

Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians

By Steve Taylor

Whether they be Christians for one year or for 20, whether they be farmers in the northeast or office workers in Bangkok, the majority of Thai Christians I have surveyed believe that Christians are able to promise God certain things so that he will answer their prayers. They also find it necessary to find some way to repay God when he answers their prayers. This kind of transactional relationship with God runs contrary to the biblical doctrine of grace.

This article follows two years researching the belief system of Thai Christians for my doctoral dissertation at the International Theological Seminary (California). My aim has been to determine the extent to which Buddhism, Animism, Brahmanism, and the Thai social structure influence the belief of Thai Christians and to evaluate whether our present system and content of Christian education (e.g. preaching, Bible studies, Sunday school) are sufficient to correct any problem areas. Of particular interest has been to study how the prominent religions in Thailand influence how Thai Christians understand God.

Early on in my study I was met by the objection that Buddhism, for example, has no clear concept of God and therefore could have no significant influence on the way converts from Buddhism think about God. The study revealed, however, that in a variety of ways Buddhist concepts (as well as those of animism, Brahmanism, and society) do have significant influences on the way Christians think about God. A number of „gaps” or „deficiencies” were identified, some of which I cover here. Those pertaining to Brahmanism have been omitted because of limited space.

These problem areas do not appear to improve with the length of time one is a Christian (despite years of exposure to various forms of Christian education). This suggests that our present system of Christian education does not meet the specific needs of the Thai Christian.

Methodology.

I studied the way Buddhism, animism, and Brahmanism are expressed in the Thai context, as well as the patron-client system of relationships, which is dominant in Thai society. Concepts that potentially may influence Thai Christians were evaluated from a biblical perspective. I devised and administered a questionnaire based on these findings to 19 groups of Thai Christians (nearly 500 Christians from a variety of denominational affiliations and number of years of being a Christian) as well as a random group of British Christians living in England. It was assumed that the British would not have been significantly influenced by Buddhism, Animism etc. but does not imply that the British make better Christians since they will have their own particular problems. Results were analyzed and compared using the SPSS computer program for statistical analysis. A typical example of results displayed graphically (but simplified) may be seen in Figures 1 and 2. This example indicates the extent to which the respondents considered it necessary to repay God when he does good to them.

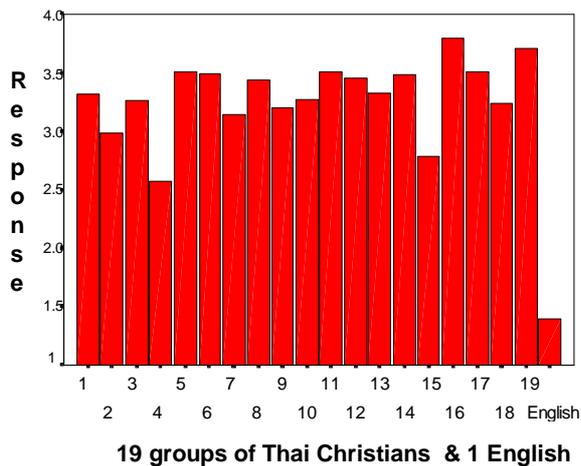


Figure 1

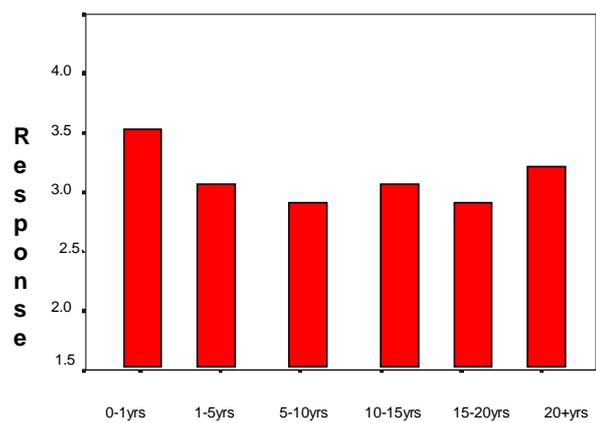


Figure 2

In Figure 1 you will see that all the 19 groups of Thai Christians scored highly in their response to the question as opposed to the English. In Figure 2 the response of the Thai Christians did not significantly change over the years of being a Christian.

Gap areas.

The study revealed the following as problem areas for the Thai Christian. Reasons why they may be so are suggested for each.

CHRISTIAN BELIEF INFLUENCED BY BUDDHISM

God is detached.

The Buddhist ideal of "no self," which is a result of total renunciation of desire, has a significant influence upon the Thai mind. "Attachment," whether it be to family, friends, or material wealth, is believed to inevitably produce suffering. The characteristic "cool-heart" of the Thai is, no doubt, largely influenced by this ideal. It is generally regarded that one who can stay cool and tranquil has attained to a certain degree of spiritual maturity.

In his much acclaimed book *Waterbuffalo Theology*, Kosuke Koyama points out that, in the Buddhist mentality, if God is attached (through loving the world), then he is unpredictable (because attachment is a weakness) and inferior because attachment will always lead to suffering.¹ The Bible reveals God as both transcendent but also as immanent. Within the Thai framework, the *immanence* of God who is intimately involved with those he loves may be dwarfed by the *transcendence* of the one who sits enthroned in the heavens. A God who is tranquil and calm, who has steady emotions and does not strive toward a goal and purpose, is much more likely, therefore, to be understood by the Thai. Greatness is thus equated with the ability to stay above and be unaffected, even to the extent of remaining aloof and impersonal. The very idea that God can be known, or even capable of either love or wrath, disqualifies him from being God, reducing him to the human level. That God should be personal automatically includes impermanence and feeling, which for the Buddhist mind are characteristic of a being *before* his or her enlightenment.

God makes us pay for our mistakes / life is about merit.

Thai Buddhist teaching centers on the laws of merit and de-merit. If you do good, you will receive good; if you do evil, you will receive evil. This is so ingrained that illness, accidents,

¹ Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1974), pp. 84-87.

fortune, and misfortune are generally seen as the result of merit or de-merit (the deeds done earlier in this life or in a previous incarnation).

Merit plays a big part in the thinking of Thai Christians as well. In his study of the meaning of religion among Thai students, Philip Hughes found that Christian students affirmed even more strongly than Buddhists that if we do good, we will receive good, and if we do evil, we will receive evil. Christianity is seen as a set of teachings about how one can do good. Thus, by following religious teaching, one will receive the benefits of doing good. If one follows the teaching of Christianity, then one should be able to enjoy a good life, and things will go well.² This means that God may be seen as the one dealing out fortune or misfortune according to our merit or de-merit. A statement that influenced me to study this subject came from a Thai Christian lady after a hotel collapsed in a nearby province and several people had been buried. She said that "those who have merit will get out alive." A relationship with God may, therefore, be based upon one's ability to perform and please God, rather than on *grace, acceptance, and salvation*.

A concern for ritual naturally follows. Hughes notes that in the responses to the initial questionnaire in his research, 65 percent of Christians said that not praying regularly was either seriously or very seriously sinful. Forty-five percent considered not going to church regularly also as seriously or very seriously sinful. If one does not keep the *dharma* (Christian teaching), one may expect to suffer the consequences.³ That *karma* is still very much at the basis of the Christian's consciousness is summed up by Wan Petchsongkram:

"Let God's will be done"__but when I was a new Christian, I thoroughly disliked this phrase because I could not see that God was coming into our lives and doing anything. I could only see that if we did wrong we were punished accordingly and if we did what was right, we were rewarded. I could not see God in it at all__when we talk about God's will and leaving things to him, Buddhists laugh at us and new Christians do not believe in it either. They still secretly believe in karma.⁴

Many Thais become Christians because God has delivered them from their troubles (not usually because God has forgiven their sin). These new believers are then taught how to follow God and to do his will. They are taught to pray, read, witness, and so on. Their tendency could well be to believe that being a Christian is doing the right things (or making merit). If they are faithful, then God will continue to bless them and give them favors; if they are unfaithful, then he will punish them. They, in turn, return the favors transactionally with more faithfulness. If he doesn't help them, then either they haven't done enough or else they have been dealt with unfairly and become disappointed with God. They may remain Christians, but just lukewarm in their commitment.

CHRISTIAN BELIEF INFLUENCED BY ANIMISM

God is one of many similar powers.

² Philip Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand" *Journal of the Siam Society*, 73(Jan-July 1985): 23-41, pp. 34-35.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴ Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree* (Bangkok: Thai Gospel Press, 1975), p. 137.

Many Thais become Christians because they see something of the power of God. This may be in the form of a healing, or of some special provision or answer to prayer. Societal pressure is so great upon Thais *not* to become Christians that they are unlikely to believe (or continue believing) unless something significant happens. Their choice would generally be to maintain peace with society rather than risk things with God. Their animistic background and knowledge of the power of spirits make the *experience* of God's power very important to them. Missionaries and Thai evangelists have often presented God as a greater power than the local spirits. They invite listeners to believe in God and experience his healing power. Explaining the cross becomes a secondary consideration.

In his research on Thai Christianity, Hughes notes two major factors. First, Christianity is seen as a religion that teaches one how to live. The second involves seeking the power of God. Experiencing God's power is more important to the Thai Christian than knowing the forgiveness of sins. It is hardly surprising that the most popular Christian event of the year is the annual "Power" meeting.⁵

If God doesn't answer a request, then the Christian may be tempted to doubt God's power. Thai Christians may be puzzled when other spiritual entities give something that God seemingly is unable to give. A childless couple, for example, may be tempted to doubt God's power when non-Christian couples seem helped by other powers.

The process leading many Thais to a belief in God is basically the same process that leads other Thais to a belief in other spiritual beings. The point of *seeing* or *experiencing* the power is the "conversion" point or the time at which they become "convinced." The usual expression given by Thais for their "conversion" is *rap cheua* (receive belief, or be convinced). Viggo Brun in his study of "conversion" to belief in certain spirits (as opposed to believing merely from tradition) records the following standard answer about why a person came to believe:

Well, in the beginning I was indifferent. I wasn't interested. I was actually rather skeptical. But then I experienced something or made a test that really impressed me, so finally I had to admit that the holy things really exist and that they are genuine, therefore I now firmly believe in holy things.⁶

Apart from the plurality of the "holy things," this could very easily be a Thai Christian giving testimony of how he or she came to believe in God.

Hughes observes,

Many Thai Christians believe that God will give blessings to all who come to him in prayer and believe in his power and beneficence. God is not usually explicitly compared with the spirits by the Thai Christians. The comparisons are implicit in the way in which they relate to him, the sort of expectations they have of him, and the kinds of occasions on which they turn to him for help⁷

⁵ A four to five day series of meetings held in Bangkok in October for approximately the past ten years, entitled Power '98, Power '99 etc. Several thousand Thai Christians attend these meetings.

⁶ Viggo Brun, *Protective Spirits and Mediums in Thailand: A Description and some Reflections* (London: A paper prepared for the 5th International Conference on Thai Studies - SOAS, 1993), p. 11.

⁷ Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand," pp. 36-37.

Many see God as a power similar in kind, but greater in extent and beneficence, than that of spirits. Eric Cohen comments, "The perception of Christianity in terms of power . . . turns Christianity into magic, more powerful than that of local magicians, but of the same character."⁸

If the Thai's Christian faith, therefore, centers on power, then the distinctive fundamentals of Christian belief (in particular the cross) will remain blurred.

God is "a-moral" power.

A fundamental problem arises when God is viewed in terms of the traditional Thai understanding of a spirit, even when he is understood as a greater, or even the greatest, spirit. Although Thai people have a category for malevolent spirits, their contact with benevolent spirits (e.g. for assistance) is separate from any moral considerations. Anyone who approaches the spirit in the correct way may expect to receive the favor desired. This entails correct ritual (e.g. posture) and correct offering of those things known to be pleasing to the spirit (such as gold-plated leaf, food, etc.). No consideration is given to the fact that the one making the request may be a thief or a murderer and that the favor requested may be to further enhance his or her crime. It is the transaction of power that counts. James Gustafson's study of animism and belief in supernatural powers at Bang Chan records, "The supplicant is punished only when he overlooks the supernatural being itself, not because he has overlooked some moral precept."⁹ The Thai mind is thus dichotomized into Buddhist merit making, which is involved with morality and good deeds, and animist involvement with a supernatural being, with its reception of power and favors.

Correct Christian thinking, however, must keep these two parts together. *God is both powerful and moral*. God is holy, and those who come to him must be holy. This may seem strange to Thais, who tend naturally to look to God for help without consideration of their own moral standing before him, and seek to develop their moral standing as their own affair without necessarily involving God in it.

Power and *holiness* are, therefore, quite separate in the mind of the Thai. It follows that the Thai Christian does not necessarily understand God as essentially holy in the moral sense. When the Christian sins, for example, it may not automatically be understood as being offensive and sinful toward God. Ritual is also very important. Ritual or religious activity (for instance, Bible reading, regular church attendance, fasting, fervent praying, and other forms of "serving God") may be seen as important, if not more important, than purity of life.

God can be manipulated.

Another important concept is that "The basic traditional Thai world view is *society* and *nature* are one entity and are in balance, everything affects and depends on each other."¹⁰ The Thai is aware of his need to coexist with the spiritual forces. He appeases them, therefore, but with no sense of their lordship. The basic instinct is to use or "manipulate" the spirits for

⁸ Eric Cohen, "Christianization and Thaification: Contrasting Processes of religious Adaptation in Thailand" (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Draft of a paper given at the International Workshop on Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity, June 29 - July 3, 1987), pp. 30-31.

⁹ James Gustafson, Syncretistic Rural Thai Buddhism (Master of Arts thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1970), p. 111.

¹⁰ Seri Pongpit, "Spirits (Pi)" In *Key Terms in Thai Thoughts* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 1992), p. 64. (Translation from the Thai is my own).

one's own benefit while not upsetting the status quo. The spirits are promised certain offerings in return for favors. The one asking for the favor knows that his investment is worthwhile since he is probably at a tenfold advantage if his request is granted. A few bananas, for example, may be offered in exchange for a motorbike. The ramifications of this for the Christian are extensive. Even if the Christian knows that God will not be "manipulated," he or she struggles when other spirits can be. "It is believed that God's expectations of those who seek his patronage are very much greater than the requirements made by the local spirits."¹¹ This can sometimes be a source of resentment.

CHRISTIAN BELIEF INFLUENCED BY THAI SOCIAL STRUCTURE

God is a great patron—but maybe not Lord.

Thai society is "relational." Thais are very aware that the right relationship, the right connection, or being in the right place at the right time could be their means of advancement. This gives rise to the careful cultivation of relationships.¹² That "the Thai social system is hierarchically structured"¹³ provides a major key to understanding Thai behavior. *Sakdi na* (the system whereby each member of society was given a number that defined his or her status in society) was abolished in the 19th century by King Chulalongkorn, but the fundamental belief that every person should have a place in a hierarchy, and be to some extent content with it, lives on to this day. All Thais are taught from childhood to be aware of their seniors and juniors. "They are taught to recognize the difference between high and low status *thi sung thi tam* (literally "high place" and "low place") and the behavior appropriate to each."¹⁴

Most Thais are keenly aware of their position of seniority to some (and the obligations they have toward them) and their position of inferiority to others (again with its own set of obligations). (For example, it would be normal for the most senior person in a group eating out to pay for the bill.) The absence of adequate social welfare and the uneven distribution of wealth in Thai society make Thai people depend upon one another. Each Thai born into the world is dependent on others, and is depended upon by others. Children are dependent on their parents. Later, parents are dependent on their children. Poorer family members are dependent on richer family members. These are facts of life that one may dislike but eventually must accept.

A strong value emerging from the hierarchical nature of Thai society is the concept of *bunghun* (loosely translated kindness). "There is no English equivalent of this term but it may be described as any good thing, help or favor done by someone which entails gratitude and obligation on the part of the beneficiary."¹⁵

¹¹ Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand," pp. 37-38.

¹² Stephen Taylor, *Patron Client Relationships and The Challenge for the Thai Church* (Bangkok: Discipleship Training Centre, 1997), p. 14.

¹³ Titaya Suvanjata, "Is Thai social system loosely structured?" *Social Science Review*, (1976): 171-187.

¹⁴ Chai Podhisita, "Buddhism and Thai World View," in *Traditional and Changing World View* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 1985), p. 32.

¹⁵ Chai Podhisita, "Buddhism and Thai World View," p. 47.

The *bunghun* system of obligation and the network that develops from it are based on the provision of benefits or favors of any kind by one party to another and the special relationship thus established between the two parties. The relationship is unequal by the fact that the grantor party places the grantee in his debt by his favor, while the grantee, by accepting the benefit, contracts the obligation to show gratitude and return the favor at an appropriate time.¹⁶

This is the underlying psychology of patron-client relationships in Thai society. The patron is one who gives favors to the client, thus forming an indebted relationship. The client must then reciprocate this favor. Dr. Chaiyun Ukosakul notes, however, that "the Thai will uphold this material interdependence only as long as it serves to benefit both sides."¹⁷ If the patron appears no longer dependable then the client withdraws.

The patron should be respectable, be worthy of honor, have authority, and be feared. He should be benevolent. He is expected to be a father figure, just like the head of a family. He is to provide protection, emotional support, favors, cover the mistakes of his subordinates, and reward them lavishly. He should be forgiving and generous. Through his many acts of benevolence, he builds up the indebtedness of his clients.¹⁸ The client, in turn, must show deference, giving his patron honor, respect and trust. He should be grateful and loyal. This feeling of gratitude and indebtedness has a particular term called *pen ni bunghun* (loosely translated indebted). This feeling goes very deep and results in reciprocity, especially in the form of loyalty. Having received a favor, one feels one *must* return it. If the favor is big, then the recipient may feel indebted for life.

The Thai tends to see God as a great patron. The two parts of the word for God, *phra-chau*, are used together in the title for the king who is the "head lord of the land," and in the word for the Buddha.¹⁹ The king is the most wonderful patron in the eyes of the people. It follows, therefore, for Christians that God is "a holy, powerful, benevolent Lord. He is the ideal patron spirit and king. His power is unlimited, and his love and benevolence is very great to those who respect and obey him."²⁰

For Thai Christians, God's benevolence is his love, which he, as a father, gives to his children. "These blessings include prosperity, health, and protection. In return, his children believe that they must show him respect in worship, and obedience by following his will."²¹

One would expect that this understanding of God as a great patron would lead the Thai Christian to grant him unconditional lordship over their lives. If the biblical sense of

¹⁶ Snit Smuckarn, "Thai Peasant World View," in *Traditional and Changing World View* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 1985), p. 139.

¹⁷ Chaiyun Ukosakul, *A Turn From The Wheel to The Cross* (Th.M. thesis, Regent College, 1993), pp. 142-144.

¹⁸ Henry Holmes and Suchada Tangtongtavy, *Working with the Thais* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995), 61-68.

¹⁹ Philip Hughes, "The Assimilation of Christianity in the Thai Culture" *Religion*, 14(1984): 313-336, p. 330.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

indebtedness had been grasped, then this would be so. It is not, however, the case. The cross of Jesus is not generally understood. The forgiveness of sins is not something they are particularly seeking. The Thai's interest lies more in salvation from suffering than in salvation from sin. Hence there is not a deep sense of indebtedness. The relationship with God is still basically transactional. When God blesses them then they return the favor by gratitude and loyalty (attend church, pray, etc.). When God does not bless them, there then could be the temptation to look for another patron, or else doubt whether God is such a good patron after all.

God needs to be repaid.

A major problem with the patron-client transactional system when applied to God is that it *undermines God's grace*. God gives freely without the necessity for his children to repay. He does not have strings attached to his benevolence. It will never be possible to repay the favor he has bestowed upon the Christian. This, however, is very difficult for the Thai Christian to grasp. It doesn't fit the model he or she is used to. Certainly, the Christian should worship and love God for his many blessings. He or she should feel eternally indebted. But «repaying» runs contrary to God's unconditional grace and favor.

Conclusion and suggestions.

The study shows several areas of difficulty in Thai Christians' understanding of God through the influence of Thai society and traditional beliefs. God is not readily seen as immanent and one with whom intimacy may be enjoyed. In particular, his grace and unconditional love are not generally understood. Knowledge of his inherent worthiness to be our Lord because of who he is (Lord of all) and his purchase of our salvation through the cross generally do not overcome the concept of a transactional relationship with him. There is also a tendency to divorce God's holiness and power.

These problem areas do not abate the longer one is a Christian. This suggests that our present Christian education system (such as in the Bible seminaries and in the regular preaching and teaching in the churches) is not yet directive enough to meet the specific needs of the Thai Christian. Similar studies could, no doubt, be done to show how other areas of the Thai Christian's belief are affected by traditional beliefs and which similarly are not being countered by appropriate teaching. I hope that this study will assist others who teach Thai Christians. I would like to see the formation of a faculty within existing Thai Bible colleges and seminaries dedicated to developing culturally appropriate theology. Such a faculty should develop key materials such as a Thai creed, a Thai catechism, syllabi, and teaching materials appropriate for children, adults, and Bible schools. Culturally sensitive thinkers need to be released for this task of bridging the gaps in the Thai Christians' belief system.



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