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Lead Essay

Theology in a Thai Operating System



One of the points made in this year's HeRBs is that Protestant theology in Thailand resides in the church more than in books. As a young missionary in Chiang Mai forty year's ago, Dr. Kosuke Koyama discovered northern Thai theology in a variety of informal settings and labeled it "kitchen theology." If one accepts his premise that Thai theology takes place in the life of the church, it becomes clear that the theological medium of the Thai churches includes sermons, prayers, lectures, conversations, discussion groups, and a wide variety of other of informal theological vehicles. Recently, I have had several happy encounters with Thai "theologians," which I would like to share with you here. I am not sure that this brief essay conveys any particular message, other than to highlight the creativity inherent in today's Thai theological operating system.

The first of these encounter with Thai theology jumped out at me in a conversation that I had with a pastor of a church in the CCT 's First District, Chiang Mai-Lamphun during the CCT General Assembly this past October. We had gotten into a discussion on the difference between *chitchai* (soul) and *chitwinnyan* (spirit) in the Western tripartite division of the human person into body, soul, and spirit. The pastor observed that the word *chitchai*, which is sometimes somewhat awkwardly used to translate the concept of soul in the Western schema, actually refers to a part of the human body (*rangkai*) and not to a separate entity apart from the body. The term is not equivalent to the Western idea of the soul at all. The *chitchai* is, rather, that part of the human psyche that concerns itself with the search for happiness (*kwamsuk*). This pastor sees the *chitchai* in negative terms as being the part of us that leads people into immoral behavior. He describes the *chitwinnyan*, on the other hand, as being a separate entity within the human person. He called it a "form" (*rang*), which would distinguish it from the body, which is also a *rang*. The term *chitwinnyan*, thus, encompasses both spirit and soul. He stated that the *chitwinnyan* is that part of us which searches for peace (*santi*). Jesus in his ministry addressed the *chitwinnyan* and not the *chitchai*. Jesus brings us peace in a spiritual sense, not happiness in a worldly sense.

Thai religious thinking generally divides reality into two realms, the profane and the sacred. The local temple and its monks embody this division in clear geo-graphical and personal forms. The temple is sacred space. The monks are sacred persons. So different are they from the mundane world outside the temple that monks are sometimes referred to as the "third sex." I was once told that monks are not "people" (*maichaikhon*), which means that they are not mundane persons (*khon*) who live in the profane world. This pastor, thus, reformatted the tripartite Greek psychology that some Western missionaries still assume in their work in Thailand today into a Thai mode. He turned body, soul, and spirit into body and soul-spirit (or, more simply, body and spirit), where the body is worldly outer space and the soul-spirit is sacred inner space.

This pastor is not a person of any note. He graduated from a Bible school years' ago and does not even have a bachelor's degree in theology. Yet, he ably restates the inherited Western theology

of the Thai church in terms that make sense in his own intellectual and religious context. His neighbors of another faith can understand his theological approach because they share its basic assumptions concerning the makeup of the human person and its relationship to religious thinking. The pastor's treatment of Jesus is particularly striking. He has reformatted Christ, transforming him into a person who speaks to Thai religious sensibilities. Jesus calls (Thai) people away from the profane world. He calls them to a search for peace, which peace can be found only in the realm of the sacred.

A few days after my discussion with the pastor, I shared his views with a younger pastor, a recent seminary graduate of some academic acumen. He greeted my recitation of that earlier conversation with a slight frown. Although he agreed that the *chitchai* is tied to the body, he felt that the first pastor is too negative about it and makes too sharp a distinction between *chitchai* and *chitwinnyan*. He feels that they have more in common than the more senior pastor seemed to think. A third individual, in another follow-up conversation, also disagreed with the pastor's model for the human person. This third person went so far as to state that he simply did not understand the Western three-way split into body, soul, and spirit. He avowed that there are just two states, the physical (*rangkai*) and spiritual (*winnyan*), which form one whole person. The difference is that the body is mortal and the spirit immortal.

Although these follow-up conversations led to no definitive conclusions, we should note that the pastor's views on body, soul, and spirit successfully shifted the dialogue from a Western to a Thai context by reformatting Western theological precepts into a Thai operating system. Where the third person, mentioned above, does not understand the Western distinction between spirit and soul, he did understand the first pastor's distinctions clearly enough to disagree with them.

Some weeks later, I heard a sermon on Genesis 4 (where Cain murders Abel), which put that biblical story firmly into a Thai mode-and, interestingly enough, drew on the concept of *chitchai* in the process. According to the preacher, Cain killed Abel out of jealousy because God rejected Cain's offerings while accepting those of Abel (4:4-5). The perennial question, of course, is, "Why did God reject Cain's offering?" One answer is found in I John 3:12 (TEV), namely, "Because the things he [Cain] did were wrong, but the things his brother did were right." Hebrews 11:4 (TEV) provides a second explanation. The author of Hebrews states, "It was faith that made Abel offer to God a better sacrifice than Cain's." Our northern Thai preacher, a theologically trained pastor, offered a third explanation. God shunned Cain's cereal offerings because Cain's heart (*chitchai*) was unclean (*maisaad*), which meant that he could not offer proper worship to God. His heart did not praise and worship God, as it should. This preacher, also, has reformatted Christian theology into a Thai operating system. He reads his Bible with "Thai eyes." His sermon made immediate sense to his congregation, because they too believe that a clean heart is necessary to faithful worship.

One need not necessarily agree with their conclusions to appreciate the theological creativity of these two pastors. Other Thai Christians find the first one's schema problematic. If we seriously acted on the stated conclusion of the second that only people with pure hearts can worship God, there would be no one left in the pews on Sunday morning. What is important is that both of these Thai local theologians have changed theology's format from the received tradition of the

West into a recognizably Thai form. The debate as to how useable their particular thoughts are can now take place in Thai language and thought world.

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Ban Dok Daeng
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Articles

Religion and Community Formation in Northern Thailand: The Case of Christianity in Nan Province

Kummool Chinawong & Herb Swanson

Introduction

Protestant Christianity established itself permanently in northern Thailand in 1867 when the Rev. Daniel and Sophia McGilvary arrived in Chiang Mai to start what became the "Laos Mission" of the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. It was so named because the northern Thai people were then widely known as the "Laos." People first began converting to Christianity in appreciable numbers in the 1870s and 1880s, and from the very beginning northern Thai Protestants exhibited an inclination to establish separate Christian communities and social systems. They attended missionary schools, received medical care from missionary doctors and hospitals, and often found their employment in missionary institutions. This social separation frequently extended to their communal relationships as well. Christians established their own villages or lived in distinct geographical areas of larger villages, in both cases living in separate communities.¹ Conversion to Christianity appears to have marginalized the converts socially, which in turn led Christians to form new, separate communities based on their religious identity.

These observations raise a number of questions. To what degree have northern Thai Protestants actually tended towards communal separatism? Have such tendencies, if they exist, persisted over time? What are their causes and meaning? The historical experience of the eighteen Protestant congregations of the Church of Christ in Thailand's (CCT) Fifth District, Nan Province, suggests that northern Thai Protestants have indeed tended to create and maintain separate communities and that religious identity has comprised a key element in this process.

Nan Province offers a useful "laboratory" for investigating the nature and meaning of Christian communal separatism. Dating back to the fourteenth century, Muang Nan has led a relatively isolated existence, which has slowed the impact of "outside" learning and social trends in comparison with the other regional centers of northern Thailand.² Nan, thus, has retained more of traditional northern Thai culture than is found in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, or even in Phrae. It provides a good place, for this reason, to study historical northern Thai Protestantism. The first Presbyterian missionaries to live permanently in the city arrived in Nan in 1895, and to this day there has been no other significant Christian presence among the ethnic northern Thai of the

province.³³ Missionary and northern Thai church work is relatively well documented, and the eighteen congregations that comprise the Fifth District offer a diverse but not overly large sample for the study of the formation of Christian communities. Those congregations number 2,213 communicant members belonging to eleven churches and seven other organized groups, termed *muad*, which are considered too small or weak to be churches.

These eighteen congregations tend to live apart from their local societies and to congregate within their own communities. This tendency, as will be seen, varies from Christian community to community. In some, separation is an accomplished fact, while in others separation is an ongoing process, gradual and apparent only over time. In a few cases, the tendency towards communal separation is obscured by the decline of the Christian communities themselves, church members who belong to another ethnic group, or other local factors. When viewed together, however, the historical experience and contemporary situation of the Christian in Nan Province show that over the last nearly one hundred years they have tended to form their own geographically separate communities and that religious issues and identity have been central to that process.

Surveying the Churches of District Five, Nan Province

The eighteen churches and *muad* of the Fifth District, Nan exhibit four communal configurations. First, three groups live almost fully *integrated* with their non-Christian neighbors. No clear pattern of physical separation exists. Second, seven Christian communities demonstrate a *mixed* configuration, meaning that the Christians tend to live together in a part of the village, but a significant number of them still live interspersed among their neighbors. Communal boundaries exist but are indistinct. Third, the Christians in three villages live in a "Christian quarter," a distinct part of the village pointing to *communal separation within a village*. The geographical boundaries between the Christians and the rest of the village are clear, although some mixing does occur across that boundary. Finally, five Christian communities live in *total separation* from non-Christians; they live, that is, in separate villages, in which few or no non-Christians reside.

These four configurations are not static, however, and the Nan Christian communities appear to have passed through three broad stages on their journey from integration to separation. This periodization, it should be understood, is somewhat tentative and works better for some congregations than for others. It is offered here with the realization that some periodization is required for the study of the formation of Christian religious communities, and this one seems to work best (although not perfectly). In the *initial stage*, incipient Christian congregations continued to live among their neighbors much as they did before their members converted, but they no longer participated in the religious life of the community. They were a distinct new group in their village. During the *formative stage*, the Christians ceased to be simply a separate group and began to form their own geographical communities. They tended to move into close physical proximity to each other, and they usually built their own church building, which frequently acted as magnets drawing them together. The *continuing stage* marks a longer historical era leading down to the present during which time Christian communities persisted or failed to persist.

The four configurations of Christian communal life in Nan Province provide a convenient framework for a brief survey of the formation of Christian communities in the province. The following survey is based upon 220 interviews conducted in each congregation by the authors and their colleague, Prasit Pongudom, from September 1990 through November 1992.

FIRST CATEGORY

This category includes three *muad*, or organized Christian groups that are not churches, in which the Christians live fully integrated among their neighbors. The first of these is *muad Wang Bao*, located in Ban Sali, Tambon Phutabat, Amphur Chiang Klang. This congregation traces its history back to before 1900, and of all of the ethnic northern Thai churches and *muad* in the Fifth District it alone has shown no tendency at all towards communal separatism. It has never been a large group, has lacked strong leadership, and such evidence as we have from its early history suggests that its members were largely nominal in their adherence to Christianity. The congregation entirely disappeared for some fifteen years after 1941 because of persecution suffered during World War II. This group has never had its own building, which as we will see is one important factor in bringing Christians together geographically. During the 1970s, furthermore, a severe internal feud took place, which is the primary cause for its small size today. The Wang Bao group, in sum, has lacked the "strength of community" in terms the size, leadership, stability, and religious commitment necessary for communal separation to take place.

The Christian group comprising *muad Phornthara*, located at Ban Wang Wa, Tambon Pua, Amphur Chiang Klang, originated in about 1920 from an extended family that resided in the forest where they had fled after being accused of being *phika*.⁴ After conversion, the new Christian group continued to live in a separate village until after World War II when they moved to a nearby site closer to a Buddhist village. The group has since dwindled in size because of migration into Nan City and internal feuding, and today only five households in Ban Wang Wa have Christians living in them. Historically, the Phornthara congregation has moved thus in a reverse course from other Christian groups. It began as a distinct community in its initial stage, went through "de-formation" in what should have been its formative stage, and now lives integrated with its neighbors. The reasons seem clear. This congregation suffered severe persecution during World War II, which reduced its membership and weakened its life markedly. Migration out of the community plus internal dissension has added to the process of congregational decay.

The third congregation in this category is the one a *Nam Mong*, located in Ban Nam Mong, Tambon Phato, Amphur Thawangpha. Although the first Christian in this village, Nai Pun from Wang Bao, moved to Ban Nam Mong some time before 1944, a congregation did not emerge there until the 1950s after a large number of Kamu tribal people migrated to the area. Contacts with evangelists from both the Fifth District and from a Protestant mission not connected with the CCT led to the formation of an almost entirely Kamu congregation. From its beginnings in the 1950s down to the present, this Kamu Christian group has shown no inclination whatsoever to form a geographically separate community of its own.

On the face of it, in sum, the historical experience and present situation of these three congregations contradicts the thesis of this paper, namely that religion plays an important role in

the geography of community formation in Nan Province. As has been seen in these brief sketches, however, each of them is an anomaly that does not contradict that thesis. The Wang Bao congregation has simply been too weak throughout its history to function as a separate community. The *muad* at Phornthara, in fact, began its life as a geographically separate community and remained so for several decades until persecution, defections, and migration made it impossible for the dwindling group to remain separate from its neighbors. It can be argued that the history of the Nam Mong congregation tends to substantiate the thesis presented here. It is not ethnically northern Thai, and as will be seen in the second category, below, the Kamu members of another congregation in District Five also show no inclination towards separation. Where Christians now live fully integrated geographically with their larger communities, in sum, they do so because they are too small to maintain a separate life or because they are not ethnically northern Thai.

Table I
Summary of Community Formation Among Category One Congregations

Church	Founded	Membrs	Initial Stage	Formtivistage	Continuing Stage
Wang Bao	c. 1909	6	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated
Phornthara	c. 1920	10	Separate	Separate	Integrated
Ban Nam Mong	c. 1944	160	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated

SECOND CATEGORY

This category includes seven congregations, whose members tend to live close to other church members without establishing clear boundaries between themselves and their non-Christian neighbors. The first church in this category, the *Phrasithiphorn Church* located in Nan City, is the oldest and still (just barely) the largest church in the Fifth District. It has shown some tendency towards geographical separation historically, primarily because of its close association with the Laos Mission's Nan Station, which was located in the city and functioned as the institutional center of Christian life in Nan Province during the missionary era. The station's two schools, hospital, and several residences attracted a significant number of Christians seeking employment; they and other Christians built homes in the vicinity of the Nan Station's compounds. This church's urban location, however, allowed other Christians to live at a distance from the Christian "cluster" and to find employment elsewhere. By the same token, non-Christians have taken up residence close to the Christian center so that no pronounced pattern of separation emerged.

In Category I, we saw that when a congregation has a large ethnic Kamu tribal membership there is no tendency towards Christian communal separation. The case of the Phrasithiphorn Church indicates that an urban location also reduces the likelihood that Christians will reside together even though they are ethnically northern Thai. Such tendency towards Christian separation as developed in the city of Nan, furthermore, represented a reaction to the presence of the mission station and its opportunities for employment.

The second church in this category, the *Khunanukhun Church*, is located in Ban Chiang Eun, Tambon Suak, Amphur Muang. From its inception in 1914, the "Ban Som Church," as it is still known, grew gradually partly through further proselytization and partly through natural increase. Its members now live in two closely situated villages. In the larger village, Ban Chiang Eun, the Christians tend to live around the church building but without a sharp separation between Christian and Buddhist households. This tendency seems to have begun after World War II, although the historical record is not clear. In the second village, Ban Don Udom, there is no separation. The Ban Som Church, in terms of community formation, can also be "the exception that proves the rule." First, church members evidently failed to move into the vicinity of their church building in any numbers for some thirty years or more. Second, even though the Ban Som Church experienced persecution in the years immediately after 1914, that persecution did not cause its members to seek communal separation as a response to anti-Christian sentiments. Third, this congregation, unlike the small, peripheral Wang Bao congregation, has been historically the strongest of District Five's rural churches and has provided a number of important Christian leaders at the district level.

The third Christian community in this second grouping is the *Kunthathipkittikhun Church*, located in Ban Mai Sunthisuk, Tambon Nam Kaen, Amphur Muang. It was initially formed as a very small, scattered group sometime before 1919. The first family converted because six of its thirteen children had died of illnesses believed to be caused by spirits, and the family converted to Christianity to escape the power of those spirits. The congregation grew only slowly and remained in the initial stage of community formation, that is integrated with its neighbors, until it built a church building in 1972. At that time, it entered the formative stage as several families moved to the vicinity of the new church building. That area of Ban Mai Sunthisuk was soon identified as the Christian section of the village. The movement to locations near the church building has not led to a separate community, however; six Christian households are today located near the church building, while seven remain scattered throughout the rest of the village.

The Christian community at *muad Pa Phae*, located in Ban Pa Phae, Tambon Maeking, Amphur Wiang Sa, was first established in 1947 when a family from the Ban Som Church moved into this previously entirely Buddhist village. Their reasons for moving were economic, and as a small Christian group formed, they lived mixed with their Buddhist neighbors. The congregation grew not only from natural increase but also from the migration of additional Christian families from Ban Som and Ban Samai. Since this muad built its church building in 1967, however, the Christians have tended to congregate at the end of the village where the church building is located. This tendency has not resulted in sharp boundaries between Christian and Buddhist sections of the village.

The *Silaphet Church*, located in Ban Donchai, Tambon Silaphet, Amphur Pua, originated from two lepers from Tambon Yom, who became Christians in the early 1930s while receiving treatment at the Presbyterian Mission's McKean Leprosarium in Chiang Mai. They subsequently returned to their homes and participated in a leper group, which formed to give injections to each other. In 1948, District Five evangelists visited Tambon Yom, and the families of these two men converted. Within five years, they moved for economic reasons to Ban Donchai, which at that time was still an uninhabited forest said to be infested with spirits. The Christians believed that

the spirits, however real, had no power over them, moved in, and built a church building. For some time thereafter, the small congregation lived as a separate community until eventually non-Christians moved to nearby locations. Even then, the congregation lived in a distinct area of Ban Donchai until squabbles and disputes among the Christians themselves led a number of Christian families to disassociate themselves from the church. Today, as a result, the Christians live much more interspersed with their non-Christian neighbors than previously. The Silaphet Church's experience parallels thus that of the Phornthara group in that it too has moved in the reverse direction in terms of community formation compared to other Christian congregations. After a brief initial stage, it did form a separate community, but since that time it has slowly regressed through a period of being a separate community within a larger village to become, finally, a loosely clustered group in that village.

The Christian congregation at *Hatplahaeng* located at Ban Hatplahaeng, Tam bon Bo, Amphur Muang, presents a unique situation. Like the *muad* at Ban Nam Mong, this group began as a Kamu Christian congregation, begun through the agency of local northern Thai evangelists from the nearby Thamaphorn Church. As the number of Kamu Christians at Hatplahaeng increased, the congregation showed no inclination towards separation until 1980, when ten northern Thai Christian families from the Thamaphorn Church and from *muad* Phornthara moved into the village. All ten of these families built homes close to the church building so that while the Kamu members continue to live among their animist neighbors to this day, the northern Thai Christians live separate from the rest of the village. It can be argued that the northern Thais chose to live close to each other for ethnic reasons, irrespective of religion. While that motivation has to be taken into account, it does not explain why the Christians chose to locate themselves close to the congregation's church building. Faced with the choice of several locations in and near the village in which to settle, these northern Thai families deliberately chose to live together near a church building.

The final congregation in this category is the *muad* at *Ban Khon*, located at Ban Khon, Tambon Sriphumi, Amphur Tawangpha, which first emerged in 1972 when Nang Bua Kham Khambun of Ban Sopkap was accused of being *phi kha*. She had Christian relatives who returned to Sopkap and conducted evangelism with the result that Nang Bua Kham and another family converted to Christianity. Eventually, a few other families followed suit. These converts originally were located in two villages and lived scattered among their Buddhist neighbors. Since 1974, however, they have all moved into close proximity of their small chapel, partly as a matter of convenience in attending worship services, partly to be together, and partly because they still feel some underlying tensions with their neighbors because of their "history" of being *phi ka*. Since they number only five households, it is not possible for them to further separate themselves from their larger community.

This second category, in sum, includes seven Christian congregations in which Christians show a tendency to live in close proximity to their church building and a historical inclination towards separation. In a sense, however, it is difficult to treat these communities as a group even though they superficially appear as such. As we have seen, the Phrasithiphorn church is unique in two ways, namely as the Fifth District's only urban congregation and because of its close ties with the mission station. The ethnic northern Thai at Hatplahaeng actually fit into the third category

of Christian groups that live separately within a larger village. And the Silaphet church is in this second category only because internal dissension has led to the decay of the community. But for its membership losses, it too would be in the third category. In addition, the Ban Khon Christians moved from living totally integrated with their neighbors to being generally clustered around their chapel, beginning only two years after conversion. They showed an immediate tendency towards separation, which is limited only by their small size. Of these four, the last three have been more inclined towards communal separation than their inclusion in this category might suggest.

The other three Christian congregations in this category, however, have moved towards communal separation only slowly. The Kunthathipkittikhun Church grew slowly over the years with several members migrating to the city for education and never returning. Once it was able to build a church building, however, the congregation did show a tendency towards separation. The community at Ban Pa Phae demonstrates a similar pattern. The Ban Som Church, we note again, stands out as something of an anomaly. It grew relatively rapidly in terms of numbers and for decades was the strongest, most well led of the rural churches in Nan Province. Although it suffered some persecution, it has moved towards separation in only a desultory manner, and its satellite group at Ban Don Udom remains integrated into its larger community. Ban Som poses an important question mark, which serves to remind us that the Christian tendency towards communal separation is exactly that, a tendency. Local conditions, factors, and personalities play important roles, and it is not always clear- Igiven the difficulty in recovering the histories of these Christian communities-how these various factors influenced the emergence of separate Christian communities.

It is clear, in any event, that the presence of a church building is an important factor in the creation of geographically distinct Christian communities. They act as magnets drawing Christians into proximity to each other, and whether stated as explicitly as in the case at Ban Khon or not, the Christians tend to identify with their church building to the extent that they want to live close to it and form a Christian community around it. In five of the seven cases considered under this second category, Christians did not form identifiable geographical communities until after they had a building. There is, in short, a dynamic relationship between these northern Thai Christians and their worship centers that reminds one of the old chicken-and-egg problem in which it is impossible to say whether buildings create distinct, separate communities or the desire to be such a community "causes" the buildings.

Table II, below, which summarizes this second category of churches and *muad*, provides some evidence for the general thesis of this paper that northern Thai Christians tend to establish separate geographical communities based on their religious identity. The members of all seven Christian groups in this category initially lived fully integrated into their larger Buddhist communities. All of them now have some members who live in a "Christian cluster," usually near the church building. This still hesitant tendency to separation will become more pronounced in the third category of congregations.

Table II
Summary of Community Formation Among Category Two Congregations

Church	Founded	Membrs	Initial Stage	FormtiveStage	Continuing Stage
Phrasithiphorn	1896	355	Integrated	Mixed	Mixed
Khunanukhun	1914	347	Integrated	Integrated	Mixed
Kanthathip	c. 1919	60	Integrated	Integrated	Mixed
Ban Pa Phae	1947	54	Integrated	Integrated	Mixed
Silaphet	1948	73	Integrated	Separate	Mixed
Hatplahaeng	1961	69	Integrated	Integrated	Mixed
Ban Khon	1974	20	Integrated	Mixed	Mixed

THIRD CATEGORY

The three churches included in this category take us one step further down the continuum from integration to separation. All three congregations existed in exclusively Christian villages for a long period, but in more recent years, non-Christians have moved into the villages. The Christians, however, continue to live in clearly delineated, separate parts of their community.

The first church in this category is the *Thamaphorn Church*, located in Ban Wang Mo, Tambon Bo, Amphur Muang. The congregation was founded in about 1908 and originally was located in the village of Ban Sopkap. The small Sopkap group had no church building, and as best as can be judged now did not attempt to separate itself from the larger community until 1939 when some members of the congregation moved to what is now Ban Wang Mo. Eventually, most of the Sopkap Christians moved to the new location, and natural increase led to a larger Christian community. The Christians, who had moved for economic reasons, lived apart for some time until Buddhists began to move into the area. Ban Wang Mo is now divided into two distinct geographical sections, the Christians living in the southern, original end and the Buddhists living in the northern section. There is very little overlap between the two portions of the community.

The *Sa Wathanatham Church*, located in Ban Don Thaen, Tambon Klang Wiang, Amphur Wiang Sa, originated in 1909, when the family of Nan Ariya Chareonphong converted to the Christian faith. This family, before their conversion, lived in isolation because they had been accused of being *phi ka*. With the addition of other converts, the group built a church building in 1913 on land acquired by the mission, and most of the families involved moved to the location of the church building. At least one family, however, did not move. Since World War II, Buddhist families have moved into the vicinity of the church building, and nearly all of the Christians living close by have either left Christianity or moved elsewhere. Only two Christian households are now located near the church building. Most of the rest of the membership, significantly, now live close together some two kilometers away in the village of Ban Tondu.

The third congregation in this category is the *Monotham Church*, located at Ban Samai, Tambon Nasao, Amphur Muang, which began in 1911 with the conversion of Nan No, who became the patriarch of this Christian community. The congregation, originally, had no church building. In about 1940, the members moved to a location adjacent to but separate from the original village, which location is now called either *ban mai* (New Village) or *ban bo* (Church Village). The church built its own building at that location. In more recent times, Buddhist families have once again moved into the same area as the Christians so that the village of Ban Samai is a religiously

mixed community. The Christians continue to live in a distinct part of the village, however, and there is almost no inter-mingling of Christian and Buddhist houses.

The experiences of both the Ban Sopkap and the Ban Samai congregations reinforces the argument that religion in and of itself has been an important factor in the formation of Christian community in Nan Province. In both cases, members of these congregations migrated to new land for economic reasons, but the pattern of that migration indicates that religious identity played an important part in the formation of the subsequent villages they established. In the case of the Ban Sopkap migration, elderly members of the Thamaphorn Church remember that a few Christians living in largely non-Christian households did not move with the Christians to their new location. Even the names of those who stayed have passed from the living memory of the church. Non-Christians, meanwhile, who migrated with the Christians to Ban Wang Mo all converted to Christianity. At Ban Samai, Christian families from Ban Som, who were not relatives of the Ban Samai people, migrated to the new Christian village to live with the Ban Samai Christians. Non-Christian relatives of the Ban Samai Christians, however, did not move with the Christians to their new location. In both of these cases, the formation of a new Christian village involved a process of religious communal separation by which those Buddhists who moved with the Christians converted (Ban Samai) and those Christians who chose to stay with their Buddhist neighbors and relatives (Ban Sopkap) failed to sustain a Christian community.

Religious identity also played an important role at Wiang Sa. The Christian community there first emerged because of religious persecution of those accused of being *phi ka*, so that the community existed for religious reasons from the beginning. Later, this congregation relocated to live close to their church building, again acting as an identifiable Christian group. Even the decay of the core Christian community at the church building more lately has not led to the reintegration of the Christians into the larger community. They have for the most part simply moved together to a nearby locale.

Table III
Summary of Community Formation Among Category Three Congregations

Church	Founded	Members	Initial Stage	Formative Stage	Continuing Stage
Thamaphorn	1908	218	Integrated	Separate	Quarter
Sa Wathanatham	1910	115	Separate	Separate	Quarter
Manotham	c. 1911	63	Integrated	Separate	Quarter

FOURTH CATEGORY

This category includes congregations that originally lived among their Buddhist neighbors but then, in the formative stage, removed themselves to live in separate Christian villages, which have remained separate down to the present. The five churches contained in this category provide the clearest instances of Christian communal separatism in Nan Province.

The Phornsawan Church, located at Ban Mai Huai Yang, Tambon Sathan, Amphur Pua, started in 1919 as a small group of converts living in the village of Ban San, near Muang Pua. A spirit

medium (*thi nang phi*) living at Ban San had grown dissatisfied with the burdens her position placed on her, and she and several relatives converted after a visit by Presbyterian missionaries. During the initial stage of congregational formation, they continued to live in their original homes; some of their neighbors, however, expressed strong displeasure and accused these converts of abandoning the religion of their parents and taking up the "Westerners' religion" (*sasana khong farang*). They were subjected to name-calling, and bricks were thrown at their homes while they were holding Christian worship services. The converts felt unwanted, and when they reported these events to their missionary mentor, the Rev. Dr. Hugh Taylor, he advised them to move out of Ban San. He purchased land for them a short distance away, at a location they named Ban Choko, and by 1924 all of the Ban San converts had moved to this new village. Beginning in the early 1950s, the Christians at Ban Choko began to move to a nearby location where they had better access to water and could obtain larger tracts of land, and by the 1970s, the original site was entirely abandoned. While a few Buddhists now live in Ban Mai Huai Yang, it remains a predominantly Christian community.

The second Christian village in this category is the congregation at *Ban Wang Haen*, located in Tambon Sathan, Amphur Pua. This community also has its origins in the Ban San convert community. At some point just before 1923, yet another family converted at Ban San, and when they also experienced their Buddhist neighbors' disapproval for converting, they removed themselves to their mountain garden plot, located at Wang Haen. Other converts followed, until eventually six Christian families had formed a Christian village at Ban Wang Haen. By the late 1940s, further conversions and natural increase had led to a Christian community numbering over thirty households. Ban Wang Haen, however, is an isolated location with only a limited amount of land, and beginning in 1957 families from Ban Wang Haen began to move to new land located closer to the main northern road in Nan Province. The unrest caused by the communist insurgency in the area also contributed to the desire of the Wang Haen Christians to move to a less isolated location. By 1963, Ban Wang Haen was completely deserted, only to be reoccupied in 1973 by a few of its original inhabitants. It presently contains twelve households, all Christians. [The village was again abandoned in the late 1990s, and has not been reoccupied as of 2002.]

The migration of several families from Ban Wang Haen that began in 1957 led to the formation of yet another Christian congregation, the *Daen Damrongtham Church*, located at Ban Daen Phana, Tambon Chaiwathana, Amphur Pua. As mentioned above, the Christians left Wang Haen because of its lack of land, isolation, and the Communist insurgency. The new location at Ban Daen Phana was well situated and unoccupied because the local people believed it was spirit-infested. The first Christian "pioneers" who cleared this land tell stories about dreams they had, which they interpret as being threats made against them by the spirits. They relate how they overcame these threats by praying to the greater spirit, Jesus. The village now numbers some eighty households, all Christian, and the local government school has a cross hanging at its front steps in place of the usual Buddha image. All of the students and one of the four teachers are Christians.

In all three of these villages, religion has played a central role in community formation. The Phornsawan church and the group at Ban Wang Haen both resulted from religious pressure put on

Christians at Ban San by some of their neighbors. As for the large community at Ban Dan Phana, even though it is a spin-off from Ban Wang Haen and the people migrated for economic and political reasons, once again religion played its role in that those who were not Christians would not move onto the land occupied by the Christians because it was spirit-infested. The village identity at Ban Daen Phana is Christian, and it is understood that anyone marrying into the village will convert to Christianity.

The *Phantasanya Church*, located at Ban Nanikhom, Tambon Yom, Amphur Thawangpha, comprises the fourth Christian village in Nan Province. The church had its beginnings in 1948 from the same group of lepers in Tambon Yom, which led to the founding of the Silaphet Church. That leper group grew out of a group of individuals from several villages who met regularly to give each other shots and to distribute medicine received from the McKean Leprosarium. Some of the group had received treatment at McKean and converted to Christianity there, and when they returned to Nan, they convinced others in the group to also convert. The fact that they were socially ostracized finally caused most of them to migrate as a group to land purchased for them by McKean, where they formed a leper colony partially supported from the leprosarium. This colony remained entirely Christian as new lepers invariably converted to Christianity after they moved into the colony. The church grew primarily through natural increase, however, and today there are only a few leper members left. The village remains entirely Christian.

The fifth Christian village in Nan Province contains the *Prasattham Church*, located at Ban Faikeo, Tambon Faikeo, Amphur Muang. This community originated as an out-cast leper village containing fewer than twenty inhabitants and was entirely converted to Christianity in about 1937 by a leper evangelist from the McKean Leprosarium. The community eventually became a government leper colony and successfully converted to Christianity all lepers who came to live there. There are now two churches in the community, representing two different Protestant groups. The District Five church is the smaller of the two. Testimony from leper Christians in both the Phantasanya and Prasattham Churches indicates that religion has played an important part in community formation and the maintenance of community identity down to the present. Their home villages and even families rejected them because of their disease and because of the belief that leprosy is caused by a lack of merit. It was their *kam* (karma) that caused them to have leprosy. They felt religiously rejected because they were prevented from even participating in merit-making ceremonies, and in most cases they were exiled from their homes.

Table IV
Summary of Community Formation Among Category Four Congregations

Church	Founded	Members	Initial Stage	Formative Stage	Continuing Stage
Phornsawan	1919	86	Integrated	Separate	Separate
Wang Haen	c. 1923	24	Integrated	Separate	Separate
Prasattham	c. 1937	152	Integrated	Separate	Separate
Phantasanya	1948	62	Integrated	Separate	Separate
D. Damrongtham	1957	339	Separate	Separate	Separate

SUMMARY

Table V summarizes the experience of these eighteen Christian groups and communities over the course of the three periods of the founding, initial movement, and long-term development of each group.

Table V
Trends in Christian Communal Separation in Nan Province

Category	Initial Stage	Formative Stage	Continuing Stage
Integrated	15	6	3
Mixed	0	2	7
Separate Quarter	0	0	3
Totally Separate	3	10	5

The figures contained in Table V reflect both the general trend of Christian communities to live apart and a more recent trend towards more complex relations with the larger society. In the beginning, most Christian converts lived among their neighbors and former co-religionists. Within periods varying from one or two years up to several decades, depending on local factors such as size, land availability, and the presence of a church building, the Christians tended to establish separate communities. If we factor out the city church and the Kamu congregations as being special cases, ten of the remaining Christian communities either remained separate (3 cases) or found Christian villages of their own (7 cases). Another Christian group, the one at Ban Khon, moved rapidly towards separation. Only four of the fifteen congregations did not enter a clearly defined formative stage that involved separation from their Buddhist neighbors.

In later years, the Christians have tended to preserve their separate communities, although "encroachment" by Buddhist neighbors and the decay of Christian communities themselves has, in a number of cases, led to a more complex picture. Even so, the number of Christian groups fully integrated into society has continued to decline and today numbers only three, two having ten or less adult members each and the third being a Kamu congregation. Eight of the remaining fifteen congregations remain sharply separated from their larger society, while the other seven demonstrate a less clear tendency towards separation. Included in these seven is the Silaphet Church, which has moved towards reintegration primarily because of a loss of former members living near the church building. Also included is the large Kamu Hatplahaeng group, where the northern Thai members live clustered together. If we, again, factor out the city church, only the same four rural groups mentioned at the end of the last paragraph remain. They have shown the least tendency towards separation, the strongest inclination to remain at least partially integrated with their Buddhist neighbors. Even in these cases, the general trend, admittedly weak, has been towards communal separatism.

Commentary

This survey of Christian communal separatism in Nan Province identifies three religious factors that "trigger" the separation of religious groups geographically, as well as socially. *First,*

persecution has encouraged separation to take place. That persecution is of three distinct groups, namely persecution of "witches" (phi ka), lepers, and Christian converts and led to the establishment of separate Christian villages at Ban Nongha (*muad* Phornthara), the Wiang Sa Church, the Phornsawan Church, the Ban Wang Haen group, the Ban Faikeo group, and the Phatasanya Church. The Daen Phana Church, yet another separate Christian village, is an offspring of the Phornsawan Church. *Second*, migration by Christians to prime farmland that was available because local people believed the land was infested by evil spirits. The Silaphet and Daen Phana churches both established separate Christian villages because their members' changed belief systems allowed them to occupy land other people were afraid to live on. *Third*, the building of church buildings frequently accompanied or, perhaps, even triggered movement towards communal separation at Ban Khon, Ban Som, the Khanthathip Church, Ban Pa Phae, Ban Hatplahaeng, and the Wiang Sa Church.

Conversion to Christianity, in sum, caused a transformation in social relationships, which in turn generated a change in communal identity. Both Christians and their Buddhist neighbors at various times and in various ways expressed a feeling that conversion destroyed that unity. Christians expressed this feeling in their tendency to live apart, and their neighbors expressed it by putting social pressure on the Christians. The act of conversion to Christianity provoked a reaction on the part of the converts' Buddhist neighbors. It was not the simple act of conversion, however, that in and of itself caused the reaction, but rather the manner in which Christians refused to take part in their village's religious life, which their community took as an affront and a threat. The tensions that arose had to do both with the converts' conceptions of what it meant to be a Christian and their neighbors' conception of what it meant to live together in a community.

The Presbyterian missionaries who worked in Nan Province played an important part in defining for their converts what it meant to be a Christian. They taught a dualistic ideology, which divided all human reality into two distinct, separate spheres of good and evil, God and Satan, and judged northern Thai society to be essentially evil because of its dependence on the "heathen superstition and idolatry" of traditional religion. They demanded that Christian converts divorce themselves from indigenous systems of religious practices. The missionaries, in effect, sought to create a separate Protestant social system, which would be the seed for eventually achieving the total Christianization of Nan Province.⁵

The missionaries functioned as patrons, teachers, and role models for the Christian groups they founded, and one still finds much of their thinking imbedded in northern Thai Christian self-understanding. Older Christians in Nan Province, who grew up in the missionary era, allude to the old "rule" by which they all lived, namely "*laeotae phokhruwa*," meaning, literally, "whatever the Father Teacher says." The phrase reflects the willingness of Christian clients to act and think as their missionary patrons wished them to act and think. Missionary teaching about the converts' relationship to their former religion, thus, defined important elements of what it meant to be a Christian. As one of the Fifth District's oldest members stated it, being a Christian meant being on the Christian "rolls," not going to the temple, not engaging in spirit propitiation, and praying to God. He placed particular emphasis, as did the missionaries, on not having anything to do with phi as central to being a Christian.⁶ Christians throughout the province still avow that it is a sin (bap) for Christians to take part in spirit propitiation or merit-

making activities, and some will state that it is wrong for them even to enter temple grounds. The tendency towards communal separation lies inherent in these ideas. When asked why his congregation had moved from its original location at Ban San to establish a separate village at Ban Choko, pholuang [Grandfather] Chom, the oldest living member of the Phornsawan Church, averred in his clipped, direct idiom, "*khonkhityukapkhith khonkhityupokhonnok manbamo*," meaning that. "Christians should live with Christians. It is wrong (inappropriate) for Christians to live among "outsiders."⁷ Not all Christian groups acted on this explicit demand for separation, but the majority did, and Christians nearly everywhere acted on the impulse behind the words.

It must be said, however, that the converts' tendency towards separation involved much more than merely acting according to the teachings of their missionary patrons. Some of their neighbors reacted in negative ways when the converts ceased attending temple activities, propitiating the spirits, giving proper deference to monks, and paying the respect expected of all members of the community to the religion of their parents and ancestors. Christians tell vivid stories of numerous instances when their neighbors engaged in name-calling, disturbed Christian worship services and evangelistic meetings, taunted Christians with the name of Jesus, and even excluded them from using the village wells or borrowing communal possessions from the temple. Christians in their 30s and 40s remember being teased and socially excluded at school because of their religion, and every Christian community has its stories, usually bracketed with the comment that "these things" do not happen any more. During World War II, in particular, Christians suffered overt, at times harsh persecution. Several were jailed, churches and Christian institutions were closed, public worship was forbidden throughout the province, and missionary property was seized. Christian civil servants had to renounce their religion or lose their positions. Elderly Christians sometimes express bitter feelings about their treatment at the hand of government officials and even their own neighbors during the War. The appearance of Christianity in a village, thus, disrupted social relationships to the point that Buddhists and Christians more often than not found it better to live apart from each other. At times, the pressure towards separation was intense, such as Ban San, which gave rise to three Christian villages. In other cases, particularly at Ban Som, physical separation has taken place only gradually and incompletely.

Pho Chom's injunction that Christians should live with Christians not only expressed missionary teachings, but it also articulated the northern Thai perception that a village's peace, harmony, and prosperity depended upon religious unity. Villagers believed that one should not leave off from the religion of their parents, and they described their religious faith as being *truihitpohmae*, that is according to father and mother. Those who failed to follow traditional beliefs and practices traditional ceremonies for any reason were condemned as *khud*, meaning they had done something wrong and "ugly" (*singthimaidi maingam*). Those who thus betrayed the faith of their fathers and mothers would necessarily experience decline and failure in their lives.⁸

Animistic beliefs, rites, and practices formed an important element in those traditional beliefs. The *phi* (spirits) gave meaning and order to daily life, both in families and in the villages, whatever the task or context in which people were involved. Thus, for example, villagers held that worshipping the *phi* of their ancestors (*phipuya*) provided a sense of secure peacefulness and happiness in family life. In the event of a marriage, a "house moving," building a new house, or

any other event in the life of the family, the family must inform and involve the spirits in order to assure the success of the enterprise in question. The spirits provided a secure context for daily life, which unified both families and villages through shared beliefs and rites, a unity that extended into the past as well as the present. People believed that through the spirits they maintained relationships with those who had died. Village people, indeed, encountered *phi* in every aspect of daily life and in every geographical area of their communities and fields. The spirits inhabited their homes, their fields, and the streams and forests that surrounded the community.⁹

The propitiation of these spirits was not merely a matter of preference. The *phi* could be dangerous if not dealt with according to the proper forms and rituals, and angry spirits had a variety of ways for expressing their displeasure. They often possessed people, so it was said, and "drank their blood," causing the possessed to take on a sallow, yellowish complexion. The *phi* could also disturb people's dreams, cause illnesses, disasters, and death. People especially feared the spirits of those killed in an accident or by murder. The failure, thus, to attend to the propitiation of the spirits could have disastrous consequences, for an individual, his or her family, and the entire village, since the activities of angered spirits affected more than just the person or persons directly involved. In other situations, family and clan spirits punished improper or immoral behavior.¹⁰ The spirit world, in short, enforced village unity by making personal and family relationships with the *phi* a matter of concern for the whole community. The community functioned best when the members of each extended family maintained regular and generally friendly relations with the spirits of their ancestors through the ritual activities of the family. These were largely conducted by older women, although as Davis points out for Nan, men could conduct those rituals as well.¹¹ Families and villages had a religious unity based on shared family and community spirits, which unity provided meaning in life through rituals and beliefs. Northern Thai animism gave people a clear sense of who they were in relationship to their families and communities, and it provided stability to communal relationships.

Even such seemingly personal matters as merit-making (*kanthambun*) have communal significance. Ingersoll observes that the "beliefs and practices of merit" are important to the formation and identity of Thai village life, and he argues that while making merit is a highly individual matter, people "acquire and possess merit entirely in association with other people." Indeed, they increase their own merit when they acquire it socially and provide others opportunities to join in merit-making activities so that an interdependent relationship exists between those who want to make merit. Merit-making activity also has a reflexive influence on the life of the whole village, making it a better, happier place to live. The prosperity, unity, peace, and happiness of a village also directly depends upon the willingness of its people to make merit. The communal solidarity villagers experience in merit-making, furthermore, extends both backwards and forwards in time because it is tied to one's ancestors and descendants, one's own previous and future lives, those one has known and will know.¹²

Taken together, the northern Thai villagers' regard for the "faith of their fathers and mothers," concern for spirit propitiation, and valuation of merit making expressed core elements of their communal identity. To break that faith, cease that propitiation, and leave off from that merit making threatened the villagers' shared sense of unity, peace, prosperity, and happiness in living

together. Missionary Protestantism, in contrast, taught its converts that as Christians they had to do these very things, acts which were most likely to incur the displeasure of their neighbors. Conversion to Christianity, thus, destroyed the core social bonds of traditional beliefs, spirit propitiation, and merit making and created a new set of relationships between the Christians and their neighbors. It is in this new relationship between the Christians and their neighbors that we see the significance of religion for the formation of community in northern Thailand. Christians no longer looked to the *wat* (temple complex) as the center of the village. They no longer met their neighbors to engage in all of the activities, which the villagers did there together. They treated the temple, instead, as if it was alien and even hostile territory. Christians no longer depended on participation in the village's religious life for their own well being nor were they themselves to be depended upon to participate in the various religious acts deemed necessary to the common good.

Conversion, in consequence, opened the door to the "secularization" of those villages where Christian groups emerged. By introducing religious plurality into community life, Christians attempted to relate to their neighbors in ways that we associate with secularity, that is to divorce their relations with non-Christian relatives and neighbors of any religious significance. Both Buddhist and Christian villagers, as a rule, however, sooner or later rejected the secularization and pluralization of village life and sought to restore the community's traditional religious unity. That northern Thai sense of village unity encouraged both groups to seek communal distance, which frequently assumed geographical as well as social expression as the Christians withdrew to form their own villages. The Protestant Christian experience, then, points to the historical and contemporary persistence of the traditional sense of community in the villages of Nan Province. Even today, the general trend among Protestants is towards communal separation, and while it is true that there have been counter trends, those trends have far more to do with the decay of Christian communities than any movement towards communal integration.

David P. Chandler's *History of Cambodia* proposes a schema for understanding the Cambodian village, which sets forth three concentric levels of community, beginning with "civilized" villages located on waterways, involved in commerce, and incorporating formal social structures. Around these *kompong*, historically, were found rice-growing villages, which centered themselves on a source of water and a temple. They stood at the boundary between civilization and wilderness, occupied lands and the forest. The third type of villages are those found in the forest, widely scattered and isolated from each other. Chandler notes that in times of crisis people from the rice-growing villages were prone to flee into the forest.¹³ Without presuming to debate its applicability to village life in Nan generally, Chandler's schema does help us understand the religious dynamic at work in the formation of Christian communities in Nan.

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¹ See Kummol Chinawong, *chang kham* [Chang Kham] (Chiang Mai: Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand, 1992) and Prasit Pongudom, *pokao maedoem: prawattsat chumchon khristian doi saket* [Ancestors: History of the Doi Saket Christian Communities] (Chiang Mai: Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand, 1993).

² See Laurance c. Judd, *Chao Rai Thai: Dry Rice Farmers in Northern Thailand* (Bangkok: Suriyaban, 1977), 32; and Somchai Na Nakon Phanom, "samaikonprawatisat" ["Pre-History"] in *muang nan: boranakhadi, prawatisat, lae sinlapa* [Muang Nan: Archeology, History, and Art] (Bangkok: Amarin Printing Group, 1987), 31-32.

³ For the history of Protestantism in northern Thailand, see Daniel McGilvary, *A Half Century Among the Siamese and the Lao* (New York: Revell, 1912); and Herbert R. Swanson, *Krishcak Muang Nua: A Study in Northern Thai Church History* (Bangkok: Chuan Press, 1984).

⁴ *Phia ka* are clan spirits whose rites have been abandoned. They are said to inhabit all the members of the offending family and are deeply feared. The families are thus also known as *phi ka*. See Richard B. Davis, *Muang Metaphysics: A Study of Northern Thai Myth and Ritual* (Bangkok: Pandora, 1984), 58-9.

⁵ Herbert R. Swanson, "This Heathen People: the Cognitive Sources of American Missionary Westernizing Activities in Northern Siam, 1867-1889" (M.A. thesis, University of Maryland, 1987); and Herbert R. Swanson, "muandungkhaminkapbun: khritasansa naibotbotprawatisatthai" ["No Middle Ground: Christianity in the Thai Historical Context,"] a paper presented to the Conference on "Christianity in the Thai Historical Context," Chiang Mai, 26-28 March 1992.

⁶ Mok Phromwangkhwa. 90 years' old. Interview with authors. Ban Don Chai, 25 November 1991.

⁷ Chom Chaosan. 88 years old. Interview with the authors. Ban Mai Huai Yang. 15 October 1991.

⁸ Arunrut Wichiankhieo, "*kanwikhrosangkhomchiangmai samairattanakosinintonton tamtonchabapbailannaiphak nua*" ["An Analysis of Chiang Mai Society in the Early Bangkok Era According to Northern Thai Palm Leaf Manuscripts] (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1977), 277; and, Mani Phayomyong, "*kwamchualaepraephanikhonglanna*" ["The Beliefs and Customs of Lanna"] in *lannathai: anusornphrarachaphithipoetphraboramarachanusawarisamkasat* [Lanna Thai: On the Occasion of the Dedication of the Three Kings' Statue] (Chiang Mai: Thiphanat Printing, 1984), 134.

⁹ Sommai Pramchit, "*rabopkwamchualaesasanailanna*," ["The Belief and Religious System of Lanna"], A paper presented to the Seminar on "The condition of Lanna Studies," Chiang Mai, 22-24 August 1986; Davis, *Muang Metaphysics*, 36; Konrad Kingshill, *et. al.*, *kantittamkanplianplaeng laephatanakarn khongmuban naiphakcua khongpratathai chuangraya 30 pi* ["Tracing the Changes and Development of Northern Thai Villages over a Thirty Year Period (Ku Daeng Village)"] (Chiang Mai: Payap University, 1985, 24; and "*huabaan*," ["Village High Points"], *chumchonphathana* [Community Development] 1, 3 (September-October 1986), 2-3.

¹⁰ Davis, *Muang Metaphysics*, 257ff.

¹¹ Davis, *Muang Metaphysics*, 56.

¹² Jaspar Ingersoll, "Merit and Identity in Village Thailand," in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society*, ed. G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), 219-251. See also S. J. Tambiah, "The Ideology of Merit and the Social Correlates of Buddhism in a Thai village," in *Dialectical in Practical Religion*, ed. E. R. Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 41-121.

¹³ David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (2nd ed., Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1993), 102-104.

Karen Culture and the Karen Church

A Report on a Consultation on Karen Theology

Herb Swanson

Introduction



The Karen Church and Culture Project—a joint project of the Karen Baptist Convention (that is, the 10th and 19th Districts of the Church of Christ in Thailand), the Baptist Union of Sweden, and the Office of History of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT)—held a three-day consultation in November 2000 at the Mae Ping Noi Church, Pai Association, on the subject of church and culture. The purpose of the consultation was to explore themes and ideas in the development of Karen theologies, particularly with reference to the traditional Karen religious poetry known as "ta". Esther Danpongpi, the project coordinator, organized and moderated the conference. Attendance fluctuated considerably but involved roughly 25 participants, including a stable core of 14 who attended all the sessions. In addition, one Thai and two Western observer-participants were also present. Most of the participants came from the KBC's Pai and Musikee Associations; but there were three from the CCT's District 16, Sangklaburi, as well as two recent Karen graduates of the Bangkok Institute of Theology, one of whom is working with Karen churches in Ratchaburi Province. Two Catholic and two Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand participants added an important ecumenical note to the consultations. The participants included eight pastors and several local church leaders. A few members of the Mae Ping Noi Church "dropped in" from time to time to see what was happening.

The consultation began Thursday afternoon, November 9th, and lasted until Saturday noon, November 11th, numbering six half-day or evening sessions. The two evening sessions were devoted to learning and practicing traditional Karen music, some of which used ta for its lyrics. Two other sessions involved substantial time in smaller groups. The process was largely informal, with participants seated on the floor of a small administrative and Christian education building situated next to the Mae Ping Noi Church's main building.

The language of the consultation was almost entirely Karen and was complicated by the fact that a few participants speak only Pwo Karen while the majority are Sgaw speakers. Several individuals assisted in translating the proceedings for the non-Karen observer-participants. The Thai participant did not speak, one Westerner spoke once for about two minutes, and one spoke in Thai for about ten minutes on the importance of working out identifiably Karen theologies and once, at the very end of the consultation, for about 25 minutes on what he had heard and learned from the consultation. Informally, during breaks and meals, all three of these observer-participants were actively engaged in exchanges with the other participants.

The Consultation

There were no lectures, as such, although one of the Catholic participants is highly knowledgeable about traditional Karen religion and literature. Most of the participants have at least some knowledge of traditional Karen ways, although all of them acknowledged their limitations in this regard. The discussions were wide-ranging and sometimes only vaguely related to the consultation's theme, if at all. One of the theologically trained participants observed during the last session on Saturday that he would come with a misapprehension of what we were doing. He thought the consultation was looking to develop a formal system of Karen theological doctrines, but what actually happened was that it explored themes in what he called "local Karen theology." The organizers, frankly, entered the consultation with the same goal of working through clear doctrinal themes in Karen theology and had themselves to "re-learn" what they were doing.

No set of Karen theological doctrines, thus, resulted from this consultation. Given the fact that none of the participants had ever taken part in anything even remotely similar to this consultation, the "failure" to develop Karen doctrines can probably only be counted as a success. A number of important themes and issues for Karen theological reflection, however, did emerge, ones that point to an identifiably Karen way of approaching Christian theological reflection.

First, the most immediate and meaningful context of Karen theology is the forest. Traditional Karen religion gives great significance to the elemental spiritual powers found in the streams and woods of the mountains, forces sometimes called the "lords of water and land." God, as creator, is also highly meaningful to the Karen, and it appears that so-called natural theology will play an important role in the process of articulating Karen theologies. One participant summarized what seemed to be a consensus of the consultation that the Karen know God in four ways: through nature, through the Bible, through the ta (traditional poetry), and through personal experience. It is interesting that he ordered the four sources of Karen revelation in this order, whether intentionally or not. Just what it means to "do" Karen forest theology (mountain theology, streams and brooks theology, hill theology) remains unclear, but it seems quite clear that the Theology of Creation plays an important role in Karen theological reflection.

Second, the question of identity was a burning, frequently mentioned theme throughout the consultation. Karen Christians are almost painfully aware of the long-held tradition that the Karen are the Elder Brother of the human family, an elder brother who in one way or another lost his inheritance so that his younger brothers have now developed themselves far in advance of their eldest sibling. The story of Jacob stealing Esau's blessing (Genesis 27) was one of the most frequently alluded to passages in the Bible during the consultation. A few references were made to the Christian Karen belief, started by Baptist missionaries in Burma, that the Karen are one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Only one reference that I caught was made to the other traditional Karen view of themselves as orphans abandoned by Yua (God). There was a real wrestling with the issue of who we are as Karen. It appears that the question of how Karen Christians understand and relate to Yua necessarily imposes the question of identity on these Christians. Given the immense social and cultural pressures of Thai national and global international forces on the Karen, it is hardly surprising how frequently and intensely the question of personal and

tribal identity arose in this theological consultation. Thinking about God requires thinking about ourselves.

This second issue for Karen theological reflection constantly raised the question of Karen relations with non-Karen peoples and with Karens of other religious faiths than Protestantism. One Catholic participant made a strong plea for greater unity among the Karen of all faiths, and that plea became another theme that cropped up from time to time. Interestingly enough, however, among this otherwise Protestant gathering there seemed to be more concern for intra-tribal unity among the Pwo and Sgaw than inter-faith unity, although inter-faith unity did come up again several times. In any event, it appears all but certain that Karen Protestants who seek to reflect on theological issues from an identifiably Karen perspective will necessarily begin to study traditional religious sources and ideas. That process will bring them into dialogue with Catholics, who are considerably in advance of Protestants on the question of drawing on traditional religiosity for church life, and with Buddhist Karen, who have retained closer ties to the old religious ways and traditions. Karen theological reflection is going to be dialogical, not because dialogue is a "good" thing to do in theory, but because in practice Karen Christians, Catholic as well as Protestant, have a great deal to re-learn from Karen of other faiths

Third, when the Karen talk about God and other important things in their lives, they frequently tell stories and often refer to things that their parents and other respected elder relatives taught them as children. Their stories are about things close at hand and make use of local images and experiences to point to larger truths. Even when Karen theology is being more doctrinal, it still retains a close relationship to the simple, basic things around it. The Catholic participant shared with us the Karen Ten Commandments. They go to the effect that You Are Forbidden to Eat the Neck of Chickens. You are Forbidden to Eat the Liver of Chickens. And so forth through ten parts of a chicken's body, which are all forbidden. Then come the reasons for these negative commandments. I did not get them through the translation process fast enough to record them accurately, but what it came down to was that if a person eats a certain part of the chicken it shows that they have certain negative traits, such as they are selfish or boastful or like to gossip or are people who commit serious crimes against the community. The body parts of a chicken, thus, become an immediate, visible, and highly effective medium for the religious instruction of children.

The participants in this consultation, apparently, have never engaged in intentional Karen theological reflection. Theological process, as they understand it, is largely a matter of studying the Bible and learning an inherited body of doctrines. Theology comes to them through missionaries, missionary and/or Western-trained Asians of various stripes, and books translated from English. When they talk about more complex theological concepts, they often have to use Thai or English words. The concept of "local theology" is as new to them as it is to most of the rest of us; the idea of "Karen theology" takes some getting used to. The shift, however, from a seminary to a local locus for theological reflection and experimentation involves a radically important reordering of who "does" theology and how local churches experience the process of articulating their faith. Even theologically trained Karen tell stories when asked to think about their faith as Karen. They are stories that emerge out of the village-forest experience. The theological experts are their ancestors, parents, and older, respected relatives. Doctrinal

correctness recedes into the backside of the hills, and theology becomes a process of packing religious meanings into a medium that is shared, meaningful, simple, and easy to communicate. If a Karen Christian wants to review the Hebrew Ten Commandments she has to open a Bible that not everyone reads or understands very well and enter an alien world thousands of years and kilometers distant; if she wants to review the Karen Ten Commandments all she has to do is glance over at the nearest hen or rooster.

Fourth, the great diversity found among the Karen and reflected in this consultation poses a major challenge to and opportunity for their theological reflection. Having had no national capital or state religion, traditional Karen religious thinking has never been systematized, nor has there been any person or body with the authority to determine how all Karen should think and believe. The number and nature of Karen ta is almost dizzying. Which ta are "right" and which ones "wrong" is not an issue that has ever come up, apparently. One of the Catholic participants had thus a strikingly different understanding about how the ta describe Yua (God) from that generally expressed by most of the other participants. Given the further intra-tribal divisions into Pwo and Sgaw, into northern and southern Karen in Thailand, into Burmese and Thailand Karen, and into a variety of Karen in Burma--given all of this, it is difficult to believe that "a" Karen theology is possible--or desirable. Where, in all of this, do Karen individuals and groups begin? While Karen theology will remain (one hopes) local in many ways, it will have to develop its own scholarly traditions, its collections of ta, and its experts. Dialogue and the exchange of ideas and information between denominations and faiths will, if carried out, greatly facilitate this process of sifting through the mass of oral and printed Karen literature to identify those particular ta that carry especial theological meaning for each group.

Fifth, the question of Karen literacy remains a central obstacle and challenge to the future of Karen theological reflection. Theology resides in language. Karen theological thought, necessarily, resides in the Karen language. During this consultation, however, Thai Bibles were as much in evidence as Karen ones. Several participants can hardly read, let alone write Karen. Thai kept "popping up," and it required a conscious effort and repeated reminders on the part of the moderator to keep the consultation from falling back into Thai entirely. It was clearly difficult for a few of the participants to engage in meaningful theological intercourse in the Karen language and to express their thoughts in Karen without Thai. Added to this difficulty is the fact that the two Catholic participants aren't all that familiar with the Karen script used by the Protestants, the Catholics having their own romanized script. The Karens also have a traditional script, which is still known but not used. Younger Karen, meanwhile, are frequently illiterate in Karen and sometimes resist having to learn to read and write it--for them Thai is more than sufficient. There are thus a range of Karen literacy issues that go along with the development of Karen theologies.

Sixth and finally, the whole point of working out Karen ways of reflecting theologically presupposes an ongoing body of Karen people who think about their faith in Karen. The vehicle of Karen theology is, as said above, the Karen language; it is also Karen culture. It is an obvious fact of Karen life in Thailand that Thai mass communications, the Thai educational system, and international globalization pose an incredibly immediate and powerful threat to the continued existence of Karen culture in Thailand. The dangers facing Karen culture were alluded to but did

not emerge as clearly from the consultation as did the other themes already mentioned; yet those dangers are something that older Karen are painfully aware of and discuss often in other contexts. Their children or grandchildren seem to be more Thai than Karen. Karen theology, therefore, cannot escape the question of how to communicate the faith to Karen children and youth. Christian education methods and values will have an important role to play in maintaining the communal and local integrity of Karen theological reflection.

If, furthermore, Karen theology is going to reach into the lives of young Karen it will have to become a computer theology, an internet theology, a "modern" theology that assists younger Karen in maintaining their religious faith and cultural identity as Karen in the 21st century. How does forest theology function in the streets of Chiang Mai and Bangkok? in the world of television and the Web? These are pressing issues inevitably raised by the very idea that Karen theologies are possible and worth reflecting on.

Reflections

The Mae Ping Noi consultation initiated a new way for the participants to think about theology. It is important to understand that what happened in this consultation was unexpected, even by (or, especially by) the organizers. Insights into the ways and means of Karen theological reflection emerged from what this interfaith, mixed group of Karen did when asked the question, "How do we Karen understand God?" They talked about the forest. They told stories. They wrestled with their identity as Karen and as Christians. They sang. They laughed. They pled for intra-tribal unity. They remembered what their grandparents taught them. They struggled with what the traditional Karen spiritual powers, the lords of water and land, meant for them. They wrestled with the relationship of *ta* to Scripture. They tended to lapse into Thai. And there was something entirely natural and unaffected about raising fundamental questions concerning Karen religious thought while sitting on mats and blankets in a modest church building--in the hills and near the forest. This consultation, in short, provided important insights into how Karen theologies are going to emerge: in dialogue, in community, in small groups, through the use of *ta*, and by the telling of stories.

Like all pioneering efforts, this consultation also had its limitations, most notably in this case in the absence of women's voices other than that of the moderator, Thra'mu Esther. How best to open the door to full and equal participation by women in the Karen context is a pressing question that will require further thought. The role of Western and Thai Christians in such a process is also problematic, and it was not easy for the three of us in this category to know quite what to do with ourselves. The participants in the consultation were very patient and encouraging, which simply left us with further questions about what are appropriate ways to be companions. We took up about a half an hour of the some fifteen hours of formal consultation and tried to direct even that time to sharing the results of our listening to their process, rather than trying to bring our "wisdom" to the process. Our sense was that future consultations should involve less or no Thai and Western participation, for a time at least. One hopes that in the future there will be opportunities for intentional cross-cultural theological dialogue between the Karen and their non-Karen neighbors and friends. There was no formal evaluation carried out. Thra'mu Esther did ask each person to share in just a couple of minutes their feelings about the

consultation. The general reaction was appropriately positive and encouraging, and in amongst the necessary forms of politeness one did sense a desire to continue to do something to preserve the Karen church as a living entity and a genuine "green light" to go on with the process of encouraging the emergence of identifiable, self-aware Karen theologies.

It must be said, however, that some of the pastors sent clear signals of discomfort and caution at various times during the consultation. The one Karen who has a Western theological training used the English term "syncretism" and warned that there is a line over which Karen Baptist churches dare not cross. Where it is, exactly, he himself was not sure. Another Bangkok-trained pastor warned that the process could end up with the formation of yet another Karen sect group, unacceptable to the rest of the Karen church--something, he said, that has happened in Burma. One could sense the ambivalence most of the participants took towards traditional Karen religiosity. They could say, as mentioned above, that the ta are a source of knowledge about God, of revelation that is. Yet, when three different participants were asked privately if the Word of God appears in ta, there was a puzzled reluctance to go quite that far. The standard response was, "Well, it depends on the particular ta." It was not an enthusiastic response. These worries and hesitations have to be honored, especially because of the communal nature of Karen theological reflection. In the end, if a process of continued reflection is sustained, it will probably find various Karen individuals thinking their various thoughts and, it is to be hoped, still able to tell each other important, meaningful stories about God and their Karen heritage.

In spite of a certain wariness about the process, however, The Mae Ping Noi consultations witnessed a remarkable transformation in the way in which the participants thought consciously about their faith. It relocated theology from seminaries and translated textbooks to the churches in the hills. It encouraged the use of the Karen language as a vehicle for theological reflection. It shed preconceptions about who can "do" theology even as it discovered the value of local Karen resources for thinking theologically. It practiced an ecumenical approach to theology that transcended (or, better, ignored) the labels of "Catholic," "Baptist," "Evangelical," and "Pentecostal." On a personal note, finally, it seemed to me that at times the participants expressed their faith most deeply and immediately not in their conversations, but when they were singing.

This paper was written as a report on the consultation and prepared immediately afterwards. The consultation was held at the Mae Ping Noi Church, Pai Association, Karen Baptist Convention, 9-11 November 2000. Funding was provided by the Baptist Union of Sweden, and the Office of History of the CCT. Some local expenses were covered by the Mae Ping Noi Church.

Short Items

Jesus the Question

One failure of Christian Fundamentalism and right-wing absolutist theologies generally is that their adherents believe exclusively in Jesus the Answer. It is not answers, however, that inspire us or drive us. It is questions. The teacher from whom we learned the most was the one who motivated us to learn for ourselves, enthused us with her questions and his own love of learning. Answers shut doors. Questions open them. Jesus is the Question, who drives us beyond commonly accepted answers and wisdom, drives us beyond stupid prejudice and self-serving clichés, drives us to prayer, repentance, and the search for justice, peace, and reconciliation.

New Life in the Church in Siam

Dr. John Sung, the Chinese revivalist who conducted a series of revivals in Siam in 1938 and in 1939, may well have been the singly most important figure in 20th century Thai Protestant church history. His revivals stirred the churches as no one before or since has been able to do, and he had an impact on a generation of church leaders that left an indelible mark on all of Thai Protestantism. The following testimony shows why. It is an excerpt from a report that the Rev. Sook Pongsnoi sent to the American Bible Society's Siam Agency and was subsequently printed in the *Missionary Review of the World*. Kru Sook writes,

"When I heard that John Sung, a noted Chinese evangelist, was coming to Bangkok I determined to go and hear him. Thank God, God opened my eyes to see His wonderful love in a new way. A powerful meaning of the cross has come to me and I came to have a new attitude toward Bible Study.

"I invited Dr. Sung to come to Trang and through him God has poured out a mighty blessing upon the people of this city. The Trang Church is now on fire for God and has been packed with people every Sunday since Dr. Sung went away. Every church member brings his Testament to every service and we read the Scriptures together...We are feeding on the Word of God as never before, and last Sunday sixteen women and five men were baptized and twenty baptized children professed their faith in Jesus Christ and all united with the church; two back-sliders also came and confessed their sins. One of the old missionaries said he had never seen anything like that ingathering before."

The Sung Revivals had this type of impact on many and brought undoubted renewal to the churches of Siam-and unavoidable controversy as well. Statements like this one help to explain why Sung is still important to the Thai Church more than sixty years' later.

Source: "New Life in the Church in Siam," *Missionary Review of the World* 62 (July 1939): 341-42.

Admiring Jesus

The following brief article appeared in the *Bangkok Post* in December 2000. It reads, "For a long time I looked up at His emaciated body, the two hands nailed to the cross, eyes closed, a ghost of a smile painted on the lips of the long, thin face, which radiated warmth. At the Song Khon Church in Mukdahan I stood, watching Him with great joy, just like so many Christians who come from far and wide to worship Him in Thailand's biggest Christian church.

"Taking after my parents, I'm Buddhist. Many times, though, a part of my heart has gone out to Jesus. I like to read about Him, to listen to His words-although I can't quite follow them. A friend once asked me, 'So, which religion do you belong to? Are you confused?' Having long sought an answer, I found none. I feel at ease with what is familiar in Buddhism, which I love, yet I enjoy learning about Jesus and participating in activities along with his worshippers. I claim no full knowledge about Jesus, but I admire many things He did. He's such an outstanding example of self-sacrifice, a man full of love for everyone, even enemies.

"That's enough reason for me to love Him, only I'm not ready to move into His house."

This article raises a hundred questions. Are the views expressed "typically Thai?" Are they the wave of the future in Thailand? Do they represent the success or failure of the Christian message in Thailand? What does it mean for the author to say, "I'm Buddhist," and then to state that he loves Jesus?

Source: Somkid Chaijitvanit, "See God in Everything," *Bangkok Post*. "Outlook" section. 23 December 2000, page 8.

The Generic Past

Last summer I visited the reconstructed New England village of "Old Sturbridge," located near Springfield, Massachusetts. The historical theme park is supposed to be a recreation of a typical New England village of the 1830s and contains a variety of houses, shops, and other buildings. The park staff has worked hard to make Old Sturbridge an "authentic" replica of historical communities of that era, but I could not help but wonder how successful they were. How at home, that is, would a New Englander of the 1830s feel in Old Sturbridge?

Most of the numerous buildings had staff people decked out in vintage dress to explain the background of the building, and in the course of my leisurely stroll I asked several of them how closely the village approximated the reality of the 1830s. The "presenter" in one house helpfully enumerated a number of "unauthentic" aspects of the room we were in: there was too much furniture in it (it was arranged as a show room rather than as a place where people live), the wallpaper was modern though of the 'right pattern,' and some of the pieces of furniture were

reproductions. Another staff person stated that the park had jammed a wide variety of buildings into a much smaller space than would have been the case in the 1830s and went on to observe, "What we've done is to create a generic village of the 1830s."

My computer dictionary defines "generic" as "relating to or descriptive of an entire group or class; general." Old Sturbridge, we can say, is a modern description of New England communities of 170 years' ago. Included in the description are modern restaurants, toilets, and goods for sale-as well as hundreds of visitors to the park dressed in casual early 21st century fashion. Nothing even remotely like Old Sturbridge, that is, existed in the 1830s. Yet, it is probably quite a good description, one that allows us to look back in time comfortably and learn some things about how our ancestors of six or seven generations ago lived. The people at Old Sturbridge have virtually written a history book, using stone, brick, and wood rather than paper as their medium. They have not recreated the past, but they have succeeded in portraying the past in ways that help us transcend our own time, however briefly and imperfectly, as time travelers. History books, at their best, do the same thing.

Africa Takes Over

According to statistics gathered by Dr. Peter Brierley of the Christian Research Association in Britain, the center of Anglicanism has shifted from Britain to Africa. He reports that in 1900, 81% of all Anglicans resided in Europe while 1 % lived in Africa. By 1970, a clear majority, 62%, still lived in Europe, but the African proportion had grown to 16%. In 2000, however, 54% of all the world's Anglicans lived in Africa while only 33% lived in Europe. Brierly estimates that by 2025 more Anglicans will live in Nigeria than in the U.K.

Statistics like these force us to re-imagine Anglicanism, to disassociate it from England's stately cathedrals, and reassociate it with our planet's poorest continent. What, now, does a "typical" Anglican congregation worshipping on a "normal" Sunday morning look like and sound like? You will have to go to Nigeria to find out!

Source: Brierley, "The Anglican Communion: Tomorrow's Trends," presented at the "Future of Anglicanism Conference," Oxford, July 20002.

Missionaries, Missions, & National Origins

Some months ago, I had a fascinating discussion about missionaries and their denominational and national origins with an older Thai pastor whose career has brought him into contact with missionaries from several groups and nations. He observed that members of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF), generally, are the best at adapting themselves to living close to the way rural people live. Members of the German Marburger Mission, again generally, are the most capable at learning and speaking local languages. American Presbyterian missionaries, he claimed, have more *namchai* than members of other foreign missions. *namchai* is a difficult term to translate. It can mean generosity or giving a helping hand or showing sympathetic

understanding. Korean missionaries, he concluded, generally show the greatest zeal and depth of personal Christian commitment. This pastor was, in a sense, praising each of these groups and certainly did not intend to find fault with any of them. His comments raise the interesting, probably unanswerable question of whether or not these characterizations of missionaries by mission and nationality actually work out in fact. Are Koreans more zealous and the members of the OMF more adaptable? Do American Presbyterians have more *namchai*? Are German Marburger missionaries more skillful at languages? Wouldn't it be interesting to know!

Towards a Glowing & Ardent Church

"But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace."

Dr. Martin Luther King, quoted in Lotte Hoskins, ed., *"I Have a Dream": Quotations of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968), 13-14.

News & Notes

Ban Dok Daeng Update

[HeRB 3](#) contains an article on the interfaith journey of the Suanduangritr Church, Ban Dok Daeng (District One, CCT), over the last seven years. Readers will recall that beginning in March 1996 this congregation has reversed the normal course of village Buddhist-Christian relations by developing closer, less judgmental ties to its Buddhist neighbors. It has done so at the behest of those neighbors and through a series of concrete actions and decisions made by both Christians and Buddhists. What we have learned over the last nearly seven years is that our neighbors yearn for better community relations and are willing to act on that longing. The process taking place in Ban Dok Daeng is not a theoretical, academic exercise in dialogue but, rather, a "dialogue of life" aimed at creating a more peaceful community.

Yet another episode in the story took place this last September when a Buddhist "revival" event was held in the temple (*wat*) in Ban Dok Daeng. The event was sponsored by the local tambon (sub-district) council in conjunction with the Buddhist hierarchy of Amphur (District) Doi Saket, which meant that a number of dignitaries from the district attended as well as a strong contingent of monks. The local temple was responsible for arrangements, but not for the program, which included a preacher from the city and a raffle. Well over 200 people attended from Ban Dok Daeng and surrounding communities.

That Saturday morning one of the members of the organizing committee called me to invite me to attend, and then she went on to ask me to speak as well. That was a surprise! She specifically wanted me to "inform the amphur" that the relationship between the church & temple in Ban Dok Daeng has improved and there is now good unity in the village. Given the century-long history of distrust between Buddhists and Christians in this community, her request was amazing-and quite unexpected. Operating on the principle that usually farangs, like children, should be seen and not heard, I tried to deflect the request to the moderator of the church. The committee had already agreed, however, that the moderator's religious standing (*somanasuk*) was not high enough for this occasion. As both an ordained clergy and an educated Westerner, I was the only person of sufficient standing in the village to be appropriate to the occasion. The fact that I'm also a Christian seemed to be a bonus.

The evening started with various monks talking at the crowd, after which the head monk of the amphur officially opened the event. An hour-long sermon by a well-known monk from the city followed. After the sermon, they invited various dignitaries to speak, and my turn came up more quickly than I had anticipated. The emcee for the evening is a monk who isn't from Ban Dok Daeng, and he stumbled a bit over my name and didn't really know quite what to say or how to describe who I am-but he got me up on the stage.

I spoke for about 15 minutes, beginning with a description of the prior unhappy state of interfaith relations in the village and the process by which those relations have improved. I explained why we Christians have changed our attitudes and behavior, and I then preached a brief Christian sermon about loving God & loving neighbor, observing that we Christians in the community had been better at loving God than at loving our neighbors. I closed by reminding the audience that the church's basic purpose has not changed, that we are still committed to bringing people to know God--not to change their religion, but their lives.

This is a significant moment in the life of our village. Not in living memory has a Christian, as a Christian, been invited to speak at a purely religious temple event. The trust level between the two sides has risen to such a degree that the local temple folks are willing to have a Christian speak to an audience that included several district and sub-district religious and political VIPs. Our neighbors actually take pride in their relationship with Christians, a rare, rare situation indeed.

The local committee's decision to ask the village's only Christian cleric to speak at a patently Buddhist event symbolized the temple's commitment to the peace-making process, which it initiated in 1996. That process has come to mean some concrete things to the people of this community-that community relations are based on trust rather than mistrust, fairness rather than injustice, truth rather than rumor, and respect for the sectarian Other rather than fear. Actions taken by both temple and church since 1996 have made this a more peaceful community, made life better in intangible but very important ways.

International Conference on Religion & Globalization

The Institute for the Study of Religion & Culture, Payap University is holding a seven-day conference on the theme of religion and globalization from 27 July through 2 August 2003 at Payap University. The conference includes seven major speakers, at least five panels, plus a large number of individual papers grouped into five themes, including: [1] "Religious Diversity and Interfaith Relations in a Global Age," [2] "Religion and Global Society," [3] "Religious Reform and Reformulation for a Global Age," [4] "Historical Perspectives in Interreligious Interaction," and [5] "Methodological and Philosophical Issues in Intercultural and Interreligious Communication and Exchanges." The conference looks to be a major event in international religious studies.

Those wishing further information may visit the conference website located at <http://www.religionandculture.org> or contact the Rev. John Butt at isrc@cm.ksc.co.th.

Karen Church & Culture Camp

On 21 to 25 October 2002, the Ban Nong Ched Nuey Church (or, in Karen, the Temakala Church) of the CCT's District Nineteen sponsored its second annual Church & Culture Camp under the direction of Thra'mu (Teacher) Esther Danpongpi, staff researcher with the Office of History. Last year's camp numbered some 80 participants ages 4 to 25. This year roughly 120 children and young people in the same age span took part, including some from nearby churches. The camp had two central purposes: first, to reinforce a sense of appreciation for Karen tribal culture and customs among Karen Christian children and young people; and, second, to preserve traditional local Karen culture in the Ban Nong Ched Nuey community. The camps are based on the premise that Karen culture is a part of God's creation for the Karen, and as such deserves to be conserved and respected.

As was the case in last year's camp, each of the five days included Karen literacy classes in the mornings, instruction in Karen crafts and local knowledge during the afternoons, and special activities in the evenings. While such a major undertaking will always have some problems, reports have it that the children and young people felt that the camp was *muedoma* (great good fun) and want to take part again next year.

Northern Thai Hymn Sing & Seminar

On 29 to 30 November 2003, the Office of History sponsored a hymn sing and seminar focused on the old-time northern Thai hymnology, which has all but died out in the northern Thai church. Nearly 60 individuals from across northern Thailand took part in the event, which was held at First Church, Lampang. Northern Thai hymnology was the invention, for the most part, of the Rev. Dr. Jonathan Wilson, a Presbyterian missionary who served in northern Thailand (Siam)

from 1868 until his death in 1911. While the hymn tunes are almost entirely Western, the lyrics are the northern Thai of a hundred years ago. Wilson published his first northern Thai hymnal in 1895 and eventually translated or wrote lyrics for over 500 hymns. The third and last edition of his hymnal was published in 1914. Northern Thai hymnology experienced a relatively brief ascendancy, however, as the use of central Thai began to spread among the northern churches. Today, only elderly Christians in their 70s and older remember a time when the old northern Thai hymns were sung in the churches, and even then they were sung mostly as special numbers rather than as a regular part of worship.

The Office of History has undertaken a modest project aimed at preserving knowledge of these older hymns and encouraging churches to make occasional use of them. To this end, it held this two-day hymn sing and seminar under the leadership of Acharn Janram Chaisri, staff researcher. This event was the eighth time in four years that the Office of History has held hymn sings promoting northern Thai hymnology. It differed from past events in two ways. First, it did not focus on one church or cluster of churches, but drew from churches across the North. Second, two northern Thai ensembles accompanied all of the hymns, adding a distinctively northern Thai flavor to the Western tunes. The vitality of the singing as well as the results of the final evaluation indicated that a good time was had by all. In particular, the participants urged the Office of History to continue this project and to expand it to more districts and clusters of churches.

Karen Research Projects Old & New

Through the good offices of the Baptist Union of Sweden (BUS), the Office of History has for the last six years run two Karen tribal research projects, the first (1996-1999) aimed at collecting local church histories and the second (1999-2002) directed at using traditional Karen cultural resources for the life of the Karen church. Thra'mu Esther Danpongpi has directed both projects. We should note that both projects were supported by grants from the Swedish Government obtained by the BUS through the Swedish Mission Council (SMC). The government paid 80% of the overseas contribution to each project and the BUS paid the other 20%.

Taken together, these projects have made a significant contribution to the work of the Office of History. They have broadened the scope and base of our work to include the Karen. They have provided new models for approaching our work with local churches, notably the hot season student research projects model and the church and culture camps featured above. We have found, however, that it is difficult to continue Thra'mu Esther's efforts in three-year stints as projects. Over the last six years, her work has taken unexpected turns and failed to achieve some (unrealistic) goals while achieving other ends that did not appear in the original project proposals.

With this in mind, the BUS has kindly agreed to take on Thra'mu Esther as a regular employee with the hope that eventually her work can be transferred to the CCT. Given its current economic crunch, taking on this added expense entails some difficulty for the BUS. The Office of History is deeply appreciative of the assistance and support the BUS has given us over the last six years.

Both the Office of History and the BUS recognize the importance of our Karen efforts and agree that it is not enough simply to continue the work begun. That work needs to be expanded, and to that end the BUS has kindly obtained a grant for yet another three-year project which will begin in May 2003. The project takes as its basic aim the strengthening of local Karen church life by teaching local churches how to conduct their own research, evaluation, and planning programs. Thra'mu Chitlada Kunkao, presently employed by the Office of History in a temporary position, will staff the project. Future HeRBs will surely contain news and articles about these ongoing efforts.

Dr. Herb

Earlier this month, I received the following email from Dr. Paul Beirne of the Melbourne College of Divinity regarding the progress of MCD's examination of my doctoral dissertation, which I submitted last February. Readers of HeRB may find it of interest.

From: "Paul Beirne"
To: "Herbert R. Swanson"
Subject: RE: Thesis Examination Progress
Date: Fri, 6 Dec 2002 13:47:33 +1100

Dear Herbert

You will no doubt be delighted to hear that the Chair of the Board of Postgraduate Studies recommended to the College at the final College meeting of the year on November 27th that you be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and the College agreed that this degree be awarded to you. A letter to you has been sent to this effect on December 3, so it should reach you in the immediate future. Congratulations!! The Conferral Ceremony will be held at Wilson Hall, the University of Melbourne, at 8pm on Friday April 11th 2003. There is a form enclosed in the letter in relation to this Ceremony.

Regards
Paul Beirne

Book Review

Philip Jenkins. "The Next Christianity." *Atlantic Monthly* 290, 3 (October 2002): 53-68.



Jenkins, author of a recent book entitled *The Next Christendom*, has evidently gained some notoriety for his views on the demographic changes currently taking place in world Christianity. These are the same changes that Andrew Walls described in his article in the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* in 2001 under the title, "From Christendom to World

Christianity: Missions and the Demographic Transformation of the Church." (reviewed in [HeRB 1](#)). Where Walls celebrates current demographic trends, however, Jenkins fears them, and the tone of this article is alarmist, heralding the possible demise of Christianity as we know it in the face of the rise of what he calls "Southern Christianity." It is also a gem so far as religious polemics are concerned.

Jenkins' article discerns a growing, deepening rift between liberal, progressive "Northern Christianity" and reactionary, spiritualist Southern Christianity. This split is fueled by the undeniable fact that the demographic center of the Christian faith has shifted from its old European-North American axis to a new and more diverse Asian, African, and Latin American one. What Jenkins fears is that the liberal North will be swamped by the illiberal South, swamped that is by the fact of burgeoning southern and dwindling northern Christian constituencies. He has his statistics in place, supported by a flock of scary examples, mostly taken from "primitive" Africa, which he parades across the pages of his alarm. The whole presentation, as well done as it is polemically however, is also a gaggle of false assumptions and sweeping generalizations.

Those assumptions and generalizations begin with the author's focus, which is primarily on the Catholic Church. Although the article is ostensibly about world Christianity, much of the contents revolve around a contrast between northern Catholicism's desire to reform the church and southern Catholicism's anti-reformist, anti-abortion moralism and hierarchicalism. International Catholic power politics, thus, underlies Jenkins' fear that the northern church is about to be inundated by the South. From time to time, he broadens his focus to include Protestants, but only to return quickly to a central anxiety over the future of northern Catholicism's place on the stage of international Catholic trends. The Orthodox family of churches is never mentioned at all, and Jenkins entirely fails to address the question of whether or not the supposed tension between Catholic liberals in the North and ultra-conservatives in the South is an accurate measure of the state of the whole faith across the whole globe. He assumes it is, but for those of us who are not Catholics, the fear that Vatican II is being undone by Southern Christianity seems to be a less immediate issue. The fact that since at least the 1860s important liberal factions within the American Catholic Church, in particular, have been out of step with the more conservative Vatican and the larger church reinforces one's sense that Jenkins' presentation is more melodramatic than reality warrants. It is questionable, in other words, that the situation facing contemporary global Catholicism is really a new or essentially different one. This is not to deny that there are serious problems facing the Catholic Church, which may have some impact on the rest of us, but one cannot but wonder whether or not Jenkins' alarmism is justified.

Where the author's questionable assumptions leave off, his grandiose generalizations take over. Most glaring among those generalizations is the stereotypical way in which the author treats Northern and Southern Christianity, so called. Each category encompasses hundreds of millions of Christians from dozens of nations and thousands of cultures. Yet, he treats the two sides only as two discrete, distinguishable objects. The one is progressive, the other reactionary. The one is enlightened, the other superstitious. The one is democratic, the other autocratic. And so it goes, until the reader realizes that, yes, the one is White and the other is Black (and Brown and

Yellow). The ultimately racist distinction Jenkins makes between Northern and Southern Christianity fails because it does not account for the far, far more complex historical and contemporary realities underlying the missionary expansion of the faith.

The distinction between North and South also fails because it attempts to transform undeniable, global ideological and theological divisions among Christians into a geographical-ethnic-cultural division. If we set aside for a moment the labels of North and South, it is clear that the world's churches are frequently split between more liberal and more conservative factions with the conservatives generally stronger in numbers but with the liberals, in some mainline denominations at least, lodged securely in positions of authority. It is a split that at times digs a vast chasm between the members of particular churches and denominations. Jenkins is entirely wrong, however, in treating this ideological-theological division as a geographical and cultural category. Pentecostalism, for example, which he identifies as the engine driving much of the global ecclesiastical change that he fears, is a widely popular Northern religious phenomenon, which the North exported to the South. It is common knowledge, furthermore, that the so-called mainline churches are in general decline and that in the United States, in particular, the most demographically successful churches are conservative, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal churches. This is as true of white Americans as it is of the population generally. Viewed historically, again, there seems to be nothing new or especially startling about this virtually inherent tension with the Church Universal. New Testament scholars and historians of the early church find strong evidence of its presence from the very beginning of church history. Christians argue. They fight. Sometimes, they even go to war against each other for reasons that make little sense to those beyond the pale of the faith. One tragic contemporary example is the struggle between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, which arises historically out of theological disputes going back to the time of the Reformation. Ireland, we need to remember, is in the North. Without in any way making light of the ongoing impact of the deep divisions within Christianity, one again has to wonder why all the sudden, dramatic alarm?

The author, in fact, operates out of an American Christian religious frame of reference dominated by the rhetoric of the modernist-fundamentalist split, which emerged into full bloom in American church history after the Civil War (1861-1865). Informing that rhetoric is a long-cherished Western dualism that draws an absolute divide between good and evil across all of creation. God and Satan. Right and wrong. Truth and falsehood. North and South. Jenkins' perspective is thus strikingly similar to that of 19th century Protestant missionaries in Thailand. He claims that Southern Christianity is anti-progressive and strongly implies that it is superstitious. He believes that it has been corrupted by the cultural orientation of Southern peoples, most particularly in Africa. He describes the terrorism employed by right-wing African Christian sects, implying (but not stating explicitly) that their barbarism typifies the nature (or potential nature) of the whole of Southern Christianity. (One might just as easily draw on the Ku Klux Klan or George Bush to typify all of American Christianity). He describes the Southern Church as being primitive and rural in contrast to progressive, urban Northern Christianity. This is old-time missionary talk of the most blatant sort, the only thing missing being an overt contrast between Christian civilization and heathen superstition. That contrast is implied, nonetheless, throughout the article, most especially in the author's assumption that Southern culture is the cause of Southern Christianity's repressive, reactionary orthodoxy. He explicitly

equates Southern Christianity's "anti-intellectual fundamentalism" with the pressures of Southern culture. Southern Christianity is reactionary and repressive, in sum, because of its cultural setting.

What a strange idea.

Setting aside the question of whether or not the churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are truly so reactionary as Jenkins believes, it is still strange that when I walk over to our local temple at Ban Dok Daeng I am greeted with semi-rural, culturally conservative, "Southern" local people who firmly believe that all religions teach people to be good. They think that all religions have the same intentions and directions. They share, that is, a generally held attitude in lowland Thailand about people of other faiths that is astonishingly open and enlightened by today's standards. If, in the past, I wanted to find people who had narrow, negative attitudes about people of other faiths, I would have had to trot over to the local church, which has been heavily influenced by Western missionary Christianity. It was missionary representatives of "Northern" Christianity, that is, who taught the "Southern" Christians of Ban Dok Daeng a narrow, Western dualistic attitude about peoples of other faiths. The attitudes that Jenkins thinks are culturally Asian have been imported into Ban Dok Daeng, in fact, from the West. We have found in Ban Dok Daeng that there are local cultural resources available to deal with the religious prejudices imported into the community from the North. Primary among those resources is a deep concern for village unity.

It is difficult to take Jenkins' alarmism seriously at another level. His own words, if read with a little less bias, indicate that the churches of his South are deeply committed to the Bible, display a strong sense of spirituality, and effectively minister to people who are living in poverty and under oppression. They bring physical and mental healing to people who have little recourse to expensive Western medicines and psychologists. Indeed, he himself points out certain parallels between African churches and the early church. Yet, the author manages to twist even these biblical parallels into "proof" that the African church is spiritual-istic and backwards, an indication of the consistent bias he displays against the non-Western church.

There is much more to criticize in this article. It typifies mainline Western Christian attitudes about Pentecostals, heaping the lot into one massive pile and charging them all with being the vanguard of a conspiracy to overthrow the Northern Church. Yet, the author also describes them as being a set of Christians who reject tradition and hierarchy and even set direct personal revelations in place of the Bible-characteristics that are just the opposite of those that are supposed to typify authoritarian Southern Christianity. Therein lies the problem with Jenkins' grand, stereotypical scheme. It does not work. It does not work when, as another example, he repeatedly points to supposed parallels between the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation to the present. It is five hundred years later, the world has changed almost beyond recognition, and the cases are not the same.

There are minor incongruities as well. The author, as one example, exemplifies the orthodox, reactionary faith of the South in the person of Francis Cardinal Arinze of Nigeria. Although affable and articulate, he is also "rigidly conservative and even repressive" in terms of academic freedom and orthodoxy. The author states, "In his theology as much as his social views he is a

loyal follower of Pope John Paul II. Anyone less promising for Northern notions of reform is difficult to imagine." (page 59). Yes, but isn't the Pope himself a northern European? You see the confusion, even in the details and minor points.

In the end, Jenkins' real concern can only be called petty, in the face of all of the heat and smoke he generates in the article. Towards the close of the article, he draws on the experience of the American Episcopal Church to warn Catholics of the dire future they face. He cites the case of an African Anglican archbishop who has been ordaining dissident Episcopalians as bishops, who then go back to the United States to minister to conservative congregations that disagree with certain liberal stands taken by their denomination. That's it. The author himself points out that nothing in international Anglican ecclesiastical law prohibits the archbishop's actions.

The dire future of Jenkins' nightmares is that conservative forces among American Catholics will find ways to circumvent the liberals to gain control over the American church. Southern Christianity, by his own admission, ministers to tens of millions of people in need, gives them hope and meaning, provides them with healing, but the author casts aspersions on these Christ-like achievements for reasons of patent ecclesiastical politics. Petty institutional politics is really all that the author is on about. Who is in power and who is taken up in the Catholic Church is weighed as more significant than the religious and spiritual needs of the Two-Thirds World. None of this is to say that the state of world Christianity is all rosy and wonderful. Christians are deeply split and treat each other across denominational and theological lines with appalling intolerance. Triumphalism is rampant in many quarters of the church, as is belief in the gospel of success, which is nothing more than self-aggrandizement in the name of Christ. Let us, however, not confuse matters by applying to them false constructs, a narrow dualism, and a petty alarmism. And let us see that in the midst of all this human confusion and ecclesiastical nonsense, Jesus of Nazareth is still Good News to a significant part of our world.

Dirk Van der Cruysse. *Siam & The West 1500 -1700*. Translated by Michael Smithies. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002.



This is a large work for a single volume, running to 565 pages by the end of the last index. While not precisely a "difficult read," the writing style of the book does not invite one to continue apart from a serious motivation to do so on the part of the reader. *Siam & the West*, moreover, is an old-fashioned history book in at least three ways. First, it harkens back to the grand old days when political and diplomatic historians dominated professional history and defined how the rest of us understood the past. Second, the author seems to see himself as primarily a story-teller; there is relatively little critical historiographical analysis anywhere in the book. Third, Van der Cruysse focuses on the splendors and depravities of the ruling classes, both in Siam and in Europe. Ordinary people appear here only as nameless slaves, servants, and soldiers—a part of the backdrop against which the grand morality play of European and Siamese diplomacy was played out by Kings, royalty, and priests. It is surely quite acceptable to write old-fashioned history, however, and the author does a better than adequate job of putting the story of Siam's diplomatic relations with the West on the table.

In telling that story, the author also relates a substantial amount of background and "surround" information, some of it so extensive and detailed that the reader almost forgets the subject of the book. Whether the details of European history, including the history of Catholic missions, detract from the overall story or not depends on the individual tastes of the reader. While those details distract the reader in one sense, they also put the emergence of Siam's relations with Europe into a clear context. To a degree, Van der Cruysee tells us about the larger world in which Siam found itself in the 16th and 17th centuries.

One can find things to complain about. The author, for example, treats some of his subjects with a snide sarcasm and indulges in cute asides that add nothing to the quality of his account. One curious feature, furthermore, is that while the book has an index of all of the ships mentioned (on the voyages of diplomats back and forth between Europe and Southeast Asia) it does not have a subject index. On the other hand, it does have a good chronology that helps the reader keep events and details straight.

I will leave a fuller evaluation of these various aspects of *Siam & the West* to those reviewers who are more qualified to comment on them than I am. I would like to focus more narrowly on the insights this book gives us into the history of Christian missions in Siam/Thailand, Protestant as well as Catholic. Although there is a huge difference between the historical era described by the author and that of 19th century Protestant missions, the similarities between the earlier Catholic and later Protestant missionary movements are striking. One of the facts of church history in Thailand today is the dearth of information available on Catholic church history, whether in Thai or English. Reading Van der Cruysee suggests the value of having a continuous narrative of Christian missions in Siam/Thailand from the 16th century down to the present. Our lack of knowledge of Catholic history (and large portions of Protestant history), however, means that it would take an extended research effort to create such a narrative.

The author, to take one important example, links French intentions to Christianize and gain control over Siam in the 1680s to Louis XIV's persecution of French Protestants, which began when he revoked the Edict of Nantes. The French government, that is, pursued domestic and foreign policies with a crusader mentality that combined politics, diplomacy, and religious concerns focused alike on dissident Christians and heathen Buddhists. Van der Cruysee, more generally, highlights the religious intolerance and cultural arrogance that characterized the Catholic missionaries and their sending agencies in the period under study. He presents a particularly striking contrast between the religious attitudes of Siamese Buddhists and the Catholic missionaries who came to convert them to Christianity. He observes that each side found the religious views of the other impossible to understand, but it is the European Catholic inability to understand Buddhism's tolerance of other view points that the author highlights and criticizes. Of one encounter between a Buddhist monk and Catholic priest, the author asks, "What can a man convinced of believing a unique truth say to another who is content with his own version of truth, without questioning that of his interlocutor?" (pages 140-141). He goes on to contend that this "fundamental misunderstanding" between the two religion's view points, "was to underlie the relations between France, full of propagating zeal in the second half of the seventeenth century, and the serenely Buddhist Siam of Phra Narai." (page 142). Phra Narai was

the King at the time of the French ascendancy in Siam. It becomes clear in the course of the book that Christian zeal fails before Buddhist serenity.

The contrast between zeal and serenity is, in some ways, an over-simplification of Buddhist-Christian relations in historical Siam/Thailand. Still, it does call our attention to the demographic failure of both Catholic and Protestant Christianity to make inroads in lowland Thailand, a failure as persistent in the 21st century as it was in the 17th and 19th centuries. The author's critique of the Catholic missionaries' failure to understand the Thai religious mentality applies with equal force to the Protestant missionary movement as well. Dr. Maen Pongudom, in his landmark doctoral dissertation comparing Presbyterian missionary strategies in Thailand to the thinking of the early church fathers, argues that missionary ignorance of the Thai Buddhism has been a key factor in the failure to present the Thai people with a contextually meaningful Christian message.

The author's description of Catholic missions in Siam reveals other parallels with later Protestant work. One that I find especially intriguing in light of my own research is the way in which 17th century Jesuit and 19th century Presbyterian missionaries both utilized scientific knowledge as a medium for the communication of their missionary message. In the case of the Catholics, the Jesuits sent teams of priests trained in math, astronomy and other sciences to establish centers of learning in Siam, this on a model that they used previously in China. Phra Narai, furthermore, seems to have taken as keen an interest in Western learning in the 1680s as King Mongkut did 150 years later. The reception the people of France gave to the diplomatic envoys sent to Siam suggests another, somewhat quirky parallel. According to Van der Cruysse, France went through a Siam craze in the 1680s with large crowds mobbing the Siamese envoys to France whenever they went out in public, and the French populace displayed a deep curiosity about everything have to do with these exotics. From the late 1860s, the people of Chiang Mai and northern Siam displayed strikingly similar interest regarding the farang missionaries until they eventually became used to the Western missionaries' strange habits, manners, and customs.

One important contribution the author makes to our understanding of missionary history is his detailed descriptions of the Catholic missionary voyages to Siam. The trip out to Siam was an important time for study and preparation. The long voyages also include stops in various ports where the prospective missionaries formed their first impressions of "heathenism." Van der Cruysse mentions the sometimes touchy relationship between missionaries and sailors, who became the first objects of missionary evangelism. Presbyterian missionary families coming out to Siam in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had virtually the same experiences until the advent of air travel, although their ships were much safer, faster, and more comfortable than those used by French missionaries travelling in the 1660s and 1680s.

Siam & the West is not a religious history. It is not church history. Although the history of the Catholic Church in Siam, in fact, receives little attention, warranting only a few asides, the author devotes considerable attention to the Catholic missionaries to Siam, particularly the French missionaries, because of their role in the diplomatic events recounted by the author. The result is that there is not a little to be gleaned concerning the history of Christian missions in

Thailand, and the author's story of Siamese and European diplomatic relations offers numerous insights into the larger history of the Catholic Church in Siam.