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Lead Essay

Summarizing Presbyterian Missions in Siam



On 13 January 2004, I had the opportunity to speak at Payap University's McGilvary Faculty of Theology to a study tour group from the House of Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA, on the subject "Presbyterian Missions in Thailand." I had about 40 minutes for the presentation, an impossibly short amount of time to cover the subject, which forced me to shave the subject down to its bare-bones core. What follows is a summary of my remarks.

One good place to start in providing a brief summary of the history of Presbyterian missions in Siam/Thailand is to "revisit" the central purpose of the nineteenth-century Presbyterian missionaries in their work in Thailand. That purpose was not primarily to convert individuals to Christianity or to found churches, although they certainly wanted to do both of these things. Their central purpose was to convert the nation of Siam to Christianity. They worked from the premise that the Bible demonstrates that God has promised "the nations" to Christ, which meant for them that Christian missions had to focus on the winning of nations as well as individuals. They also worked from the additional premise that so long as the church lived in the context of a Buddhist society it would be in danger, under threat. The Christian church, they reasoned, exists securely and safely only in Christian nations. The hidden assumption underlying both of these principles was that the American nation provides the model for a converted and Christianized Siamese nation and, thus, a safe environment for the church. (We should remember that in the nineteenth century the United States was not the world's predominate super power that it is today and that the assumption that it represented the apex of Christian civilization was an assumption that it shared with Britain and the other dominant European powers of that day).

Like all human goals, these Presbyterian missionary goals had both an "upside" and a "downside." However we might feel about some aspects of the Presbyterian enterprise in Siam, it was based on a broad vision and a deep commitment to Christian values. And it did have at least two important positive contributions to make to Siam. First, the missionaries introduced positive social change, that is Westernization, at a time when Siam was in the throes of change that would have taken place with or without the missionaries. It can be argued that the American Presbyterian missionaries were a relatively benign agent of change compared to the European colonial powers, and that in the introduction of Western medicine, education, and other technologies such as printing they did Siam a real and important service. Second, they particularly followed the model of Christ in providing social and spiritual liberation for people in need, people who lived at the margins of society. Most importantly, they had a strong, positive impact on the place of women in Thai society and Thai religious life. The missionaries also provided liberation for people in northern Siam who were accused of "witchcraft," that is supposedly causing other people to be possessed by evil spirits. In addition, they brought real hope and healing to Thailand's lepers, and here in the North a number of government leper

colonies were inhabited almost entirely by Christians who converted because of the soul-healing comfort and new life they found in the Christian faith.

There was a downside as well to Presbyterian work in Siam, the effects of which are still with us today. First, the fact that the Presbyterians emphasized the Christianization of the whole Siamese nation meant that they had to put most of their missionary efforts into building up a strong Christian institutional base as the mechanism for changing Thai society. That institutional base included, most importantly, hospitals and clinics, schools and educational training programs, and printing presses in Bangkok and in Chiang Mai. The missionaries tended to downplay the importance of the local church as the primary agency of Christian witness and mission, and they failed to provide sufficient nurturing oversight of the churches they founded.

Second, as we have seen, the Presbyterian missionaries equated Christianization with Americanization, which meant that they sought to Americanize and Westernize Siam as much as they did Christianize it. For them Christianization and Westernization were virtually the same thing, not even two sides of the same coin. They based their work on the ideological principle that Siamese society was essentially evil, in spite of some good points, because it was not Christian. Siamese religion was at once atheistic and idolatrous and taught people to try to accomplish the impossible task of winning their own salvation. Siam was a heathen nation. The missionaries, as is widely understood now, took a highly negative attitude towards everything Thai. The consequence was that they established the church as a minority society that stood at the periphery of Thai society and was strongly alienated against Thai society. One had to give up much of one's Thai identity to become a Christian, and relatively few people were willing to do that. To this day, the people of Thailand perceive Christianity to be a foreign, farang (Westerner) religion. It is very difficult for the church to communicate the Good News of Jesus in this situation, because most Thais see Christianity as being bad news instead of Good News.

If we bring these observations down to the present, we can see that the consequences of Presbyterian missions, our heritage if you will, has also been a mixed one. On the one hand, the churches of a Presbyterian heritage in the Church of Christ in Thailand today do have a strong, independent, and meaningful religious heritage of their own. While the forms they following are generally quite Western-like, their faith is a Thai faith; it makes sense to them in a culture that eats rice in place of bread and potatoes. These churches have often been weak, historically, but many of them are increasingly strong today, and unlike the Presbyterian Church USA they are growing in numbers faster even than Thai society (See my article on CCT demographics in [HeRB 3](#)). Less happily, these same churches of a Presbyterian heritage continue to have a ghetto mentality that is strongly anti-Buddhist, and they generally fail to engage Thai society with a vital Christian message that is at once uniquely Christian and still authentically Thai. Where the Bible calls on the church to be "in" but not "of" the world, we have a situation today where these churches are not "in" the Thai world but in many ways have been subverted by more negative cultural ideologies so that they are in many respects still "of" the world. This situation is, however, not so entirely different from that in the United States as we might suppose. Presbyterian churches there tend to be so much "in" the American world that they too are "of" it.

Much more could be said than this, but it is important to bring this presentation to a close on a balanced, perhaps even positive note. It remains true that the Thai churches of a Presbyterian heritage are socially and religiously isolated and that they have trouble communicating a vital faith in the Thai context. Yet, these same churches are growing in numbers and, I think, in strength. For the time being, they are not headed in the European direction of radical ecclesiastical decline. Quite the opposite. There are signs, furthermore, that as the old missionary heritage dwindles into the increasingly distant past the churches are growing closer to their neighbors of other faiths and are less inclined to a radical rejection of them. While we simply cannot predict the more distant future (and there are some indications that CCT churches, like those in other parts of the world, are not holding on to their young people), the near-term future seems more positive than negative. We cannot discount the role of the old-time missionaries in laying a foundation that has made this growing strength possible-even if we must continue to criticize some other aspects of their work. Thank you.

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Ban Dok Daeng
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Articles

The Political & Diplomatic Setting of Northern Thai Church & Missionary History in the "Era of Resistance," 1867-1882

Herb Swanson

Introduction



The founding and establishment of Christianity in what is today northern Thailand took place in a maze of religious, political, and socio-cultural contexts all of which influenced the course of the events that began in 1867 when the Daniel McGilvary family arrived in Chiang Mai. Most of my own research over the last twenty years has been devoted to recovering the Western, American, and Protestant Christian sub-set of those contexts. That research makes it clear that the members of the Presbyterian Laos Mission behaved in certain ways and made certain types of decisions because they were Americans, Protestant evangelicals, and Presbyterians. The history of northern Thai Christianity, in short, makes no sense apart from nineteenth-century American religious history.

That history, however, also makes no sense apart from the context of Southeast Asian history going back into the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when five small states located north of Siam and east of Burma successfully transferred their allegiance from Burma to Siam. Those five states were Chiang Mai, Nan, Lamphun, Lampang, and Phrae. Prior to the 1890s, it is not correct to think of them as comprising "northern Siam"-although that is the term frequently applied to them-because they were semi-autonomous tributary states and had a great deal of de facto independence. They were not a part of Siam as such. A number of Western and Thai scholars (See the [Bibliography](#)) have pieced together the history of the Northern States, and the

purpose of this article is to use their work to describe the political and diplomatic context of the founding and early history of northern Thai church and missionary history up to 1882.

The political and diplomatic situation of the five Northern States that confronted the fledgling Laos Mission from the late 1860s through the early 1880s had its deepest roots in the history of the Lan Na Kingdom, which was founded in 1259 by King Mangrai. Although the Lan Na Kingdom became a center of Southeast Asian Buddhism and civilization, it eventually fell to Burma in the mid-sixteenth century and was divided into a set of smaller states ruled by the Burmese. For the next two hundred years, those states suffered under oppressive rule and unsettled conditions until the 1770s when the states of Chiang Mai and Lampang initiated wars of liberation that culminated in the final eviction of Burma from all of the five states in 1804. That victory required the aid of Siam, Burma's long-standing military rival, and once they had freed themselves from the Burmese the five states established a tributary relationship (*prathetsarat*) with Bangkok that left them as functionally semi-autonomous "princelets."

The Siamese and Westerners living in Bangkok generally called the five Northern States "Laos" and thought of them as being separated into two geographic divisions. "Eastern Laos" included the larger state of Nan and the smaller Phrae. Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang comprised "Western Laos," of which Chiang Mai was the chief. Wilson notes that, "The duties of the Lan Na principalities as *prathetsarat* fell into three general areas, periodic displays of loyalty to Bangkok, defense, and the supply of local products." The "displays of loyalty" included local annual ceremonies where the *chao luang* ("prince" or, following, Sarasawadi, "local king," in *Lan Na History*, 356) of each state drank the waters of allegiance as well as periodic missions to Bangkok to present gifts to the King of Siam. (Wilson, 75) For the most part, however, Siam left the Northern States to themselves in an arrangement that was congenial and beneficial to both sides. The North retained its autonomy while Bangkok gained the prestige of being suzerain to a set of relatively important states and the protection of its northern border.

By the 1850s, however, European colonialism, embodied especially in the looming presence of the British, was fostering increasingly massive political, economic, and social change into Southeast Asia. That colonialism imperiled both Siam's own independence and the status of the Northern States, and over the course of the next four decades politicians and diplomats in Bangkok, the Northern States, Britain, British India, and France danced an often intricate dance of power over the fate of Siam and its tributary states. The Laos Mission necessarily danced to the same political and diplomatic tunes as it pursued its own evangelistic agenda. At times, its members even proved themselves to be deft at political gamesmanship as they struggled to establish and expand an indigenous northern Thai church.

The following commentary focuses on the history of "Western Laos," especially Chiang Mai, for two reasons. First, secondary sources on the history of Nan and Phrae are limited for the period under study, and most of the historical work that has been done on the nineteenth-century history of the Northern States focuses on Chiang Mai and, secondarily, on Lamphun and Lampang. Second, Christianity only gained an entry into the two eastern Northern States in the early 1890s and the histories of Nan and Phrae, thus, are not relevant to the earlier history of the Laos Mission. It is clear, in any event, that the general trends described in this article apply to those

two states as well. The timing of those trends was different, however, particularly in Nan where the chao luang of that state retained a large degree of autonomy into the 1890s, well after it had been lost in the other four states. In Nan, the specter of France also loomed larger than it did in the western Northern States. (See Ratanaporn, "Social History of Nan")

Historical Roots of the Context, 1800 to 1850

With Siamese aid, the Northern States successfully evicted the Burmese from all of their territory by 1804, and all hostilities ceased five years later, in 1809. Over the next roughly thirty years, the Northern States enjoyed an era of peace that allowed them to recover socially and economically from the devastation of the brutal wars of liberation of the eighteenth century. They reoccupied abandoned territory and rebuilt deserted cities, towns, and villages. They also developed their status as tributary states of Siam.

One of the facts that has to be kept in mind when dealing with the history of the Northern States is that there was nothing "traditional" about the political structures and international relations that emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century. Prior to its fall to the Burmese, the Lan Na Kingdom had been more of a rival than anything else with Siam. Their status as tributary dependencies of Siam was a new development, one that proved inherently unstable, as we will see, in the face of European colonial expansion. The Northern States' continuing fear of Burma, more than anything else, motivated them to seek Siam's formal suzerainty, and that fear remained the key factor in their relationship for two decades, into the 1820s.

Both sides, as we have already mentioned above, derived important benefits from that tributary relationship. The Northern States were small and required a militarily strong patron while Bangkok benefited from the protection the Northern States gave to its northern borders as well as the prestige of being suzerain to these five relatively stable and well-off statelets. The Northern States, in particular, had every reason to remain loyal to their new suzerain. Initially, they required Siam's power to act as a counter weight to that of Burma, and then as Burmese power began to fail it was all the more important for them to remain on good terms with their powerful patron to the south because of the relative ease with which Siamese military forces could invade the North and because of the brutal way it suppressed an uprising by another of its tributary states, Vientiane, in 1827. The Northern States, furthermore, were too small to maintain independence on their own; nor could any one of them, even Chiang Mai, dominate the rest. Their tributary status thus gave them a unity they could not otherwise have achieved. For all of these reasons, the Northern chao (ruling class) deemed it wise to affirm regularly their tributary status to Siam. (See Brailey, 79, 48-49. On the Vientiane rebellion, see Wyatt, *Studies*, 185-209)

Scholars generally agree, furthermore, that Siamese suzerainty rested lightly on the Northern States, which retained a large degree of autonomy after they became tributaries of Bangkok. Communications between the North and Siam were slow, the distances between them great, and there was very little commerce between the two. The Siamese state itself was relatively weak and simply could not manage effective administrative oversight of its own outer provinces, let alone the still more remote tributary states. So light did their power rest on the North that the various northern tributary states even conducted their own independent international affairs. (Brailey, 79; Bunnag, 69; Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 87-89; and Sarasawadi, *Lan Na History*,

283) Ramsay points out, in addition, that the northern Thai and the Siamese did not get along very well. The Siamese looked down on the northern Thai as being ignorant country bumpkins while the people of the North considered the Siamese to be haughty as well as physically inferior. (Ramsay, 55)

Bangkok and the Northern States developed their relationship initially in a pre-colonial Southeast Asian political and diplomatic context little troubled by global issues. The First Anglo-Burmese War, which ended with the British defeat of the Burmese in 1826, brought about a fundamental change in that context. By the terms of the Peace Treaty of Yandabo, the British acquired important territories from Burma including the province of Tenasserim, which bordered both Siam and Chiang Mai. The city of Moulmein became Britain's main seaport and administrative center. Grabowsky and Turton note that the British defeat of the Burmese "marked a watershed" in the regional balance of power; and they argue that while Siam and the Northern States benefited from the decline in Burmese power, they suddenly confronted a more powerful, and potentially more dangerous foe in Great Britain. They, in sum, had to contend for the first time with the geographical and military proximity of Western colonialism. (Grabowsky & Turton, 5)

The British, however, were not an immediate threat. Britain had no pressing reason for or interest in acquiring territory beyond its Burmese possessions and desired nothing more than good relations with its eastern neighbors, relations it hoped would be marked by safe, stable borders. The next twenty years, indeed, represented something of a "golden age" for the three western Northern States. They developed a thriving export trade in cows and buffaloes with both Burma and British Tenasserim, the resettlement of territory depopulated in the eighteenth century continued at an increased pace, and the North experienced both political stability and economic growth. (Grabowsky & Turton, 10)

The Northern States, meanwhile, developed good diplomatic as well as economic relations with the British in Tenasserim, although there was resistance to such relations among some chao particularly in Chiang Mai. That resistance foreshadowed the emergence of an identifiably anti-Western (and anti-missionary) party in the North in the 1860s and 1870s. In spite of some objections, however, trade between the North and Tenasserim flourished, and by the mid-1830s the first British subjects from its Burmese territories began to export teak from the Northern States. The western Northern States and the British in the 1830s and 1840s, in sum, developed mutually satisfactory relations, and Bangkok wisely did not interfere in them. (Brailey, 68-69; Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 109-110)

Creating the Context, 1850 - 1867

The 1850s marked the full-blown emergence of a new and dangerous era in the history of Siam, the Northern States, and their relationships with each other. Wyatt bluntly states, "The last half of the nineteenth century was an extraordinarily dangerous time for the Tai peoples," a large majority of whom were at least nominally living under Siamese suzerainty at the time. (Wyatt, *Thailand*, 181) Britain to the West and South and France to the East and, eventually, North absorbed state after state until their troops stood on the very borders of Siam and its tributary states. To many it seemed inevitable that Siam and the Northern States would sooner or

later share the fate of Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Malay states of falling under the full authority of either the British or the French. That threat dominated the political life of the Northern States and forms the largest political and diplomatic context for the establishment and early development of northern Thai Christianity. As Ramsay states, "The equilibrium in relations between the central government and the northern tributary states which existed in the first half of the nineteenth century was thrown into increasing disequilibrium in the second half of the century by the impact of the West on Siam." (Ramsay, 57)

The threat to Siam's independence was a real one, and only good fortune and political skill saved Siam from a fate similar to the other major states of the region. The fortune was a combination of geographic location and the historical moment. Siam stood at the periphery of both British and French expansion in Southeast Asia, which meant that, especially in the case of the more dominant British, it did not pose a threat to European colonial territory. Britain did not conquer Burma because it coveted Burmese territory so much as because the Burmese foolishly threatened Britain's hold on some of its Indian territories. Historically, meanwhile, Siam was ruled by a new and relatively dynamic ruling house, the Chakri Dynasty, which had itself undergone a period of expansion that meant that it had "extra" territory that it could give up to the British and French without diminishing the integrity of its inner core. Finally, Bangkok generally displayed a political acumen in its dealings with the colonial powers unusual among the larger states of Southeast Asia. It understood that Britain dominated the scene and that in order to remain independent Siam must keep Britain happy, a task at which it largely succeeded. (See Tarling, 6, 64, 70; cf. Wyatt, *Thailand*, 185) From the 1860s, the British adhered to a policy geared to maintain the stability of Siam, using it as a buttress for British security in Southeast Asia while protecting its own dominant economic interests in the country. The nature of British colonialism, that is, actually aided and abetted Siamese strategies for staying independent. (See Tuck, 239-242, 253)

The emergence of a European colonial system in Southeast Asia dominated by Britain affected the Northern States even more than Bangkok because of their inherent inability to weather the forces of change independently. Despite Siam's own evident weaknesses, the northern chao had to continue to rely on Bangkok's suzerainty to protect them. To a degree, then, they too benefited from the "luck" of their benefactor's geographical position and historical situation, since in the long run their tributary status to Bangkok allowed them to avoid being swallowed whole by Britain or France. On hindsight, however, it seems all but inevitable that the five states could not survive in their original condition and that their dependency on Siam simply meant that they would lose their autonomy to Bangkok rather than a European power. The European colonial system imposed on Southeast Asia at gun point by the British and the French, in sum, forced Siam to learn to play the same colonial game in order to survive, and the Northern States proved to be the chief victims (or beneficiaries, depending on one's point of view) of that learning process.

It would take some fifty years for Bangkok to complete its conquest of the Northern States in a process that was, in contrast to the European penchant for violent military takeovers, largely but not entirely peaceful. Three key events in the early 1850s, none of which took place in the North, prepared the ground for that conquest, In April 1851, King Mongkut (Rama IV) assumed

the Siamese throne and initiated a new, more accommodating policy towards the West, one aimed particularly at placating Britain. It was just this policy, as we have seen, that played an important part in preserving Siamese independence at a time when the other major states of the region were falling under colonial rule one-by-one. In 1853, Britain concluded the Second Anglo-Burmese War with a surprisingly easy conquest of a nation that had long been a formidable adversary of Siam. The lesson of unchallengeable European military might was not lost on the Siamese government, even as Britain extended its borders with the Northern States. In 1855, finally, Siam and Britain concluded the Bowring Treaty, a trade agreement that fundamentally altered Siam's economic relations with the West. (Brailey, 83-95) The Bowring treaty had an especially direct impact on Siam's relations with the Northern States because Britain expected that Siam would enforce the provisions of the treaty in the North as well, especially the clause giving its Burmese citizens, including traders and loggers, extra-territorial rights. While the Northern States tried to deny that the treaty applied to them, they could not halt the growing economic power of Britain in the North or the fact that Siam, from 1855 on, would necessarily take a deeper interest in their affairs. Siam, for its part, could not ignore Britain's threat to deal with the Northern States independently if Siam did not bring them into line with Britain's economic interests. (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 121-126)

By 1855, then, the dim outlines of Bangkok's future, more "intimate" relationship with the Northern States was beginning to emerge. Until the Siamese government finally and fully integrated the Northern States into the Siamese nation state, Bangkok's authority in those states would vary from year to year and situation to situation. Its power, now and again, would recede for a time, but the larger trend was one of incremental increases in Siamese authority as the government sought to gain control over the North without driving it into rebellion. This is not to say that it was clear in the mid-1850s that Siam had the power to change fundamentally its relationship with the Northern States. Its armies had, in fact, failed miserably to conquer in three attempts the Shan state of Kengtung, a neighbor to the Northern States, between 1850 and 1854. (Brailey, 95-109. See also Wyatt, *Thailand*, 182)

More than counter-balancing Bangkok's governmental and military limitations was what may well have been the greatest single factor in the Northern States' inability to preserve their semi-autonomous state. That factor was the failure of the northern chao to learn how to deal with the British and the Siamese. They failed, most importantly, to respond creatively or positively to Britain's growing economic interests in their teak forests. They, instead, took unscrupulous advantage of the British Burmese teak traders and loggers by demanding heavy bribes for leasing forests for logging and, not infrequently, double leasing the same lands to two leaseholders. Serious, constant tensions arose, generated by the greed of both the chao and the British and Burmese involved in teak logging. By the same token, the chao also failed to take effective action to limit banditry along their border with Britain, which action would have reduced tensions with the British and reduced the need for Bangkok to intervene in northern affairs. The chao also failed to make any modernizing changes in the governmental and legal structures of their states, which failure only deepened British mistrust of and disgust with Northern States' corruption. (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 127-145)

Symptomatic of the situation in the mid-1850s were the events surrounding the choosing of a new chao luang for Chiang Mai after Phrachao Mahawong died in January 1854. Three rivals claimed the throne, and Chiang Mai finally had to refer the matter to Bangkok for a decision. Brailey argues that the fact that one of the main contenders, Chao Kawilorot, finally gained the throne by threatening to withdraw from government altogether if he did not demonstrate that Chiang Mai could intimidate the Bangkok government because it could not exercise real authority in the North. (Brailey, 109-114) Sarasawadi argues, however, that the King of Siam had never before played such an important role in the process of selecting a successor to a chao luang and that from this point on the Northern States had to fall into line with Bangkok's demand that it show greater loyalty and deference to the Siamese government. (Sarasawadi, *Lan Na History*, 289) Taken together, Brailey is surely correct that as of 1855 Bangkok still had little effective power in the North, and Sarasawadi is surely just as correct in arguing that Bangkok's power was growing.

During the 1850s, then, an inherently unstable situation arose created by British territorial and economic expansion, Bangkok's inability to project its power effectively in the North, and the Northern chao's inability to adapt themselves to the emergence of a new international order in inland Southeast Asia. Yet, it was not until after 1870 that this instability began to resolve itself into the full incorporation of the Northern States into the Siamese state system. The British were not particularly interested in acquiring the Northern States for themselves and did not wish to press matters too far. That reluctance limited its ability to influence change in the North. Bangkok, meanwhile, still did not have the political wherewithal to bring the Northern States to heel. In the Northern States, Chao Kawilorot, who as we have seen rose to the position of chao luang of Chiang Mai in 1856, provided the strong, if not particularly creative, leadership needed for Chiang Mai and the other western Northern States to retain their autonomy for the time being.

Chao Kawilorot was a forceful ruler who had a deserved reputation for brutality when the security of his state and his own personal power were at stake. Brailey calls him "one of the greatest characters in nineteenth century Thailand" and correctly describes him as "the last effectively independent Prince of western Laos." (Brailey, 115) Born sometime around 1800, Chao Kawilorot on his accession vigorously moved to suppress his rivals and end the internal political divisions of Chiang Mai, which divisions at that juncture posed a serious threat to the western Northern States' autonomy. (Brailey, 116-117) Brailey also notes, however, that Chao Kawilorot did not effectively address the problems facing the Northern States, as described above. In particular, the border regions between Chiang Mai and British Burma remained violent and unstable, and the Northern chao kept to their corrupt, greedy ways particularly in the way they mismanaged their teak forests. (Brailey, 119ff)

The pressure for a decisive change concerning the status of the Northern States continued to build in the 1860s, but matters apparently drifted during that decade. One of the factors that limited both Bangkok and Britain's ability to effect that change was the internal divisions facing both of them in terms of their respective policies towards the North. British India had one set of objectives with regard to Siam and the Northern States while the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office in London each had their own agendas. They not infrequently worked at cross-purposes,

and even the British consulate in Bangkok and local officials in British Burma at times acted as independent agents. King Mongkut's ability to develop a policy with regard to the Northern States, meanwhile, was limited by the power of the Bunnag clan and its head, Chaophraya Si Suriyawong (See Wyatt, *Studies*, 107-127). Si Suriyawong believed that Bangkok did not have a right to interfere in the affairs of the Northern States while Mongkut eventually sought to increase his authority over them. Change, thus, came to the North only haltingly, receding or proceeding according to the rise and fall of various factions, parties, and officials in Bangkok, London, Calcutta, Maulmein, and in the Northern States.

When the decade of the 1860s opened, Si Suriyawong and the Bunnag clan still blocked Mongkut's growing desire to gain closer control over the Northern States. Two events, both related to Chao Kawilorot, however, opened the door, momentarily, for the king to gain a modicum of that control. In 1862, a complex dispute over the lease of teak forests under Chao Kawilorot's control was referred to the Siam government's court for foreigners, and Bangkok called him down to participate. Although the original ruling was in Kawilorot's favor and against the British plaintiff, Mongkut took the opportunity of a British protest to reverse the decision and get Chao Kawilorot to make concessions in the case. (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 140-141; and, Brailey 130-135) Brailey suggests that Mongkut's treatment of Chao Kawilorot shows that, "The Siamese attitude to Chiangmai was clearly, progressively hardening, partly no doubt, from a desire to placate Britain, the only possible counter-weight to French ambitions, but also, probably, as the beginning of a vague centralization policy." (Brailey, 139)

The second event that allowed King Mongkut to exercise increased oversight over the North took place in 1866 when several of Chao Kawilorot's political rivals in Chiang Mai sent a letter to Bangkok accusing him of planning to transfer his allegiance to the Burmese. It is possible that Kawilorot did, in fact, contemplate such a change, but an investigation by Bangkok turned up no solid evidence; Kawilorot, subsequently, traveled to Bangkok where he took a humble attitude and even offered to give over to Mongkut certain gifts he had received from the Burmese. His argument that it had all been a misunderstanding was accepted, and he returned to Chiang Mai confirmed in his power as chao luang there. (Brailey, 141-151; Ratanaporn, 158-160) While Brailey feels that yet another shift in power back towards Si Suriyawong forced Mongkut to deal leniently with Kawilorot, the fact remains that Kawilorot did feel constrained to explain his actions, was careful to remain on the good side of King Mongkut, and depended upon powerful support from another faction in the Siamese government for protection. The weight of Bangkok's opinions and the ebb and flow of Bangkok party politics was much more important to the northern chao in the mid-1860s than it had been even a decade earlier.

It was while Chao Kawilorot was in Bangkok in 1866 that Daniel McGilvary approached both him and the Siamese government for permission to move to Chiang Mai and initiate Christian missionary work there. (See "Prelude to Irony," pp. 1-5) It is revealing of the changing but not yet changed situation facing the Laos Mission in its early years that McGilvary felt it necessary to gain permission from both Bangkok as well as Chiang Mai. Yet, Chao Kawilorot remained powerful in his own "kingdom," and it would have been impossible to live in Chiang Mai without his express approval. Britain had, meanwhile, begun to make its demands for a stable border and fair treatment of its citizens with increasing force. The political and diplomatic situation in

Chiang Mai and the North was complex. The older tributary relationship seemed still in force, in Nan as well as Chiang Mai; but in both cases it was the strong personalities of the chao luang that obscured the fundamental shift in power that was taking place.

Mission & Prince, 1867-1870

When the McGilvarys arrived in Chiang Mai in April 1867, Chao Kawilorot had entered the final years of his rule, which would end with his death in 1870. Tensions with the British over teak logging and border conditions had abated, and Bangkok, for the time being, was not inclined to interfere in Chiang Mai's affairs. The death of King Mongkut in 1868 brought Chao Kawilorot's old supporter, Chaophraya Si Suriyawong, to supreme power in Bangkok as the Regent for the young King Chulalongkorn. (See Ratanaporn, 160) In spite of Kawilorot's initial willingness to allow the missionaries to move to Chiang Mai, this brief final era of his ascendancy proved to be politically the most dangerous period in the whole history of the Laos Mission. As a rule, the mission benefited most from those periods when the Bangkok asserted its authority in the North and suffered most in those years when Bangkok's power receded. Fate would have it that the mission began in an era when the Siamese government's influence was momentarily in decline in the North.

In fact, as both Ramsay and Ratanaporn point out, the most serious challenge to Chao Kawilorot's authority in the closing years of his reign came from the Presbyterian missionaries themselves. Beyond all of the chao luang's expectations, the people of Chiang Mai showed considerable interest in the Christian religion, and by August 1868 seven men had actually converted to Christianity. Kawilorot interpreted their conversions as a challenge to his own authority and to the very foundations of Chiang Mai's patron-client social order, and he responded with a brutal persecution of the small Christian community including the execution of two of its members. (Ratanaporn, 161, and Ramsay, 64-66. See "Prelude to Irony," pp. 119-131 and *Khrischak Muang Nua*, pp. 12-15) At the behest of the American Consul and the missionary community in Bangkok, the Siamese government sent a special envoy to Chiang Mai to ensure the safety of the two missionary families resident there. Bangkok did not feel that it could do anything, and Chao Kawilorot ordered the missionaries to leave. Only his death in the following year, 1870, prevented their expulsion.

The initial context in which the fledgling Laos Mission worked, then, was one reminiscent of the situation in the Northern States prior to 1850. Although both Britain and Bangkok hovered just off stage and the days of northern autonomy were numbered, Kawilorot stood in a momentarily strong position in September 1869 in his confrontation with the mission. King Mongkut was dead, and the Regent was Si Suriyawong, who adhered to the principle of full Northern States autonomy. It was almost as if someone had turned the clock back to the 1840s. (Brailey, 159) The prevailing attitude in Bangkok, thus, was that the northern chao had their own laws and administered them according to their own likes. Those laws were strict, and the chao luang of Chiang Mai had every right to enforce them. (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 161)

The Laos Mission in the late 1860s, then, had to contend with a volatile situation that was both hopeful and desperate, dangerous and yet not without advantage. Chao Kawilorot, who seemed so powerful, had to contend with a difficult position as he tried to resist the irresistible forces of

political, economic, and social change. The Laos Mission, apparently so weak, was the first local agency in the Northern States to embody and represented those changes. While in the near term the mission could not resist the powerful Chao Kawilorot, in the long run, paradoxically, it actually stood in a more favorable situation than he did. It represented a change that the chaos could not, finally, contend with because of their own failures of leadership, and once Kawilorot died in 1870 there was no one left who had the power or the political acumen needed to drive the mission out of Chiang Mai.

Systemic weaknesses in the Northern States' political system contributed to the inability of the northern chao to deal with what amounted to the nineteenth century version of globalization. The northern Thai political system was generally loosely defined, power was scattered among various individuals, and much depended on who was married to whom. The chao luang did not have a clear-cut mandate to exercise actual political control, and his ability to do so depended on a variety of factors including his own political acumen, force of personality, family relations, and ability to create a viable political faction. This informal system worked fine in the hands of a strong ruler, one who could gather in the reins of power, but after Chao Kawilorot died, as we have seen, there was no other political figure in the western Northern States who could "work the system" as he did. (Rujaya, 67; and, Sarasawadi, *Lan Na History*, 289. See also McGilvary, *Half Century*, 142-143.)

Chao Kawilorot's death in 1870 thus effectively marked the passing of the "old" Chiang Mai, although it took another nearly three decades for it and the other Northern States to lose the remainder of their former autonomy. The passing of the old regime was of fundamental importance to the Laos Mission. There are indications that as far back as the 1830s, the northern Thai ruling class, the chao, were divided loosely into those who favored closer ties with the West and those who feared and resisted such ties. After 1870, these two tendencies emerged as identifiable political alliances, the one pro-Western and pro-missionary (or, at least, tolerant of the missionaries) and the other strongly anti-Western and bitterly anti-missionary. The main supporter for a tolerant, supportive approach to the missionaries and, more generally, to Westernization was Chao Mae Tip Kasorn, daughter of the deceased Chao Kawilorot, and wife of his successor as chao luang, Chao Intawichaiyanon (usually referred to as Chao Intanon). The chief pillar of the anti-Westernization, anti-missionary party was Chao Bunthawong, the *chao hona* or "second king" and Chao Intanon's half brother. The bulk of the upper level chao supported Bunthawong, and he dominated the daily political affairs of the state; his power, however, was not overwhelming such as had been the case with Chao Kawilorot. (See Brailey, 166-168; and, Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 176-177).

The Laos Mission & the Northern States in the 1870s

As the 1870s opened, the Chiang Mai government, dominated by Chao Bunthawong, faced the same problems that had plagued the state during Chao Kawilorot's reign. Conditions on the border with British Burma remained unsettled, and the teak loggers, who were British subjects, still complained about the way in which the chao handled (or, better, mishandled) them. Britain was not happy with developments in the Northern States and maintained its policy of putting pressure on Bangkok to take unambiguous command of its northern dependencies. The Siamese

government in the early 1870s, however, remained under the control of the Regent, Sri Suriyawong and he steadfastly refused to try to exercise authority over those states.

The Laos Mission, as we have just seen, suffered a nearly fatal attack by Chao Kawilorot in September 1869. While his death the following year brought it a reprieve, the mission had experienced a major set-back, and this period of temporary political stasis during the early 1870s allowed it to begin the process of recovery. Mission records show that the people of Chiang Mai were still afraid to convert, but the mission itself was able to set its own affairs in order and continue to evangelize the citizenry. Full recovery would not come until the end of the decade, but during the period 1870 to 1875 the ground was prepared for that recovery. The mission was aided by the fact that while Chao Bunthawong sought to maintain Chiang Mai's traditional political order he lacked the stature needed to command a unified response to Britain, Siam, and, locally, the missionaries. The Chiang Mai government could not thus solve the problems it faced with the Burmese teak loggers, could not bring peace to its border with British Burma, and did not have the wherewithal to prevent its gradual loss of autonomy to Bangkok. (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 177; Brailey, 174-184) Most importantly for our story here, it also did not have the strength to rid the state of its missionary presence.

The political and diplomatic situation in the Northern States began to shift again in 1873 when King Chulalongkorn attained his majority and the period of the Regency came to an end. The King, his party of young princes, and some younger government officials were by that time convinced that Siam had to engage in Westernizing reform if it was to survive the threat of European colonialism. Not everyone in the government agreed, of course, and a loose anti-reform alliance comprised of senior government officials, senior members of the Bunnag family, and a powerful clique led by the Second King, Prince Wichaichan coalesced around the former Regent, Si Suriyawong. (Ramsay, 67-68) The young King, in spite of this opposition, initiated a set of wide-ranging reforms aimed at streamlining governmental administration, reducing the power of the traditionalists, and bringing slavery to an end. (See Bunnag, 88-93; and, Wyatt, *Thailand*, 192-193)

Among the issues that divided the reform party of the King and the traditionalists was their different views on Bangkok's relationship with the Northern States. According to Ratanaporn, King Chulalongkorn had concluded that to resist the West it would be necessary for Thailand to become a unified state rather than a loosely organized tributary state as it was. The implication for the Northern States was that the King was determined to bring them under Bangkok control." (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 178)

The traditionalists, have we have seen, held that the Northern States were autonomous political entities, which Bangkok did not and had no right to rule directly. While they sought to frustrate any moves towards incorporating the Northern States into the Siamese state, the traditionalists had to act circumspectly because the British supported the King's "forward policy in the Northern States." (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 180-181)

Before he had assumed his full power, King Chulalongkorn had taken a trip to British India in 1872, which along with earlier trips overseas had an important impact on his thinking, encouraging him to engage in reform. That trip also provided him with personal contacts within

the government of the British Raj. In 1873, he availed himself of those contacts to further his project to gain control over the Northern States by initiating negotiations for a treaty with British India aimed at resolving the problems between the British and the Northern States chao. (Brailey, 185-190; and, Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 174) The result was the Chiang Mai Treaty of 1874, which called for a range of governmental, legal, and economic reforms in the North. As it turned out, most of the provisions of this treaty were vague, only fitfully implemented if at all, and the treaty did not ultimately satisfy British demands that the Siamese government take charge in the North. Among its provisions, however, was one that did increase Bangkok's influence and to a limited extent its actual power in the North. According to the treaty, Bangkok was to appoint a resident Siamese "commissioner" (*kha luang*) for Chiang Mai who was to see that the provisions of the treaty were carried out. (Brailey, 194ff) Ratanaporn observes that the result was the emergence of a "dual government" in Chiang Mai, a government headed by both the local chao and the Siamese commissioner. (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 172)

The man King Chulalongkorn chose for the position of commissioner was Phra Narin (Phum Srichaiyan), a civil servant who spoke English well, had traveled to Europe on a diplomatic mission, and had experience in governmental finances. He was evidently a skilled diplomat, and his assignment as Chiang Mai's first resident Siamese commissioner required him to use those skills to the fullest. (Brailey, 199; Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 189-191) Ramsay argues that the basic problem Bangkok faced with regard to the Northern States in the mid-1870s was "to remove the chaos as obstacles to increasing its authority in the North while, at the same time, not antagonizing them as to cause them to rebel." (Ramsay, 83) Phra Narin, who for his success in Chiang Mai was later rewarded with the new name and title of Phraya Thep Prachun, also had to placate the British while attempting to minimize and limit their power in the North. Bangkok still did not have adequate political structures and sufficient reach to extend its own administration into the North. It had to rely instead on a commissioner to represent it there, and it had to allow its commissioners wide latitude in carrying out needed political and financial reforms. (Bunnag, 104-105)

Ratanaporn sees the Chiang Mai Treaty of 1874 as being an important milestone in the eventual incorporation or "centralization" of the Northern States into the Siamese state, particularly because of the role of the commissioner. Through all of the maneuverings for position between Phraya Thep Prachun and the chao in Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang, he was able to inject an unparalleled degree of Siamese authority into the northern political process. His very presence served to undermine the traditional power structure to a certain extent. He made changes in the border police and gained some financial control over the northern teak forces, which further reduced the authority and income of the chao. Phraya Thep Prachun also convinced the northern chao to begin to turn some of their revenues over to Bangkok. The "dual government" system he introduced also served to increase the power of the chao luang, Chao Intanon, as opposed to the other higher strata of chao because Chao Intanon could deal directly with Phraya Thep Prachun on some matters instead of having to consult with the other chao. He, for example, began to levy taxes on his own initiative, something not done previously. (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 195, 197, 201. See also, Rujaya, 73; and, Ramsay, 71) Concerning Bangkok's policy of using resident commissioners in its outlying territories, Bunnag

states, "In spite of the limitations, the commissioners made administrative changes which constituted the beginnings of a centralized provincial administration." (Bunnag, "Provincial Administration of Siam," 105) Such was certainly the case in Chiang Mai.

The "era of dual government" did not by any means reduce the traditionalist's threat to the Laos Mission, but it did provide the mission with an important ally in Chiang Mai, one who could help it resist the pressure of its adversaries. The role of the kha luang as sympathetic ally of the missionaries was particularly seen in one of the most important local events to take place in Chiang Mai in the later 1870s, the issuing of the so-called "Edict of Religious Toleration" in 1878 by Phraya Thep Prachun. Ratanaporn emphasizes the importance of this event and argues that the edict "partly liberated converts in the Northern States from the traditional control of the chao." (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 195. See also Brailey, 232-235)

The events surrounding the Edict of Religious Toleration began as a contest of wills between the mission and the traditionalist party led by Chao Bunthawong over the right of Christians to marry without having to conform to local animistic traditions that carried the force of law. (See Edict of Religious Toleration, and "Prelude to Irony," pages 141-148) Although the chao luang and his influential wife, Chao Mae Tip Kasorn, sided with the missionaries, as did Phraya Thep Prachun, none of these three believed that they had sufficient authority to deal with the matter at hand. They felt that it had to be referred to King Chulalongkorn, who then authorized Phraya Thep Prachun, as Siamese commissioner, to issue an edict giving certain religious freedoms to Christians in Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang states.

The missionaries and the small community of Christian converts were, naturally, overjoyed at their apparent victory over the traditionalists. They seem not to have taken into account the fact that their victory created still further bitterness between the mission and the traditionalist party, which as we will see was shortly to make a final attempt at driving the mission and its churches out of the North. Still, if Ratanaporn is correct, the Edict marked an important moment in the political and social history of the western Northern States in at least three different ways. First, when Phraya Thep Prachun issued the Edict he thereby initiated a process of de-sacralizing the political system by which it was now understood that the citizens of Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang states no longer had to be Buddhists in order to be loyal subjects of the state. Until that time, the control the northern chao traditionally exercised over certain Buddhist-animistic rituals had been an important pillar of their political power. It was, as Ratanaporn writes, one of their "main techniques in controlling the people who were subject to spirit practices from birth to death." (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 209) While events proved that northern Thai authorities widely ignored the Edict, it did provide the Christian community with a new legal standing that rested on a secular, rather than religious foundation.

Second, one of the clauses of the Edict acknowledged the right of the missionaries to employ northern Thai servants, and the Edict also gave Christian converts the right to refrain, except under unusual circumstances, from working on Sundays irrespective of the strictures of the northern Thai corvée labor system. These provisions virtually confirmed the new, alternative patron-client relationship that had been developing between the missionaries and Christian converts. The emergence of a missionary-convert system of patronage beyond the boundaries of

"traditional" society served to weaken further the socio-political structures of the Northern States by establishing a legally recognized patron class apart from the northern Thai chao. (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 210)

Third and finally, by the same token, church membership suddenly offered those northern Thai who were willing to convert to Christianity a new avenue for social mobility, which was now legally ratified by Bangkok in spite of the wishes of the politically powerful traditionalist party in Chiang Mai. (Ratanaporn, "Chiang Mai Treaties," 199) In the decades that followed, the Laos Mission opened opportunities for women to become employed as teachers, Bible women, and domestic help in their own homes. They provided a Western-style "modern" education to women. These same types of opportunities were open men who had no particular social standing as well as men and women who had been socially marginalized by being accused of complicity in spirit possession (*phi ka*) or through leprosy or for other reasons.

The issuance of the Edict of Toleration, in sum, was a key event in the political history of both the Northern States and the Laos Mission. In the context of the Northern States' evolving dual government, the Bangkok side of the dual government gave Christianity a legal status that facilitated the mission's work and all but guaranteed its future in the North. At the same time, the occasion of the Edict afforded the Siamese government with an opportunity to strengthen its own political role in the Northern States, cement its reformist alliance with the Laos Mission, and slightly weaken the standing of the chao, its recalcitrant "partners" in the dual government.

More should not be made of the event, however, than it deserves. On the one hand, persecution of Christians continued almost unabated in spite of the Edict (See *Khrischak Muang Nua*, pages 28-29), and the Edict did not provide particularly effective legal protection for Christians in the years immediately after 1878. Many of the chao still did not think that the King in Bangkok had a right to legislate for them. By the same token, the Edict did not immediately and magically reduce the actual power of the chao, who did show that they had the ability and will to resist its implementation "on the ground." The tectonic plates of northern Thai politics did shake and rumble a bit in 1878, but the great shift in them that tumbled the North into Siam's lap was taking place at a much more measured pace.

The tension generated by the events leading up to the proclamation of the Edict demonstrates that the Laos Mission faced virtually the same basic problem in Chiang Mai that Phraya Thep Prachun had to deal with as the Siamese commissioner. As best it could, the mission too had to neutralize the power of the chao to interfere with its work while also placating them because throughout the 1870s the chao continued to exercise a great deal of political power. This similarity of interest between Bangkok and the mission in the 1870s reflects a larger set of parallel interests and concerns between the two that marks the whole era from the 1860s to the 1880s and beyond. Both the Siamese government and the Laos Mission were outsiders who, each in their own way, sought to increase their influence and power in the Northern States. The two differed in that while Bangkok, as a political entity, had also to compete for power in the North with other political entities, especially the British, the Laos Mission did not have to compete with any other external agent and actually shared a number of parallel interests with the British, particularly in seeing that the Northern States were stable and well run states.

The political situation during the 1870s, in any event, remained highly fluid and unstable. The Siamese commissioners, beginning with Phraya Thep Prachun, represented one new power center; their political allies, the Presbyterian missionaries, represented a second new, if lesser, political power center. As we have seen, something of a "balance of power" existed between the traditionalists, led by Chao Bunthawong, and the modernists, led by Chao Mae Tip Kasorn, with neither one being able to take full control over the other's objections. Brailey argues, however, that a generally anti-Western attitude continued to hold sway in Chiang Mai, one directed at the missionaries as well as the British. (Brailey, 217-218) Still, the Chiang Mai Treaty of 1874 led to important changes in the relationship between Bangkok and the Northern States, changes that ultimately benefited the Laos Mission.

In Bangkok, the balance of power between the traditionalists led by Si Suriyawong and the reformers under the King tilted first towards the King's party and then in early 1875 back towards his opponents. The reforms instituted by the King in 1873 and 1874 generated serious resistance on the part of the traditionalists and led to the famous "Front Palace Crisis of 1875," a political confrontation between Prince Wichaichan, the so-called "Second King," and King Chulalongkorn that threatened to descend into a civil war. While the crisis was finally resolved more or less in the King's favor, it brought his reform campaign to an abrupt halt for a decade or so. The King realized that his reforms posed a threat to the power of Bangkok's ruling elite and to the "traditional" political, economic, and social structures of the day. He also realized that he did not yet have the political clout he needed to achieve his reform agenda, and while he did continue to carry out some minor reforms the larger program was put aside for the time being. To put the matter bluntly, the King had to wait for the elder generation of political conservatives to die before he could proceed. (See Wyatt, *Thailand*, 192-194; and, Ramsay, 72-73) By the end of the decade, subsequent events—ones involving the British consul, Sir Thomas Knox, and his infamous daughter, Fanny, who had an indiscreet affair with a political rival of the powerful Bunnag clan—enhanced the power of the conservatives, again at the expense of the King whose prestige, Brailey concludes, "reached its nadir." (Brailey, 239-242)

The general suspension of King Chulalongkorn's reforms after 1875 meant that Bangkok also slowed the process of centralization. The Bunnags, in particular, used their increased authority to replace Phraya Thep Prachun, who they mistrusted and who had offended some of the northern chao, with an appointee of their own. The Northern States' dual system of government initiated by Phraya Thep Prachun in 1874 thus remained in place at the end of the 1870s, but the Laos Mission could no longer rely on the power of the King to sustain it in Chiang Mai.. (Brailey, 244--245)

The Laos Mission & the Northern States into the 1880s

Even though the Laos Mission had won an important round in 1878 in its ongoing struggle with the traditionalist party of Chao Bunthawong, that momentary victory did not immediately lead to an improved situation politically for the mission. As suggested above, by the beginning of the 1880s the pendulum had swung back in favor of the traditionalists in Bangkok and, therefore, in Chiang Mai as well. The King's relative loss of power in Bangkok meant that the mission still faced a potentially dangerous situation in Chiang Mai.

The reality and extent of that danger was realized in 1882-after a period of two or more years during which Chiang Mai Christians suffered through increased persecution-when Chao Bunthawong made what proved to be the last concerted effort of the Chiang Mai chao to be rid of the Laos Mission. In July 1882, Chao Intanon made his first trip to Bangkok in a decade, leaving Chao Bunthawong in charge of things in Chiang Mai. The following September Bunthawong published a decree sent up to Chiang Mai from Bangkok concerning the need to initiate certain religious reforms; to that decree he appended further decrees of his own forbidding people from visiting the missionaries, selling property to them, or seeking refuge with them when accused of causing demon possession. (Brailey, 249-250) In his own description of the events surrounding Chao Bunthawong's attempt to suppress the Christian faith, the Rev. Jonathan Wilson stated that Bunthawong evidently received a letter from the "Bangkok government" that left the question of whether people could become Christians or not to the discretion of the chao. He termed the letter a "distinct repeal" of the Edict of Religious Toleration. (Wilson to Irving, 27 Nov. 1882, Records of the Board of Foreign Missions) The letter Wilson refers to must have originated with one or another of the Bunnag clan, who generally believed, as we have seen, that the northern chao should be left to run their own affairs as seemed best to them.

As it turned out, Chao Bunthawong died in November 1882, just as his campaign against Laos Mission and its converts was getting into full swing. With his death, the traditionalist party lost its last strong, politically powerful voice, and the Laos Mission never had to face such a dangerous situation in Chiang Mai again. The state of affairs in Bangkok had also begun to change, as the King was able slowly to restore his power. A key moment in that process came in January 1883 when the former Regent and chief figure among Bangkok's traditionalist party, Sri Suriyawongse, died. (Ramsay, 92-93) With the death of other leading figures that had resisted significant reform, the King's ability to initiate meaningful change increased rapidly. The Northern States' years of autonomy were, as one consequence of these changes, rapidly coming to an end.

The rest of the decade of the 1880s would witness a number of highly important events the sum total of which was to promote the continued slow, but increasingly remorseless erosion of northern Thai autonomy by Bangkok. In 1883, Siam and Britain signed the Second Chiang Mai Treaty, which corrected a number of the weaknesses in the first treaty and led, subsequently, to the establishment of a British consulate in Chiang Mai in 1884. From this point on, the British teak firms would expand their presence in the North rapidly. In 1884, King Chulalongkorn sent a special commissioner, Krom Mun Phichitprichakon (Prince Pichit), to Chiang Mai, and the Prince initiated a set of political and economic reforms that included the reorganization of the western Northern States' governments and that further reduced their autonomy in spite of the fact that the northern chao still had enough power to thwart the full implementation of Prince Pichit's reforms. We should note, as an aside, that Prince Pichit played a direct role in the expansion of the Laos Mission when he urged the mission to consider opening a new station in Lampang and offered government support in doing so. The mission responded by founding the Lampang Station, its first outside of Chiang Mai, in 1885. In 1889, meanwhile, Siam brought the Northern States still more fully into its orbit when it completed the first telegraph line from Bangkok to Chiang Mai. Even the abortive rebellion of Phaya Prap in Chiang Mai in September 1889 only

managed to slow down the process of centralization and perhaps make it somewhat less heavy handed in its taxation of the general populace. (See Ratanaporn, , "Chiang Mai Treaties," 297)

The process of centralization reached its culmination in the 1890s, in two stages. In 1892, the Siamese government underwent a thorough reorganization that brought it into line with European governmental organization and practices. That reform saw the appointment of Prince Damrong, one of the most capable and effective members of the royal family (and the "Father of Thai History"), as the Minister of the Interior. He capably moved the process of centralization along to the point that, in 1899, the Northern States were fully incorporated into the Siamese state as provinces.

While these later events, as will be mentioned below, were of fundamental importance to the Laos Mission, they were important in a way quite different from those up to 1882. None of them threatened the existence of the mission or its churches. None of them, by the same token, "saved" the mission from the dire straights it faced in the 1860s and again in the 1870s. Chao Bunthawong's failed suppression of the mission and Christianity marked thus the end of an era for the Laos Mission.

Conclusion

For a period of roughly fifteen years, from 1867 through to 1882, the Laos Mission was an important local "player" in the political events that were shaping the political future of the Northern States. It was important enough as a political factor that in 1869, 1878, and 1882, the traditionalist powers in Chiang Mai took aim at the mission, seeking to cripple its work and drive it out of the North. Twice, the mission was saved by the death of a chief political rival, Chao Kawilorot in 1870 and Chao Bunthawong in 1882. So far as the mission itself is concerned, as we have seen, the passing of Bunthawong in November 1882 marked the end of an era, whether or not it was apparent at the time. After his death, the traditionalist party had no leader of sufficient stature to exercise effective political leadership in Chiang Mai, and as we have also seen Chao Intanon, the chao luang, gradually increased his power over against the other chao through a functional governing alliance with the various resident Siamese commissioners. By the mid-1880s, the Laos Mission was a fixture in Chiang Mai, and its buildings and heavily clad, white skinned members had become a "natural" part of the cityscape. In spite of future tensions and occasional local persecutions, the mission would never again be the political factor it had been up to 1882, and diplomatic and political developments in Southeast Asia would never impinge on it with the intensity of its first fifteen years. In that sense, the Northern States, in the aftermath of Chao Bunthawong's aborted persecution in 1882, had already become "Northern Siam" for the Laos Mission, although it would not be until 1899 that the transformation from Northern semi-autonomy to full incorporation into the Siamese state would be completed politically.

This is not to say, however, that political and diplomatic events ceased to be important to the mission or its history. From the Chiang Mai Treaty of 1883, through the Shan Rebellion of 1902, down to 1921 when the northern railway line finally reached Chiang Mai, those events would shape the course of the mission to an extent. At times, it would have to deal yet again with traditionalist parties that were still in power in, for example, Lampang in the 1880s and Phrae in

the 1890s. Throughout that period from 1882 to 1921, the mission would continue to be a beneficiary of the process of centralization and would, in fact, contribute substantially to the process in a number of ways. Bangkok understood, perhaps from the beginning, that it could use the Laos Mission as a tool for furthering its own political agenda in the North; in the mid-1880s, thus, the Siamese Government officially encouraged the mission to open a station in Lampang and even provided land for it to do so. After the turn of the century, Siamese governmental agencies in the North made substantial use of the mission's printing office for publishing notices and official documents in both northern Thai and Siamese. During the Shan Rebellion of 1902, the missionaries and local Christians sided entirely with the government and in Phrae even provided shelter for Siamese officials and residents fleeing the Shan massacre. Elsewhere during that rebellion Christians provided information and assistance to Siamese governmental representatives.

Still, in the end, the political scene did not influence the life of the mission to the degree or with the intensity of the years up to 1882. Viewed from the perspective of northern Thai history, the era 1867-1882 might be styled as the "Era of Resistance," the era when most of the most powerful political figures in Chiang Mai and elsewhere in the North sought to impede as much as possible the massive forces of political, economic, and sociocultural change buffeting their states. In Chiang Mai, the powerful traditionalist party repeatedly took aim at the Laos Mission, recognizing in it a dangerous foe that challenged the religious prerogatives of the chao as state liturgists, threatened their economic self-interest in the corvée labor system, and undermined their social standing by setting up an independent system of patronage. This power struggle between the Laos Mission and the traditionalists significantly shaped the work of the mission itself, limiting its ability to expand, intimidating its converts, and impeding its institutional work.

In the final analysis, however, the Laos Mission rode the crest of a political, economic, and social revolution in the Northern States that was not to be denied; and while it cannot be claimed that "historical necessity" magically ensured the survival of the mission, it had more in the way of resources and allies than might at first seem to have been the case. The anti-Westernization party could and did impede the work of the mission, but it failed to halt it. That party could persecute, intimidate, and make life unpleasant for converts to Christianity, but it failed to bring conversions to an end. When the "Era of Resistance" in Chiang Mai itself came to an end with the death of Chao Bunthawong in 1882, both the Laos Mission and the rulers of the Northern States had changed each other in important ways to the extent that historians cannot understand the history of either except in light of the actions of the other.

A Note on Contextualization

If the experience of the Laos Mission and its churches is any measure, political leaders and concerns have historically constrained the ways in which missionaries carry out their work. They have forced Christian missions to adapt themselves to local situations and defined, to an extent, how evangelism can be conducted and churches organized. Not being conversant with the literature on the contextualization of the Christian faith in non-Christian nations, so called, I'm not sure if it has given much consideration to the role of political forces in that process, but I

suspect not. It is likely that the situation and nature of the northern Thai church would have been quite different but for the constant political pressure placed on the Laos Mission in its first fifteen years. Politics, that is, is a factor in contextualization, which as a religious process cannot be separated out from the larger world.

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Searching for a "Useable" Karen Culture in Burma: Notes from an Interview with Esther Danpongpee

Herb Swanson

Introduction



From 27 December 2003 through 26 January 2004, Esther Danpongpee of the Office of History staff conducted a research visit to Burma with the purpose of collecting material on Karen culture and history to use in her work of conserving and using Karen culture for the life of Karen churches in northern Thailand. Thra' mu (an feminine honorific meaning "Teacher") Esther and I had a long discussion, something on the order of a "debriefing" session, on her visit on Thursday, 12 February 2004, and with Thra' mu Esther's permission I am sharing her observations and insights on her trip with the readers of HeRB. We would like to gratefully acknowledge that Esther's trip was made possible by the financial support given her work by the Baptist Union of Sweden.

Thra' mu Esther, since 1997, has carried out an important ministry with the churches of the 19th District of the C.C.T., which churches also comprise the bulk of the congregations that belong to the Karen Baptist Convention. She has studied the histories of some 20 churches in the Musikee, Pai, and Zion Associations, conducted two seminars on Karen theology, and initiated an innovative program for inculcating a deeper appreciation of their culture among Karen young people and children. One of the most serious problems Thra' mu Esther continues to face in her research work is the lack of readily available sources both on the histories of the Karen churches in Thailand and on the history of Karen tribal cultures. She went to Burma (Myanmar), as will be seen below, primarily to discover new sources of information.

It should also be added that while Thra'mu Esther was in Burma she learned of the death of her mother, who died early in 2003. Poor communications and inefficient postal services in Burma prevented her brothers from getting news of her mother's death to her. The staff of the Office of History shares in her grief.

Goals of the Trip

Esther explained that there several reasons why she wanted to take this trip to Burma. First, she wanted to gain further data on Karen tribal history generally as well as to discover sources of information in Burma on the history of the Karen churches in Thailand. (Readers not familiar with the Karen should realize that five or more million Karen live in Burma while only a few hundred thousand reside in Thailand). Second, she also wanted to gain more information on traditional Karen cultures. Third, she particularly wanted to visit a Karen Christian movement, called Musiree, that has taken an innovative approach to interreligious relations and evangelism, one that reminds Esther of the PTCA (Programme for Theology and Culture in Asia) approach. She repeatedly expressed her frustration about having only a limited amount of time, observing that a month was not nearly enough time to do all that she had hoped to do. She also noted that the Burmese government restricts areas where foreigners can travel, which meant that she could not go to some places she wanted to or, in some cases, could take only brief day trips to visit places where she would have liked to stay for a longer period of time. A third limitation she faced was that the Burmese government also puts severe restriction on the photocopying of academic materials, and she was consequently not able to acquire some important works that she wanted to copy and bring back to Thailand.

The Trip

Esther went to Burma with a group of delegates from the Thailand Karen Baptist Convention (TKBC) to attend meetings of the Burma Karen Baptist Convention (KBC), which met in the city of Pathein (Bassein). Before going on to Pathein, she took part in a planning meeting of the Christian Conference of Asia program "Reading the Bible with Karen Eyes," which met at the Anglican Compound in Rangoon. This meeting involved about 20 Pwo and Sgaw Karen church leaders from Burma and Thailand, and Esther ended up having to do some translation between the various languages and dialects being used. The meeting agreed that there will be no more international meetings of this program, which will now hold separate meetings in Thailand and in Burma.

On the evening of 29 December 2003, the Thailand group traveled to Pathein, and the next day they all went on a one-day "pilgrimage" to visit the city of Panathee, the hometown of the Karen missionary evangelist, Maung Htwe, who played a leading role in the founding and early life of the first three Karen churches in northern Thailand. Those churches, founded in 1882, were located in Lampang Province. Although there had been some confusion about the date of the visit, the three Karen churches in Panathee joined together to give its visitors from Thailand an enthusiastic reception. They were surprised, however, at the Thai Karen's interest in Maung Htwe, a person they remembered only as having been a lukewarm Christian at best and a person of no importance to speak of. They had no idea where he was buried. Esther had hoped to do some oral history interviews, but the situation did not allow her to hold more than hold a quick conversation with descendents of Maung Htwe; there was too much going on, and when she did sit down to talk to an informant there were just too many people listening and interrupting for her to get any amount of coherent information. The Thailand delegation could stay only for a fairly short time, and Esther wasn't able to get back to Panathee.

On the 31st, Esther and the representations from Thailand began to take part in the 86th annual meeting of the KBC, which was celebrating the 175th anniversary of the first Karen convert in Burma as well as the 150th anniversary of the Sgaw Karen Bible. Esther noted that the KBC had had a great deal of trouble getting government permission to hold this meeting, which involves thousands of people, and finally did approval only a week before it was to be held. A great deal had to be done at the last minute and, in her words, had to depend on prayer. The meetings lasted until January 4th, and on the 5th the group from Thailand returned to Rangoon.

On the evening of 5 January 2004, the Thailand group visited a large KBC congregation, the Themai Church, located in Rangoon. They were treated to a meal, and then there were various performances given. Esther stated that the "stars of the evening" were two of the Karen from Thailand who played traditional Karen songs on the Karen guitar, a musical instrument not much used in Burma anymore. The Burma Karen in attendance were evidently quite taken with the Thailand Karens' grasp of these old songs and instruments. These songs are seldom sung in Burma, and Esther observed that the Burma Karen are in some ways much more Westernized than are those in Thailand.

One of the most important insights Esther gained on this trip was that she went to Burma thinking that she would discover more "Karen-ness" there than she sees among the Karen peoples of northern Thailand. She was quite taken aback to realize that the Karen in Burma consider the Thailand Karen to be "more Karen" than they are. The Karen of Burma say that the Thailand Karen have retained more of the traditional Karen way of life and dress than they have, and in Patheingyi people even asked Esther for her Karen blouse and dress. They have nothing like it there, and they are only now beginning to reintroduce the traditional Karen way of weaving with a handloom. The Karen in Burma, however, are much more self-consciously aware of their Karen identity than are the Karen of northern Thailand, and they are making every effort to resurrect the use of their traditional culture in the Baptist churches in Burma. From what she observed, Esther feels that the Karen Baptists in Burma are far ahead of those in Thailand in using culture as a conscious part of church life even though they are "less Karen" in a traditional sense. One of the things that most bothered Esther on this trip was the amount of Burmese Karens in Burma use, even in their formal meetings. Some Karen churches even use Burmese in their worship services.

On Tuesday, January 6th, the TKBC group returned to Thailand, and Esther moved over to the Karen Baptist Theological Seminary (KBTS) at Insein, where she stayed with a friend. From that point on, Esther spent a great deal of her time during the next three weeks in the KBTS library where she discovered a large number of works useful to the study of Karen history, culture, and the history of the Karen churches in Thailand. This material is all in Karen and is virtually unknown to the churches in Thailand. As it turned out, one member of the staff at the KBTS has privately collected a large number of back issues of three old Karen-language publications, "Morning Star," "Go For Word," and "The Light." He very graciously allowed Esther to research this material, and she brought back a great deal of data on the history of the churches in Thailand from them. As it turns out, Karen evangelists from Burma working in northern Thailand as well as local churches themselves sent letters and articles back to Burma to be published. Esther feels that what she brought back to Thailand adds a great deal of important details to Karen church

history here. These publications also contain many pictures of the Thailand churches, which Esther had never seen before. Most of the material she collected dates from the 1930s into the 1960s. Esther also notes that before this she has had to rely mostly on oral history data to reconstruct the history of the Karen churches in northern Thailand, and while such data does give a generally reliable picture it is weak in details and texture. What she has now is both more reliable and more detailed.

Esther observes that much of the data she brought back is related to the Karen churches in three areas, the original Ban Nok churches in Lampang, the churches in what is now the Musikee Association, and the churches located in the area of Maesariang. She spent all of two weeks in the KBTS library and using the private collection mentioned above, and while there were other libraries she wanted to visit she feels that these two weeks were well worth the time spent.

In addition to her documentary research, Esther took a four-day trip to the town of Paan, which is the capital of the Karen State, one of the several ethnic states into which Burma (Myanmar) is divided. She went to the Karen State hoping to find out more about traditional Karen culture, but the situation there was not at all what she had assumed it would be. In Paan itself, at least, most of the Karen churches use Burmese in worship, and most Karen children tend to speak Burmese rather than Karen. They cannot read Karen. She was saddened by this lack of respect for the Karen tongue and observes that even in Rangoon most of the Karen churches use Karen in worship and in family life. Evidently even rural families in the Karen State use mostly Burmese for daily communication. There is a Karen cultural center in Paan, which Esther hoped to visit; but she was told that it was in a terrible state, her hosts were very reluctant for her to see it, and Esther did not press the matter.

If Paan itself was a disappointment, Esther's visit to the Musiree Community was not. The Musiree Community is a group of some 80 Karen Christian families, living in a single community, who devote much of their time to worship and prayer. Community members are supported by gifts from other Karen villages and by the labor of certain family members who reside outside of the community for varying lengths of time to earn an income, which they return to their families in the community. The community is physically very orderly, pleasant, and well tended. The community members say that they want to make it as close to Eden on Earth as they can. There is daily worship in the community worship center (they do not call themselves a church), and a group of especially devoted older women come together for hourly prayer with the group founder every day. The community's children go to another village to attend school.

Thra Sunday Tun, a Pwo Karen clergyman who at the time was the principal of a Bible school in the town of Dujha, founded the Musiree Community in 1974. The community is a result of his observation that the ways in which Protestant Christians usually related to people of other faiths did not work very well. The evangelistic demand for conversion only drove people away from Christ and caused unnecessary divisions between the religions. Thra Sunday thus started up an interfaith discussion group involving adherents of six different faiths, including two Pwo Karen sects as well as Karen who practiced the traditional Karen faith, called moluebala. This fellowship met once per month and evolved into the Musiree Community.

Thra Sunday's approach was highly controversial in the 1970s, and he was forced to leave the Burma KBC because of his "unacceptable" views on people of other faiths. Esther notes that Thra Sunday himself is a very devout Christian who spends up to six hours a day in prayer and devotions. As it turned out, all of the members of the Musiree Community have become Christians, something that Thra Sunday has hoped and prayed for but never pushed in any way whatsoever. In general, however, Esther feels that Thra Sunday's approach to people of other faiths is similar in many respects to that of the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia's (PTCA) accepting, open approach to interfaith relations. She is sorry that she could spend only one short day with the community because she feels that its perspective has a great deal to offer to the Karen churches of northern Thailand.

Reflections & Conclusion

Esther returned to Thailand with mixed feelings about her trip. She felt that she had collected a great deal of data in a relatively short time. She also saw places and work of interest and possible value to the Karen churches here. Burma, however, is a sad place to visit. The Karen people, in particular, are poor, making do on very small salaries and with limited physical comforts. Government restrictions made it difficult to visit places she wanted to go to and restrictions on photocopying academic materials limited what she could bring back to Thailand.

One of the benefits of the trip, on the other hand, was that Esther was able to renew old contacts and make new ones that are important in her work of conserving Karen church history and culture in Thailand. She was gratified by the fact that two papers she has written (see [HeRB 1](#) and [HeRB 7](#)) have gained a wide currency among Karen Christian academics and Baptist church leaders in Burma. On the whole, Esther came back with a renewed sense of the importance of her own ministry and a continued sense of its urgency. She was very glad to come home; she missed her family a great deal. Asked if she wanted to return, Esther was hesitant. On the one hand, she sees that there is a lot more to be gained from another trip; on the other hand, doing research in Burma is not all that easy and she has many reasons, she says, to want to stay close to home.

Short Items

Edward Said: Doing in Exile

In an interview he gave in Paris in 1994, Edward W. Said, was asked about his often expressed sense of not being at home in any culture and his feeling of being two people in one. Said, a professor of literature at Columbia University, is a Palestinian who was born with American citizenship. His response is worth a thought for all of us who live in a "foreign context." He answered,

"Well, I do not think I am two separate people; I am maybe four of five. The answer has been the multiplication of interests, without regard to trying to reconcile them to each other. I have stopped doing that, and now I just assume that I am, and everyone else is as well, a contradictory and heterogeneous identity. I do not really think much about myself as a fixed quantity, partly because of my illness. Without regard to who I am, I feel I still have a lot of things to do, and a lot of things I do not want to do. So I have made choices. Those things that I can do, I pursue with the realization that I am more than one person, or at least I am not a single, stable, coherent identity. For me, the condition of exile means the freedom to pursue these choices with no regard to a fixed place." He went on to say that his past, history, and heritage are now for him, "...part of the large picture which I call 'exile,' which for me has become a relatively generous field of opportunity."

Zero Sum Theology in America & Thailand

In his fascinating and detailed study of American theology from the post-Revolutionary era to the Civil War, *America's God*, Mark Noll describes that era as the most productive period for American Calvinist theology in American theological history-and the most contentious as well. American Calvinist theologians, from roughly 1790 through to 1860, wrestled creatively with a variety of key issues having to do with the nature of God, humanity, salvation, and atonement. Their primary method for reflection, however, was by attacking the thinking of other Calvinist theologians in what Noll calls "zero-sum reasoning," by which he means that "the defense of one theory usually entailed arguments against all others." (page 267). Noll cites Presbyterian theologians, such as Charles Hodge, as being major players in the game of Zero Sum theological one-upmanship.

Presbyterian missionaries first arrived in Siam in 1840, established a permanent station in Bangkok in 1847, and founded the work in Chiang Mai in 1867. The leading clergy members of the two Presbyterian Missions, the Siam and Laos Missions, were men trained in the Era of Zero Sum Theology, and they brought the instincts for theological battle with them to the field. Their records indicate a sure tendency over the whole course of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth to apply those instincts to theological reflection in Siam. Among their targets were Animists, Buddhists, Baptists, Catholics, and errant members of their own churches; their way of "doing theology" is one important source of contemporary Thai Protestant theology in Thailand. With that in mind, it is important to ponder Noll's assessment that the antebellum era was the "greatest, but also the most self-destructive, era of productive Christian theology in the nation's history."

Source: Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

The Grand Context of 19th Century Thai Church History

The following paragraph from Nicholas Tarling puts 19th century Thai church history into its largest global and Southeast Asian regional setting. It reminds us that everything was fluid, changing, and multi-polar in the years after 1800. Tarling writes,

"From the late eighteenth century, the involvement with Europeans, with things and ideas European, deepened and affected the whole of Southeast Asia; but it varied in intensity from people to people and from place to place; it increased through time but at no constant pace; and it took differing forms. Furthermore, it was always a matter, to a greater or lesser degree of interaction, rather than simply of Western initiative or challenge and indigenous response. Nor were Western initiatives and challenges the only ones. Others came to Southeast Asia, too, though in some sense they themselves had already been stimulated by the Western ones. Islam, for example, had increased its hold on archipelagic Southeast Asia in the preceding period of European enterprise: linked more closely with its homeland by better communications in the nineteenth century, it was deeply involved in many of the social and political changes which that region now underwent."

Source: Tarling, Nicholas. "The Establishment of Colonial Regimes." In *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*. Vol. 3, *From c. 1800 to the 1930s*, edited by Nicholas Tarling, 1-74. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, page 1.

A God Who Burns with Jealousy

The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) translation of Zechariah 8:2 raises a number of fascinating theological issues. That translation reads, "Yahweh Sabaoth says this: I have been burning with jealousy for Zion, with furious jealousy for her sake." Whether in a contemporary Thai or Western religious context, the assertion that God experiences burning emotions of anger and jealousy is hard to accept. The Thai religious agenda generally seeks to douse the fires of burning emotions through the denial of the reality of a "self" while the Western religious project proposes that the way of salvation is one of self-denying service for a Greater Cause. Both contexts generally view jealousy and anger as dangerous emotions that ensnare people in self-centeredness and blind them to the Way.

The biblical premise that God feels intense emotions of jealousy and anger presents us with an opportunity to rethink the relationship of negative emotions, so called, to our humanity. It suggests that there is a form of jealousy and a kind of anger that is consistent with a life of religious faith. From a Christian perspective, God created us with these emotions, which we are constrained by the authority of the Genesis creation myths to accept as good. In this framework, the Christian faith does not call upon the faithful to give up themselves but rather to reorient self

to God; and it is possible for such a reoriented self to feel jealousy that is free of self-aggrandizement and anger that is free of fearful self-importance.

The problem, of course, is that we consistently debase our God-given emotions by reorienting them to our self. We do this with emotions such as love and compassion just as much as we do with anger and jealousy. That tendency towards corrupt emotions does not mean we should not feel anger or jealousy any more than we should stop feeling love or compassion. It does mean that we have to see that not all angers are righteous (indeed, the vast majority are not), not all jealousies are healing, nor for that matter are all loves loving. Our emotions are healthful and salvific only to the extent that we orient them towards God and away from self. Such a reorientation is not self-denying so much as self-fulfilling; it is living the life we were created to live.

News & Notes

U. S. Consulate Records and Thai Church History

The Payap University Archives contains a set of six microfilm reels of the "Dispatches from United States Consuls in Bangkok, Siam, 1856-1906" (United States National Archives Microcopy 448). Although not precisely a "rich" source for the study of Protestant church history in Thailand, these microfilms do contain important information and insights not found anywhere else. They reveal the political and diplomatic role of the American missionaries, which was influential in terms of American diplomacy in Siam, especially for earlier decades. They contain a few letters written by missionaries, including especially Daniel McGilvary, to American consuls, which letters were forwarded by the consuls to the U. S. State Department for the diplomatic intelligence they contained regarding Siam's northern dependencies (notably, Chiang Mai). This set of records is especially helpful in the study of the two Presbyterian missions, the Siam and Laos Missions.

Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide

Just as [HeRB 8](#) was going to press back in December 2003, I received a copy of Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources, volume 2, Southeast Asia (Delhi: ISPCK, 2003). From start to finish, the volume runs to some 730 pages and contains brief histories of the nations of Southeast Asia and commentary on theological movements, trends, issues, and ideas, as well as descriptions of key theologians and Christian scholars of Asia. The whole tome is well seasoned with bibliographies. Not having seen either volumes 1 or 3, the size of volume 2 alone indicates what a large undertaking the entire three-volume project was. The editorial team, headed up by John England, is to be congratulated and thanked for what they have accomplished. The editors are to be particularly commended for their all but heroic efforts to see that Thailand is fairly and adequately represented. While the Thailand chapter is still appreciably the smallest of all of the chapters in this volume except for a very short one on contextual

theology in Laos and Cambodia, Thailand for once takes its place alongside the other nations of Asia as having a recognized, documented theological tradition of its own. There are, inevitably, minor errors of fact and interpretation in the Thailand chapter, but they do not detract in the least from the over all quality of the material presented. Anyone interested in Thai Catholic and Thai Protestant ecumenical theologies simply must make use of this volume.

"Akha Voices"

On a Christmas shopping trip to the DK Bookstore in Chiang Mai last December (2003), I came across a curious publication loosely formatted as a journal and entitled *Akha Voices*. Published by a Mr. Matthew McDaniel, the publication, which runs to 272 pages, contains repeated attacks on Protestant missionary attitudes towards and treatment of the Akha people. The tone is frequently strident, nearly always angry, and at points abusive, which is unfortunate and unhelpful as the publication actually voices legitimate concerns but so over does its attacks on just about anyone who isn't Akha as to throw serious doubt on its entire position. The genuine issues include Christian attitudes against people of other faiths, the not infrequent failure of churches and missionaries to address fundamental issues of social justice, and the fact that some individual missionaries and mission groups, as well as local Christian leaders, use evangelism as a tool for personal and even financial aggrandizement. Mr. McDaniel, however, so intently and vocally focuses on the negative as to fail to see that Christianity does sometimes serve the social, economic, and spiritual needs of oppressed people in Thailand. Indeed, as one reads this book posing as a journal and the contents of McDaniel's website (www.akha.org), one cannot but wonder if he too is not but another Westerner feeding (emotionally) off of the suffering of tribal peoples in Thailand.

In any event, *Akha Voices* is a resource for the study of the church in Thailand, one that offers one form of data for those studying especially tribal churches. While I can hardly recommend this publication itself, it surely raises issues that need to be addressed.

Dialogue of Life Dissertation

Although completed some five years, in 1999, I have just received a copy of J. Mark Hensman's Th.D.. dissertation, written for the Melbourne College of Divinity. It has the imposingly long title of, "Beyond Talk: the Dialogue of Life, Set in the Context of Two Communities in Western Thailand. Communication and Cognitive Theories Provide the Theoretical Framework. Two Villages in Which a Buddhist Community and a Catholic Community Live as Neighbours, Provide the Case Study." The dissertation is an important contribution to the understanding of how Buddhists and Christians in Thailand communicate their faith to each other in every day life. It also contains a large amount of theoretical and background material on the subject of "dialogue of life.

This dissertation is unique, so far as I know, within the increasingly large body of theses and dissertations written by Westerners on the church in Thailand. It documents the actual behavior of a local Christian community without advocating supposedly needed changes or pointing to

real or imagined flaws in Thai church life. The central argument of the dissertation is that Thai churches dialogue with people of other faiths on a virtually daily basis through the ways their members and leaders interact with their neighbors (hence the term "dialogue of life").

Dissertation on Conversion in Thailand

Dr. Edwin Roy Zehner has finished his doctoral studies at Cornell University with the completion of his long-pending dissertation entitled "Unavoidably Hybrid: Thai Buddhist Conversions to Evangelical Christianity" (2003). The body of the text runs to 270 pages, and Ed argues in the dissertation that even such avowedly "anti-syncretistic" faiths as those of evangelical Protestants are still fundamentally and irrevocably influenced by local values and beliefs. He writes, "...the stance of [evangelical] anti-syncretism contains within itself the very seeds of hybridity." (p. 27) Ed's dissertation is available through University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, 48106 (800-521-0600 or www.umi.com). Copies have also been placed at both the Payap University Archives and the library of Bangkok Bible College.

Dissertation on Thai Church History

Another doctoral study completed at the end of 2003 is Seung Ho Son's Th.D. dissertation on the topic of "Christian Revival in the Presbyterian Church of Thailand between 1900 and 1941: an Ecclesiological Analysis and Evaluation," which was written for the University of Stellenbosch, Republic of South Africa. The whole work including bibliography runs to 210 pages. The first paragraph of the dissertation's abstract states, "This study deals with Christian revival and specifically Christian revival in the Presbyterian Church of Thailand. Above all, it is an in-depth ecclesiological analysis and evaluation of the Thai revival through John Sung's campaigns of 1938-1939. This is a first attempt to examine this revival from a holistic point of view." By "Presbyterian Church of Thailand," the author means the churches founded by the American Presbyterian Mission, which became a part of the CCT in 1934.

A copy of Dr. Son's dissertation has been deposited with the Payap University Archives.

A Thesis on Karen Evangelism in Thailand

Young Chul Oh completed a thesis in May 2002 entitled "Forming a Mission Strategy for Thai Karen in a Remote Region: Research into Effective Communication in Evangelism," which has also just recently come to my attention. He wrote this dissertation for a "diploma in postgraduate theological studies in missiology" awarded by the Free Church of Scotland College. The thesis runs to 100 pages including bibliography, and the author briefly summarizes the purpose of the thesis by stating, "This study suggests a method of communication that is suitable for evangelism and a mission strategy for Thai Karen living in remote regions." It provides background information on and an analysis of the evangelistic work done by the OMF, WEC, "God for Karen" Hong Kong Mission, Korean Reformed Presbyterian Church, Anglican Church, Agape

Mission, and the Thailand Karen Baptist Convention among the Karen in remote areas of the provinces of Tak, Mae Hong Son, and Chiang Mai.

A copy of this thesis has been deposited with the Payap University Archives.

Movie Reviews

Introduction



The following two movie reviews are presented partly as a change of pace from my usual book and article reviews. They also affirm the fact that theology and culture are inexorably intertwined by showing how two "secular" Western movies contribute to Christian theological reflection as they call upon Christian categories to tell their tales. I have used two websites for background information and reviews of both of these movies; they are: the [Internet Movie Database](#) and [Rottentomatoes.Com](#).

In one sense these two movies have little to do with the Thai church, but at the same time they do raise at least two questions that may be relevant to the church here. First, what is effective evangelism? I have no idea what motivated the producers of each of these films, but one can view them and other movies like them collectively as an effective medium for Christian evangelism-so long as we do not expect evangelism to demand formal conversion from one religious institutional and ideological system to another. They convey basic Christian insights without the trappings of the institution, which trappings "turn off" so many people today. Many thousands of people, most of them not Christians, for example, went to see "Bruce Almighty" here in Thailand. In the course of watching the film, they received covert instruction in (Western) Christian thinking. No one asked them to sign a card, kneel in prayer, or join a cell group, and the message was not tied to the institutional agendas of paid or volunteer Christian evangelists. Is this evangelism? Is it effective? Did seeing the movie allow people here to "make sense" of Christian theological categories in a way that will help them live better lives? Was "Bruce Almighty" an effective medium for quietly subverting acquisitive secular values of self-aggrandizement? Did it help people of other faiths see the Christian God in a new, more positive and comprehensible light?

A second question raised by these movies is that of the role of the church. In "Bruce Almighty," again, God is very much present in the film while in the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy Christ is more subtly present. The church is entirely missing in both of them. Does this mean that 21st century Christianity can do without the church and can communicate its message through entirely non-ecclesiastical agencies? If so, then who are the stewards of the Christian story? What agencies will communicate it across generations? The films contain but a hint of a shadow of the large Christian theological corpus, but their "theologies," if theology they be, make no sense, finally, apart from that corpus. Who will maintain the Christian theological corpus as a body of living theology from which "secular" authors and producers can draw?

It seems to me that we really do not know very much about how theological reflection outside of academic settings (or even in the, for that matter) actually takes place. The church, in particular, I suspect has shied away from what is becoming the commonplace understanding of human cognition generally, that is that the way we think is "socially constructed." A nifty little epigram of the late twentieth century refers to the "social construction of reality." We should also refer to the "social construction of theology," which means that what we early twenty-first century Christians believe about God is not "essentially" biblical but rather "essentially" social. "Bruce Almighty" and the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy embody that truth in celluloid, communicating each in their own way a social, general, uneclesiastical Western understanding of certain religious truths. Theological reflection, to state the matter somewhat differently, is (in important part) a shared, public act that suffuses the way people think about ultimate realities. Unless one stops using her mother tongue, stops all contact with the media, and cuts himself off from all but the most superficial social contact, no person can escape the influence of shared, public theology on their thinking.

It is possible to reject public theology as being superficial and merely the reflection of "culture religion," meaning that it corrupts or, at best, fails to capture the "true" meaning of "real" theology. Karl Barth and Paul Tillich wrote "real" theology; or, to put matters in an Asian context, C. S. Song and Kosake Koyama are "real" theologians. Yet, Koyama, at least got his start in Asian theology because of his encounter with northern Thai village theology, which he at times calls "kitchen theology." Barth, Tillich, and any other "real" theologian one cares to name, when studied in their own time and place also prove to have built their theologies out of the linguistic, philosophical, ideological, and other cultural tools provided for them by public discourse and social reflection. We need, I think, to pay more attention to the powerful place public theology has in our societies and to understand that it has its own value and integrity. A better understanding of such theologies might help us to better communicate the messages of our more formal theological heritages.

"Bruce Almighty"



"Bruce Almighty" is an apparently light-hearted movie starring Jim Carey as Bruce, Jennifer Aniston as Bruce's girl friend, and Morgan Freeman as God. Bruce is a self-involved down-on-his-luck TV reporter for whom nothing goes right. He blames God. And God calls him to account in a bemusing fashion. God gives Bruce divine powers and tells him he is in charge of things, the idea being that if Bruce doesn't like the way God does the Lord of Heavens & Earth shtick, Bruce can just do the job himself. God is going on a vacation.. Bruce, in the course of things, goes overboard, using his divine powers to amuse himself, get back at a rival reporter at his TV station, and turn himself into a renowned reporter in his own right. He deals with prayers, of which he has to answer millions and millions, by computerizing them and, eventually, just answering "yes" to all of them-to save himself time. God told Bruce that one of the things he could not do was "mess with free-will," and it is on this score that our self-important god-for-a-day finally takes a tumble. For all of his divine powers, he can't win the heart of his live-in girl friend. He is Bruce Almighty, but she still leaves him because he is interested finally only in himself. Her heart is broken. He dies, having decided to fall on his

knees in prayer on a busy highway. In the end, of course, Bruce learns humility and love, gets his life back, gets his girl, and lives happily ever after without recourse to divine power.

Sounds dumb. Personally, I'd rate the movie as a comedy at only about 6.0 or 6.5 at best on a scale of 1 to 10. Not all that funny actually. (As the reviews and ratings show: Rottentomatoes.Com counted 154 reviews of "Bruce Almighty," the majority of which gave it a negative review. Rottentomatoes.com itself gives the movie a 5.9 rating on a scale of 10; the IMDb "user rating" gave it an only slightly better rating of 6.4).

As theology, however, "Bruce Almighty" scores much higher, something above an 8.0 on that same scale of 10. The film teaches a number of key theological points including: first, the source of much of our unhappiness is self-absorption, a fixation with our own wants, needs, and goals. This blind self-absorption affects our relationship with God; it causes us to blame God for the things that go wrong in life. Second, power is not the path to salvation. Self-absorption corrupts even divine power. The more Bruce uses his divine powers the more he messes up the world, causing natural disasters and fostering urban rioting. Bruce, the divine reporter, "just happens" thus to be on the scene when a huge meteor strikes the Earth-an event he himself caused-and files an exclusive report that greatly enhances his career. That same meteor (inexplicably) disrupts electrical power, thus causing chaos. Having divine power, in any event, does not bring Bruce happiness or salvation. Third, Bruce Almighty finds out that if he answers all human prayers positively he causes even more chaos because people pray for selfish things, silly things, and things that shouldn't be. If everybody's prayers are answered, the world will fall apart. Fourth, God doesn't "mess with free will," and that's a good thing. Bruce tries to force his girl friend to love him, which only causes her to feel more alienated from him. Throughout the movie, God reappears from time to time to offer Bruce advice, sympathy, and wisdom. In the end, finally, Bruce only wins his girl, achieves professional excellence as a reporter, and becomes reconciled with God after he loses his divine powers and, more importantly, his selfish orientation to life.

The movie is better theology than it is comedy, and the fact that it is better theology may be why it doesn't work all that well as comedy. The fascinating things about "Bruce Almighty" is the manner in which it packages patently Christian theological reflection in the medium of a popular, "secular" movie culture. While not one of the great hits of all or any time, still millions of people around the world have viewed this theological film, which teaches that the way to happiness and fulfillment is by reorienting one's life away from self, towards others, and in harmony with God. God, as played by Morgan Freeman, is a wise, insightful, engaging, and quietly humble Individual who visibly (and visually!) embodies divine patience with and suffering over the limitations of humanity. God is the very antithesis of Bruce, and Bruce only gains a meaningful life as he learns selfless, divine wisdom. Freeman's portrayal of God makes a lot of Christian theological sense in a secular, early 21st century world, much more sense than a lot of Sunday morning preaching. The movie itself, whether intentionally or otherwise, capably contextualizes central categories of the Christian faith, packaging them in ways that make those categories more accessible to people who seldom darken the church's door. It teleports the Christian message of reconciliation with self, others, and God from its usual location in ecclesiastical halls into the cinematic aisles. Amen.

"Lord of the Rings" Trilogy



In September 1970, I had just moved to Washington, D.C. to look for a job that would constitute a year long "secular internship" at Princeton Seminary. I pounded the pavement in "our nation's capital" fairly seriously looking for that job, and it so happened one afternoon I walked by a book store that had a display of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings in the shop window. I didn't have a television and had been counting my pennies very carefully but decided that I could afford cheap copies of all three volumes. In the 34 years since that brisk, darkening September afternoon in D. C., I have read and re-read Tolkien's trilogy along with his stand-alone prequel, The Hobbit and never tire of the bitter-sweet story of Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, and Tolkien's cast of thousands. That makes me, I suppose, an addict, although I do not eat, sleep, and dream hobbits and orcs as, evidently, do some of the truly hardcore smitten do. The strange thing is that, other than Tolkien's stories about hobbits, I've never met a fantasy story that I like. My pleasure reading is divided between science fiction and history, which for me represent two sides of the same coin-historians make educated, not rarely well-researched guesses at what the past was like and scifi authors tell educated, sometimes elaborately researched stories about what the future might be like.

Lord of the Rings, the trilogy, has the marks of both good scifi and good history. It is very well written. It creates a world that is textured, complex, and entirely believable once the reader accepts the premise that such a world could exist or, at least, "makes sense" in and of itself. Tolkien obviously did his research. Indeed, one might even look upon Lord of the Rings as a historical work, one based on Tolkien's own experience in the European trenches during World War I.

The movie trilogy, sadly but inevitably, simply does not compare to the books. That is not to say that the three movies are "bad" theater; they certainly are not. The cinematic trilogy, however, all but entirely fails to capture the very human side of Tolkien's saga, which focuses on relationships and adventures rather than on war and battles. The massive battle scenes that dominate especially "The Two Towers" and "The Return of the King" do not dominate the trilogy although they are obviously an important part of it. The movies also entirely omit some of the best scenes and characters in the books. One profoundly misses Tom Bombadil in the beginning of the story, a happy go-lucky figure who stands outside of time and for whom the Ring has no meaning or terror. At the end of the trilogy, one misses even more the "scouring of the Shire" and the last battle of the epic, which was a small one fought only with knives and pitchforks in the Shire itself. There is, however, no sense beating up on the movie for not being as good as the book. The producers produced a set of movies that would sell and still capture something of the spirit of the books, if only in part and superficially.

The movies have captured something of the "essence" of Tolkien in several ways. In spite of all of the big screen battles, the three films taken together are about Gollum and Sam more than anyone else. In a book full of heroes, these two figures in very different ways are the two greatest heroes. In the books and the movies, Frodo failed to complete his mission. Gollum had

to complete it for him. In the books and the movies, Frodo would never have even reached Mt. Doom without Sam, a gardener by trade who had none of the markings of greatness until forced to cope with and conquer a series of impossibly dangerous challenges. Both the books and the movies are about heroism, and both carry the message that the true heroes are "little" people who simply muddle through what needs muddling through. More largely, the movies do retain the central threads of Tolkien's trilogy, sometimes majestically, and the ending in "The Return of the King" is as powerfully bittersweet as it is in the final chapters of the books.

The movie trilogy, moreover, is as much a work of covert Christian theology as are the books. They portray evil as a dangerous, powerful reality, which entices and beguiles good people (such as Saruman) into turning to evil themselves. Evil clouds the minds of people. It creates dissension. "Lord of the Rings" embodies evil in both Sauron, the Evil Eye that dominates the story with his intended conquest of Middle Earth, and in the Ring, which has an evil will of its own that is linked to Sauron. The Ring has power to corrupt, and the stark point is made that it has an especially strong power over humans. The "Return of the King" begins with a particularly compelling description of how lust for the Ring caused the hobbit-like person, Smeagol, to commit murder to possess it and then was driven into the dark depths of the earth to live a tragic "life" as Gollum. Both Christian theology and Tolkien take the reality of evil seriously and embody evil in a person, Christianity in Satan and Tolkien in Sauron.

Building on this vision of the power of evil, the movies portray reality as an unending struggle between good and evil, and even where good does prevail it is only with a price. While there is no Christ-figure as such, the Christian theological motif of the suffering servant is prevalent; it obviously dominates the journey into darkness of Frodo and Sam, but all of the other key "good guys and gals" also suffer as they seek to do good. And like Christian theology, Tolkien affirms the power of good over evil, affirms the reality and power of hope in the face of despair. Sacrifice has meaning, even the ultimate and redeeming sacrifices of Boromir and of King Théoden of Rohan, who both transcended their own dark experiences of temptation, evil, and despair. Frodo, however, provides the clearest example of the theme of sacrifice at the very end of the "Return of the King" when it becomes clear that he (along with Sam and Gollum) saved Middle Earth by destroying the Ring, but he did not share in that salvation. He did not physically die, but he truly did give his life for the sake of others in a clear, if covert recalling of Christ's own ultimate sacrifice. The books and movies, finally, also embody a clear Christian understanding of greatness and salvation, namely that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Greatness is not a matter of power and salvation is not won, finally, by the "usual" military and political means. The path of true salvation is away from the direction that the world usually considers the "right path" to greatness.

Christian themes are less overt in the Tolkien trilogy, but they are no less powerful; and where Carey's *Bruce Almighty* was an almighty flop, "Lord of the Rings" will long stand as an important cinematic event, witnessed by tens and tens of millions of people. I know of people who went to see "Return of the King" three or more times. Does that not make it an effective medium for communicating elements of the Christian faith?