious attitudes and prejudices that helps us to understand how Christianity has come to be seen by Thai Buddhists as the adversary of Thai religious consciousness. As a historian of Protestantism in Thailand, I find original sources for Catholic missionary thinking such as this one to be useful for throwing more light on the whole history of Christian missions in Siam since the sixteenth century. Institutionally, one can make a good case, I think, for arguing that Catholic and Protestant church history are two separate fields of study. Aside from some few half-hearted stabs at establishing a closer ecumenical promiximity in more recent decades, the only substantial relationship between the two historically has been adversarial.

One could also make a case, however, that ideologically the two Christian movements have shared a great deal in common and actually encompass one continuous history rather than two. The first two Catholic missionaries arrived in Siam, so far as we know now, in 1567 less than 50 years after the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. When Christian missions began in Siam, that is, Catholicism and Protestantism were still ideologically much closer to each other than

either would have admitted then. Le Blanc's aplogetic for French and Catholic behavior in Siam in 1687-1688 makes those similarities abundantly clear, and much of his attitude concerning and behavior towards Thai culture and religion is the same as those of nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries. Both the Catholic and Protestant missionaries severely criticized the Siamese for being immoral, unrefined, superstitious, ignorant, sly and deceitful, cowardly, and so on through a long list of failings. Le Blanc, as a minor example, cites a proverb "current in Siam," presumably among the foreigners, that, "…one should leave commerce to the Dutch, fine arts to the Chinese, war to the French, and deviousness to the Siamese." (page 56).

Unlike the Protestant missionaries, however, Le Blanc also condemned the Siamese for being savages and barbarians. He believed that they were lacking in any civilized refinements, and he has few good words for any Siamese other than King Narai and one or two faithful Siamese servants of French masters. The later Protestant missionaries usually acknowledged that the Siamese were civilized, believing only that their's was an inferior civilization. Le Blanc's *History of Siam in 1688* represents thus another example of what Edward Said and others term "Orientalism," the preudicial presentation of Asian peoples by self-styled European experts on the Orient.

This book is a theological treatise that parallells later Protestant missionary writings in a number of other ways as well. Most notably, it attributes the events it records to providence, seeing in God's hand the force that moves human behavior along divinely directed paths. It also gives considerable attention to the persecution Christians underwent during and after the events of 1688 and emphasizes the value of and heroism displayed by the suffering of the Christians. Le Blanc foreshadows future Protestant missionary thinking even in his ocassional swipes at heretical Protestantism itself. Protestant missionary writers in the nineteenth century were equally happy to lambast the "Antichrist of Rome" and his minions in Siam.

The translation and publication of *History of Siam in 1688* is an important contribution, then, to the study of Thai church history. One does wish that the editor had provided a somewhat more comprehensive description of the background and historical context of the book, although the "Chronology of Events" at the end of the book is helpful. The bibliography is also quite inadequate. What the editor has done is to point interested readers in the direction of Van der Cruysse's *Siam and the West 1500-1700*, which he also translated. I reviewed that book in HeRB 4 and feel for a number of reasons that it does not adequately take the place of a fuller scholarly treatment of the background and significance of *History of Siam in 1688*. If nothing else, the reader may not even have access to Van der Cruysse. Be that as it may, this is still an important book and yet another welcome addition to the published primary sources available for the study of Thai church history.