

Christmas and Contextualization in Thailand

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December 22, 2011

Have you ever wondered about how Thai people view Christmas? What do Thai Christians do to celebrate the holiday? Do people realize that Christmas is the work of missionaries? Why does this matter for the Thai church?

A Time To Work

I was talking with my friend the other day about what Christmas was like for him growing up. He is from the island of Samoa. He told me that since he was a boy Christmas was always a season of outreach and work. It was only after he married an American girl that he understood Christmas to be a time for family, rest, and worship.

On his island, missionaries worked to share the Christmas story with those who had never heard. They brought, not only the Gospel of Jesus, but also their Western holidays with them. So it only followed that the new believers would follow that same customs. I'm sure the missionaries thought to themselves, "how can we simply spend time with our families sharing in our own custom when there are so many who still haven't heard the message of Jesus"? Everywhere they looked they must have been reminded of the need.

So the Christmas season became an intense time of getting the message out to those who had never heard.

A similar scenario plays out here in Thailand.

Although some churches celebrate through special services and meals together, the Christmas season has become the main season of yearly outreach for Thai Christian churches. Since a "consumer oriented Christmas" can be found in many places of the world where capitalism is alive and well, the Thai believers use the opportunity to bring the message of Jesus' birth to their own people.

A Time To Have Fun

One of the largest mall chains in Thailand is the Central Plaza. It was told to me that one of the principle owners is a Thai Christian. So in most major cities in Thailand, you can walk into one of these malls and see a huge decorated Christmas tree, lights, and even hear popular Christmas music, even worship music, playing in English. Christmas is in vogue here in Thailand. However it is easy for the message to be crowded out and lost, even more than it already is in the Western world.

For the majority of Thai people the holiday will come and go without any special recognition or fanfare. In their minds, if they know of the holiday at all, it is a Western holiday with snow (never seen in Thailand) and a bearded fat guy in a red suit. It is seen as fun and anything celebratory and fun could go over well in Thai culture!

For me, this brings up the question of how we are communicating within a certain context.

Many times the Thai believers do what they have learned from those who brought the Gospel to them without much thought of how they are communicating or if their message is connecting to the heart and mind of the Thai culture.

Christmas and Contextualization

What many don't realize is that Christmas is a "contextualized" holiday. That means it came about through interaction with the local culture and customs of the people. The Bible's message was fit into the local "context."



Santa Claus is Coming To Town...

“Christmas” is the mainly the work of missionaries who sought to reinfuse the winter solstice celebrations of European pagans with new meaning.

They found elements in the cultures of their adopted nations and built bridges of new understanding by emphasizing certain Biblical stories that fit within the celebrations that were already taking place.

Others came along and added their own stories and traditions until it has morphed into what it is today.

The historical story of the birth of Jesus Christ and its relevance to us is no doubt an very important one.

But as missionaries, is it our job to encourage believers to emphasize and continue traditions that were contextualized for the Western world or to help people look into their own cultures and find what people are already celebrating then find the bridges of God, within their own worldview?

I believe our primary role is the latter.

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Can we stop what we has already been done? Probably not. But can we help the Thai believers think through how they can find the holidays that the mass of their people are already celebrating and help infuse them with new life and meaning.

I believe we can and should.

This process of contextualization is how Christmas became known as a special time where a big part of the Western world remembers that “a Saviour was born who is Christ the Lord.” Although, it was never mandated by God emphatically for us to celebrate the birth of his Son. There are so many things we could celebrate from a Biblical point of view.

Should we as Westerners celebrate? Yes, and we do! Can Thai people celebrate too? Of course. It’s a personal choice. We enjoy the season and we take full advantage of the work of the missionaries who went before us. We use the opportunity to share the story of Jesus.

But I long for the day when Christ will be celebrated through the world-views and seasons of the Southeast Asian world.

What Bible stories are yet to have been dramatized and told? Like the Christmas tree, lights, candy canes, carols, and gift giving; what Thai traditions have yet to be made that will point to the Saviour?

If we don’t allow experimentation, new expression, and lead by example, in much the same way that our forefathers did with Christmas, then we may never know. And the church in Thailand may continue to look as “foreign” as it has for the last century.

To read my thought on one such important Thai holiday, [Loi Krathong](#), [click here](#).