

HeRD #312 - Hughes I: Barriers to Christian Faith in Thailand

Dr. Philip Hughes contributes the next seven HeRDs. Philip is a member of the Christian Research Associates, a church-oriented research group based in Melbourne. He visited Chiang Mai in August-September 1996 and helped me teach two research courses at McGilvary Faculty of Theology. The following HeRDs are based on a small research project he conducted with the students in one of those courses. You'll find them interesting and revealing. My thanks to Philip for his contribution.

What follows are Philip's own HeRDs, but I should mention that they have been edited somewhat.

In September 1996, I took a few sessions with seminary students at the McGilvary Faculty of Theology in research methods. We took, as our focus, the topic of evangelism. The first part of the process was to make some general observations, think about the relevant literature, and then develop some ideas that we might test. From there, the students assisted in developing a questionnaire which was circulated to seminary students asking about their own experiences of becoming Christian and those factors that have been helpful or problematic in being a Christian. Questionnaires were collected from about half the seminary students -- not a good sample, but sufficient for the purpose of learning something about research methods.

One of the questions asked about the various barriers to becoming, or remaining, a Christian in Thailand. We put before the seminary students ten possible barriers and asked them to rate how significant each of one had been for them. The most significant barrier among the students was the fact that Christianity was 'not Thai'. Thirteen percent of the students said that it was the most significant barrier for them. Another 45 percent indicated that it was a very significant barrier. Thus, nearly two-thirds of all the students expressed considerable concern. It is also interesting that although this issue was mentioned by both students who had grown up in Christian families and by those who had grown up in Buddhist families, it was considerably more significant among those who had been Buddhists of whom 100 percent rated it as a significant or very significant barrier to them. The fact that 'Christianity' was Western, or might be seen that way in Thailand, was not such a problem. Some of the students suggested that this was because the seminary students knew that Christianity was not, in fact, originally Western. It was interesting that problems of opposition from family and friends, or problems with the nature of Christian belief itself were not nearly as significant as barriers as the fact Christianity was 'not Thai'.

If this result is indicative of Thai people generally, it means that one focus for Thai Christian apologetics should be to deal with this issue of the alien nature of Christianity. Indeed, it may be something that every part of the church needs to address: in forms of worship, in patterns of faith, in processes of administration. The incarnational principle is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition: that God comes to us in human form, and within specific cultural contexts. Paul put it this way: we should be all things to all people, in order that we might win some!

HeRD #313 - Hughes II: Another Barrier to Faith

In the last HeRD, I gave account of a small questionnaire filled in by seminary students at the McGilvary Faculty of Theology in Chiang Mai in September 1996. The sample was small, and in terms of looking at the church in northern Thailand, hardly representative. However, some of the results were quite suggestive, and worth investigating further.

The major barrier to belief for the seminary students was the fact that Christianity was seen as not being 'Thai'. However, another significant barrier for many of the students was that they were aware of many people who claimed to be Christian setting bad examples, or not showing Christian love. Forty-five percent of all students said that this was a very significant or the most significant barrier for them. The problem was not quite as great among the students who had grown up in Buddhist families as it was among those from Christian families. Buddhist families would not be so aware, perhaps, of Christians "setting a bad example". However, with a small sample of students from Buddhist families, the differences were not statistically significant.

The problem of bad examples was given a higher rating among younger students than among

older ones. Perhaps, older students, with their wider experience of life, were more accepting of people who did not live up to the standards expected of them. This barrier to belief was rated considerably higher than issues of the nature of Christian belief itself, or opposition from family or friends. It is another reminder that in the processes of evangelism, the example of Christians remains a very significant influence.

HeRD #314 - Hughes III: Friendship and Evangelism

The last two HeRDs have been about a questionnaire completed by McGilvary Seminary students in September 1996. One of the questions looked at the barriers to Christian belief in the experience of the students. Another significant barrier, following the fact that Christianity was seen as 'not Thai' and awareness of people who had not been 'good examples', was opposition from friends. This was more important than opposition from family. Two percent of the students said that this had been the most significant barrier, and another 36 percent said it was very significant as a barrier.

Another question asked about the influences on the students in becoming Christian or developing a life of faith. The most widely affirmed influence among the seminary students were personal experiences of God's love. Among the wide range of other experiences to which they pointed were 'friends'. Twenty-four per cent of the students said friends were the most significant influence on them becoming Christian or remaining Christian, and another 68 per cent said friends were very significant. One hundred per cent of those students who had grown up in Buddhist families rated 'friends' as a very important or the most important influence, compared with 66 percent of those who had grown up in Christian families. 'Friends' is a major factor in people becoming Christian in northern Thailand -- both positively and negatively. If people find opposition from their friends to becoming Christian, they are far less likely to do so. On the other hand, friendship can be a very positive influence in bringing people into the Christian faith. One of the students recounted in class her own experience. She had grown up in a Buddhist family. One of her friends had a major part in her becoming a Christian. On the other hand, after conversion she lost many of her former friends.

Effective evangelism is not just a matter of teaching about faith. Forming and developing Christian community in which people can build positive friendships is a very important factor. In Australia, my church developed a student accommodation scheme for rural students studying in the city. We find that most of the students form strong friendships with the other students in the four houses we operate. We work hard to maintain a Christian ethos in the scheme. I have seen many students come into the church through that scheme. It has been the most effective evangelistic program the church has had, certainly within the last twelve years. Providing the opportunity and encouragement for the development of appropriate friendships has been the key.

HeRD #315 - Hughes IV: Other Influences on becoming Christian

In the last HeRD, we saw that in the survey taken among seminary students, 'friendship' was noted as both a positive and a negative influence in people becoming Christians. We also observed that of 15 items suggested to students as influences on being a Christian, the most important was experiences of God's love. Personal experience appeared in several other parts of the survey. For example, 38 per cent of the students said that an experience in which they had been healed had been the most important influence on them becoming or remaining Christians. Another 23 per cent indicated that the experience of seeing someone else healed had been the most important influence on them. Between 75 and 80 per cent of the students said that experiences of healing were either the 'most important' or 'very important' among the influences on them.

Thai people want to see 'evidence' of the power of God. There is a widespread interest in miracles for a similar reason. They expect God to work in ways which will be evident. Thirty-eight percent of the students said they had an experience of something miraculous happening to them, such as being healed in a way they did not expect, several times. Another 25 per cent of students said it had happened to them once. 34 per cent of students said it had not happened to them.

I believe that a similar interest has grown in Australia, and is part of the reason for the success of the Pentecostal churches. The Pentecostal churches expect miracles and point to them. Twenty-five years

ago claims of miracles were often considered to be a barrier to faith, or even an embarrassment. Many theologians and Biblical teachers sought to explain away miracles. But the tide has swung. Even outside the church, there is a widespread interest in para-normal phenomena of all types. Miracles are no longer problematic for many younger people. They want to see, and expect to see, God at work. It is indicative of some very substantial changes in the ways in which people view the world.

HeRD #316 - Hughes V: Church Life and Its Evangelistic Impact

In the survey conducted in September 1996 that we've been discussing, seminary students at McGilvary Faculty of Theology indicated that experiences of God's love definitely had the greatest influence on them becoming or remaining Christians. The second most important influence was 'worship', followed by 'Sunday School'. Forty percent of the students said that 'Sunday School' was the most important influence on them, and 36 percent said that 'worship' was. For students who had grown up in a Buddhist background, Sunday School was not so important, although 50 percent of these students still said it was 'the most important' or 'very important' influence on them. Two-thirds of those who had grown up as Buddhists indicated that worship was 'the most important' or 'very important' for them.

It was very interesting that, in comparison, other explicitly evangelistic programs, such as activities in school, or crusades, had little impact. Seventeen percent of students said crusades were the 'most important' influence and 13 percent said 'school' was. Out of a total of 15 influences put before the students in the questionnaire, crusades came in at number 12, and school at number 13 in comparison with other influences. This is despite the fact that school, university, and city-wide crusades are frequently organised by the Thai church. The students were more conscious of the continuing impact of church life, of worship, Sunday School, and Bible studies.

Single events, such as crusades, did not seem to have much importance in their own right. While some denominations place a great deal of emphasis on special 'once in a life-time' conversion experiences, such experiences do not appear to have the same meaning in Thailand. When the students were asked if there had ever been a special time when they had committed their lives to Christ, 68 percent said they had done so several times, 19 percent once, and 13 percent never but had grown gradually in the faith. These results suggest that commitment often is seen as part of the process of deepening one's spiritual life rather than the idea often associated with repentance of 'turning right around'.

Nor is it those events which seek people to 'turn right around' that have the most impact. Rather, greater influence comes from weekly worship, Sunday School and Bible studies, and becoming part of a Christian community. It would be most interesting to know how many people make a commitment at a crusade, but fail to take faith any further. Every person needs on-going support in faith, not least the person who has just made a commitment of faith. The friend who draws another person into the on-going life of the church is probably more successful evangelistically than the large crusade.

HeRD #317 - Hughes VI: The Impact on Faith of Parents and School

In the survey conducted among McGilvary Seminary students in September 1996, one of the most strongly affirmed influences on faith was that of the parents. Seventy percent of the students said that their mothers were the 'most important' influence on their becoming or remaining Christian; and another 17 percent said their mothers were 'very important'. 60 percent claimed that their fathers were 'most important', while another 13 percent said their fathers were 'very important'. The influence of parents was second only to that of the personal experiences of God's love and to the life of the church in worship and Sunday School.

Interestingly, parents were also important among the few students who had grown up as Buddhists and had converted to Christianity. One hundred percent of the students who had been Buddhist said their mothers were very important or the most important influences, and 75 percent of students previously Buddhist said their fathers were most or very important. There are several interpretations we can give to this response. One is that many students became Christian because their parents did so. When they were young, their parents were also Buddhists. The family converted as a family. Another possibility is that parents were seen as influential, perhaps encouraging the children to explore the Christian faith even while

remaining Buddhist themselves. A third possibility is that parents converted to Christianity following their children, and thus became a source of encouragement.

Whatever the interpretation, these results confirm that parents do have a great deal of influence on their children. While, in Western countries, it is common for children to go through a time rebellion and develop values and attitudes which are deliberately opposed to those of their parents, they often return to the values and attitudes of their parents in later years. I have recently examined some data collected from a sample of the Australian population in 1993. I was looking particularly at the influences of having been to a Catholic school - at least, the correlations with attendance at Catholic schools. There was a weak but significant correlation between having had one's education at a Catholic school and church attendance (of about .17). However, there were much higher correlations with the parents' patterns of attendance at school and those of their children. Regression analysis showed that when one controlled for parents' behaviour, the independent influence on church attendance of the Catholic school disappeared altogether.

HeRD #318 - Hughes VII: Catholic Schools

Of all Australian adults 17.2% attended a Catholic primary school, and of those who went to secondary school, 16.7% attended a Catholic secondary school, according to the National Social Science Survey of 1993. About half of all Australian Catholics send their children to Catholic schools, but so also do many non-Catholics. They prize the educational standards, the discipline, and other aspects of Catholic schools, in comparison with many State schools. There are also many non-Catholics who send their children to Catholic schools.

In a simple comparison of the numbers of students who complete year 12 of schooling, the Catholic schools appear to do considerably better than other schools. On average, for the whole population, 42% of students who went to Catholic schools completed year 12 compared with 27% of the population. Even when one takes into account the more intellectual orientation of parents sending their children to Catholic schools, the affects of the schools themselves remain substantial. Controlling for the orientation and background of the parents, still 38% of children attending complete year 12 compared with 27% in the population as a whole.

Catholic schools were established not only to provide a good education in a general sense, but to pass on the Catholic faith to children. The National Social Science Survey allows us to look at this in several ways. We can compare, for example, the church attendance of those who attended Catholic schools to those who did not. We find that those who attended Catholic schools, on average, attend church more frequently than those who did not. While, on average, Australians attend about once or twice a year, those who attended a Catholic school attend more than several times a year. Almost 13% of the variance in church attendance is explained in terms the mother's attendance when the person was growing up. The father's attendance adds a little to the explanation, accounting for a total of 14.6%. The person's own attendance as a child also explains a little of the variation: a total of 15.2%, and attending a Catholic secondary school makes it 15.6%. Having been a student at a Catholic secondary school does have a very small, but statistically significant (at better than .005 level) independent relationship to church attendance as an adult. However, the independent relationship is very small compared with that with the parent's involvement.

The results are similar in relation to belief in God. There is a correlation of .16 between how sure people are in their belief in God and attending a Catholic school. Again, however, most of that relationship can be explained in terms of the fact that the parents with stronger religious practices, and presumably beliefs, were more likely to send their children to Catholic schools. The school is one of several significant influences on the attitudes and opinions of students about religious matters. Alone, it's influence is very limited. Yet, perhaps without it, parents and the parish would also find it more difficult to have a positive influence in the affirmation of Christian faith and practice among their children.