

# WRAPPING THE GOOD NEWS FOR THE THAI

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SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR A  
CONTEXTUALIZED PRESENTATION  
OF THE GOSPEL IN THAI SOCIETY

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BY ALAN R. JOHNSON

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## INTRODUCTION

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Protestant missionaries first came to Thailand in 1828 and have worked without interruption to the present. However, the response to the message of the Gospel has been disturbingly slow when contrasted to the amount of time missionaries have been in the country and to the amount of effort expended in bringing the Gospel to the Thai people. There is no doubt that the Church in Thailand is growing. The latest edition of *Operation World* by Patrick Johnstone estimates adherents to Christianity to be 1.62% of the population now.<sup>1</sup> This breaks down to .42% Catholic and 1.18% Protestant. This is a significant community of almost 1 million people in a total population of just over 61 million. However, a large number of the Christian population is found among tribal peoples meaning that the actual percentage among Thai people is still quite low. Alex Smith found the following comment from a missionary to Thailand nearly one hundred years ago to be expressive of the feelings of many who have struggled to make Christ known in this land, “I believe there is no country more open to unrestrained missionary effort than Siam, but I believe that there can hardly be a country in which it is harder to make an impression.”<sup>2</sup>

Reasons for this difficulty in gaining a response to the Gospel have been discussed in detail by Smith in his book *Siamese Gold*, which focuses on the history of the Christian movement in Thailand to the end of the 1970’s through a church growth lens.<sup>3</sup> Smith points out that the obstacles include not only problems related to the Thai religion and culture but also with missionary methods and practices. Tom Wisely, in his doctoral dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary, reviews the work of a number of the researchers on the growth of the church in Thailand and concludes that Protestant Christianity is a struggling religious minority and that “one of the major factors for its slow growth and its continuing struggle is its westernity”<sup>4</sup> Inevitably however, discussion regarding the resistance of the Thai to the Gospel returns to the fact that Thailand presents unique difficulties since it is, “one of the few countries where Theravada Buddhism has traditionally been all but *de riguer* and Buddhist concepts inform the speech and thought-forms and feelings of the great majority, if not all of Thai

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<sup>1</sup>Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: When We Pray God Works* (Paternoster Publishing, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>*Missionary Review of the World*, vol. 43, quoted in Alex Smith, *Siamese Gold* (Bangkok, Thailand: Kanok Bannasan [OMF Publishers], 1981), p. 274.

<sup>3</sup>Alex Smith, *Siamese Gold* (Bangkok, Thailand: Kanok Bannasan [OMF Publishers], 1981), pp. 271-278.

<sup>4</sup>Tom Wisely, *Dynamic Biblical Christianity in the Buddhist/Marxist Context: Northeast Thailand*. (Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1984), p. 163.

society.”<sup>5</sup> Although there are a number of factors involved in creating the feeling among the Thai that Christianity is foreign and the religion of the white man, the tremendous influence of Theravada Buddhism undoubtedly carries a great deal of weight in the matter. It becomes obvious that if we are to avoid, as Frances Hudgins calls it, “reciting conundrums” to our Thai listeners, then we must endeavor to contextualize our message so that the mind steeped in Buddhist thought and culture can begin to understand.<sup>6</sup>

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## THE NEED FOR MESSAGE CONTEXTUALIZATION

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I came to Thailand in 1986 excited to learn the Thai language so that I could begin to share the Good News with my newfound Thai friends. It did not take long for me to realize that even though I was speaking Thai, and people for the most part were polite and respectful as we talked, creating understanding involved a great deal more than simply encoding words in the local language. Even when we know intellectually that people think differently, there is still the overwhelming temptation to assume that our listeners are making the same meaning of our words as we intend.

Although there were a number of experiences over time that helped to bring the reality of the complexity of communication home to me, one stands out in particular. I was conducting an English lesson with a couple of Thai high school students and we were working through Luke 5 in the English text. We came to the point where I wanted to discuss the meaning of the passage and some of its implications and since they were unable to converse easily in English I said that we would switch into Thai. I asked the question, why did Peter fall on his knees and say that he was a sinful man? Without a moment’s hesitation the young man said, “Because he killed all of those fish!” I have to admit that his response caught me totally off guard. He was reading the text through his “Buddhist eyes” of the principle of not taking life. It made me realize in a much clearer fashion that the worldview, beliefs, values and assumptions of my listeners were causing them to make different meanings than what I was intending, even when those understandings did not surface in conversation.

This started me on the process of trying to understand the meanings that people would be making in their minds from the terms and concepts that we use when we share the Gospel. It became clear to me that Thais were not simply rejecting the Gospel or Christianity, in reality the situation was much more complicated than that. At least part of their lack of response is a rejection of the linguistic and stylistic wrapping in which we as missionaries and local Christians were presenting the message. When the “wrapping” makes no sense it keeps them from ever getting to the wonderful gift of the Good News inside.

Learning to wrap the message in a way that makes sense to local people is a part of the broader task known as contextualization. Hesselgrave and Rommen define contextualization as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation and that is meaningful to

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<sup>5</sup>Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, trans. and ed. by Frances Hudgins (Bangkok: Thai Gospel Press, 1975), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.<sup>7</sup> This is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing, Bible translation, interpretation and application, incarnational lifestyle, evangelism, Christian instruction, church planting and growth, church organization, worship style and all the elements of what it means to be a community of faith in this world. This contextualization model takes seriously the message of the Bible as well as that of culture, and attempts to communicate the supra-cultural message in a way that is relevant to the hearer. Stephen Bevans calls this the “translation” model, which is an application of the principles of dynamic equivalence translation theory to the doing of theology.<sup>8</sup>

Endeavoring to do this kind of dynamic equivalence theologizing is an arduous task which must be undertaken by a wide variety of workers both local and expatriate over an extended period of time. The purpose of this paper is to make a small contribution to this broader task in the specific area of contextualizing the communication of the Gospel message.

The material developed here grows out of hundreds of conversations with Thai people over the past 16 years and reflects my interest in training Thai Christians in sharing their faith with their Buddhist neighbors. There are two assumptions that guide me in the development of this project. The first is that in sharing the Gospel we need an approach where dialogue can take place, questions can be asked and answers attempted. This is because in my experience a large part of the sharing of our faith is first the correcting of misunderstandings before one can move to the heart of the message. A canned approach that consists of a monologue may be politely listened to, but it does not create room for building true understanding.

Second, it is my conviction that local Christians need to have a flexible track to run on when sharing the Gospel. This track provides a coherent sequence whereby a person can present and illustrate key points of the Gospel in a single conversation or over many meetings. The track allows for multiple entry points, the chance to ask questions and yet provides a way to share the message in a way that makes sense and has logical consistency. I learned about this principle when interviewing college students at Raamkhamhaeng University, a campus with a number of strong Christian ministries present. I was asking students if they had ever met a Christian who had shared their faith with them. One exasperated student told me that he had been witnessed to a number of times and all the Christians said was that he must *chua prajao* (have faith in God) over and over again, without ever explaining to him what that meant. The combination of monologue, lack of a coherent and logical presentation of the message, and unexplained terms leaves listeners puzzled and unimpressed.

I will begin with a review of some of the work on contextualization that has been done on reaching Buddhists in general and Thailand specifically in order to highlight some of the important issues related to this task. Next there is an examination of the religious context of Thai society consisting of a brief overview of classical Buddhism, a look at the broad religious context of Thailand, and a discussion of how Buddhism is integrated into Thai life. I then illustrate what the Gospel message sounds like through

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<sup>7</sup>David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1989).

<sup>8</sup>Stephen Bevans, “Models of Contextual Theology,” *Missiology: An International Review* XIII (April 1985), p. 190.

the ears of a Thai Buddhist listener. This is followed by two sections, one which develops some starting points to share the Gospel and details on each of the major points of the Gospel message then finally a list of suggestions for developing a strategy for evangelism in Thailand.

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## OVERVIEW OF WORKS ON CONTEXTUALIZATION ISSUES IN THAILAND

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The specific focus of this paper is on message contextualization, which is just one part of the much broader task of developing dynamic equivalence Christianity. This is not a comprehensive review of what has been written on the subject, but the purpose here is to look at the work of a few writers, who have wrestled with the issues, to see what their approach has been and consider their suggestions for areas that need further research and development. Much of what has been done is more in the nature of pointing towards what needs to be addressed rather than actually developing a fully contextualized approach. The work of Wan Petchgsongkram in *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree* is not dealt with here since it forms much of the basis for the presentation on message contextualization to follow.

### THE WORK OF ALEX SMITH

In his recently published book, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*<sup>9</sup>, Smith identifies six major theological and two missiological issues that must be dealt with in bringing the Gospel to Buddhist peoples that are relevant to this paper. The theological issues are divine revelation versus human intuition; the nature of God as a personal being versus impersonal control like karma; the nature of Christ as being God/man or only human; the nature of life as single or a circle of multiple lives via reincarnation; sine as transgression or illusion; and the means of salvation, through divine provision or self-effort. The missiological issues concern whether or not the Buddhist concept of merit transference can be used, and whether the concept of the future Maitreya Buddha can be used as a redemptive analogy.

He points out that there are a core of Buddhist beliefs that must be dealt with in sharing the Gospel into their worldview. These include the belief that there is no God, denial of Christ's deity, the no soul doctrine of man as impermanent and transitory, karma as the iron law, the concept that sin has no consequences, salvation through self, and extinction as the ultimate goal.

Smith emphasizes the fact that effective evangelism must have effective communication. He notes that too often Christian communicators assume that communication lies in what is said not heard and thus they do not take into consideration how the issues of social solidarity in the Buddhist community, local culture and the infiltration of Buddhist terms and concepts into religious and educational language influence the decoding of the message.

Smith recommends that Christian witness include a feedback mechanism to check for understanding and encourages the use of local flavored media and indigenous

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<sup>9</sup>Alex Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes* (Littleton, CO: OMF International, 2001).

illustrations. In studying the work of others who have reflected on their methods in sharing the Gospel he identifies five different approaches that have been taken for presenting the Gospel to Buddhists

1. The apologetic approach focuses on gaps and inconsistencies inside of Buddhism and presents the Christian message in contrast to these. Smith notes that those who prefer this method indicate that it works best with thinking, educated Buddhists.
2. The “point of contact” approach uses ethical and moral similarities as the basis for presenting the Christian message.
3. Shame theology focuses on the difference between shame and guilt.
4. The “Scratch Where it Itches” approach focuses on meeting immediate needs in order to open doors of understanding for sharing the Gospel.
5. The power encounter approach that presents Christ as the superior power of all forces.

### **THE WORK OF JOHN DAVIS**

John Davis worked for the major part of his life as a teacher and missionary in Thailand. His book *Poles Apart*<sup>10</sup> deals specifically with the contextualization of the Gospel in Asia. After examining the differences between western and folk Buddhist worldviews he advocates for the development of local theologies. His point is that all theologies are local and created in a given historical context, thus they are not necessarily relevant in other contexts. Davis identifies the following issues as being critical in the development of a contextualized theology and practice for those in the religious and cultural context of Buddhism: components of the Buddhist worldview, the nature of God and man and sin, the nature of suffering, liberation, enlightenment and nirvana, the use of culturally appropriate rites and rituals, power encounter and non-stereotyped communication models. The remainder of his book is devoted to developing in detail each of these ten themes.

### **THE WORK OF TOM WISLEY**

Tom Wisley<sup>11</sup> served as a missionary in Thailand for a number of years and then did his doctoral research at Fuller Theological Seminary on the subject of dynamic biblical Christianity in the Buddhist/Marxist context of Northeast Thailand. His argument is that Christianity is not only perceived as a foreign religion but that the Thai church itself exhibits a westernity that is a legacy of the western missionary movement that helped to found it.

Wisley proposes the answer to this dilemma is the development of dynamic equivalence Christianity. The model of dynamic equivalence is taken from the work of Bible translators who “seek interpretational renderings in a receptor language that are ‘dynamically equivalent’ to a source language”.<sup>12</sup> The focus is always on the intended

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<sup>10</sup>John Davis, *Poles Apart: Contextualizing the Gospel in Asia* (Bangalore, India: Theological Book Trust, 1998).

<sup>11</sup>Tom Wisley, *Dynamic Biblical Christianity in the Buddhist/Marxist Context: Northeast Thailand*. (Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1984).

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 228.

meaning and impact in the receptor culture. Wisley draws upon the work of Kraft in applying this model to culture and the whole of the Christian life and adapts it to fit his Northeast Thai context. A key concept in this model is found in the concepts of form, meaning, use and function. Forms are observable expressions of culture that have particular usages. It is usage that determines both function and meaning. The form is relatively static while the usage, function and meaning is dynamic. Forms and meanings represent the passive qualities of trait complexes while usage and function represent the active. Wisley makes the point that meaning, function and usage can only be transmitted through forms. Forms point to underlying meanings and the deep needs and preferences of a society. He believes that “biblical Christianity must operate at this deep level of culture if it is to be dynamic and relevant to the overall Thai society”<sup>13</sup>

Wisley then develops four major principles that he believes if practiced would bring about “new and relevant forms characteristic of dynamic equivalence Christianity....”<sup>14</sup> The first principle is to respect the uniqueness of Thai culture by acknowledging its dynamic nature, understanding the core worldview perceptions, and interacting with current issues. The second is to focus on meanings. The central question must be to ask what a word, concept, form, or usage means in the local culture. The third principle is to be open and flexible in terms of forms. He notes that forms are relative, functional, and that meanings attached to them change. He advocates that Christians maintain an open attitude towards forms that will allow new ones to arise. Finally he believes we must be committed to Christian praxis, meaning that words and ideas must be put into action.

In his chapters on case studies he devotes one to an examination of the work of James Gustafson a Christian and Missionary Alliance missionary who developed the Center for Church Growth and Church Planting in Northeast Thailand. Gustafson’s purpose was to plant a truly indigenous church in the Northeast context. Many of the principles Wisley writes about were actually put into practice since the late 1970’s by Gustafson and the center, with good success. Although I have heard of the work of Gustafson, met some of his staff over the years and read some short pieces on their approach, I have never seen a detailed write up on his work, other than Wisley’s brief case study.

### **THE WORK OF NANTACHAI MEJUDHON**

Nantachai Mejudhon<sup>15</sup> did his doctor of missiology work at Asbury Theological Seminary and now pastors in Bangkok. He focused specifically on how to share the Gospel with Thai people through the use of meekness as opposed to the western missionary approach over the years of being openly critical of Buddhism. He begins with an examination of how the early missionaries witnessed to Christ in Thailand and believes that the problem of Thai response has been due to the attitudes of the Gospel communicators and their misunderstanding of Thai cultural value systems. He concludes that the Thai were positive towards those who demonstrated meekness and negative towards those who did not understand Buddhism or Thai culture.

He then looks at what make the Thai “Thai,” works through historical documents to reveal how early missionaries witnessed to Christ and then collected interview data from

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>15</sup>Nantachai Mejudhon, *Meekness: A New Approach to Christian Witness to the Thai People* (D.Miss. dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 1997).

western missionaries, Thai Christians and Thai Buddhists. His research revealed that although Thai Christians and missionaries can talk about the proper way to build relationships with Thai to bring them to Christ, “in real situations, they encounter anxiety, awkward feelings, [and] frustrations....In practice, they do not know how to apply what they know in order to see real results”.<sup>16</sup> He discovered that although Thai Christians know more about local culture they do not know how to apply their knowledge, and that they witness exactly like the missionaries do.

Nantachai summarizes the results of his research into six very important points. First, missionaries in general do not have a good attitude towards Buddhism. Second, missionaries are much more work-oriented than the Thai. He suggests that the willingness to work hard even on strategies that are not fruitful may create tension between Thai believers and the missionaries. The missionary sees relationship building as work and thus there is a hidden agenda to try and lead Buddhists to Christ that is picked up on by the Buddhist. He advocates relation building with no strings attached. Third, missionaries equate successful Christian witness with communication of content. Missionaries also come to know Christ in different ways, usually on an individual basis rather than in a social network as many Thai do. The fifth and sixth points are that missionaries feel like outsiders and do not have Thai co-workers that they can consult with in their incarnational ministry.

He proposes that sharing the Gospel through meekness will be a more effective approach. After developing the biblical basis for this he expands in detail six propositions for Christian witness in Thailand.

1. A humble attitude toward Buddhism.
2. A proper attitude toward Thai culture.
3. Long-term, genuine, sincere relationships with Buddhists with no strings attached.
4. Presenting the Gospel in a way to bring help and benefit and not challenge and threat.
5. Allowing time for diffusion of the Gospel.
6. Using indigenous strategies for communication.

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## **THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF THAI SOCIETY**

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This section will begin with an examination of the major tenets of Theravada Buddhism, and then look in overview fashion at the major belief systems present in the country and some of common conceptions people there have about religion. The final part will study the actual practice of Buddhism in Thailand.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 313.

## THE BASIC TENETS OF THERAVADA BUDDHISM

The essence of Buddhism is found in the four Noble Truths, which Siddhartha Guatama discovered when he received enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> The term “Buddha” is a title and means one who is enlightened. Following the three principle transmission routes as Buddhism expanded out of India, there are today three major streams of Buddhism. The form of Buddhism followed in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia is known as Hinayana (The Smaller Vehicle) or Theravada (The Way of the Elders). It is considered to be the stricter version that aligns itself most closely with the teaching and practice of the Buddha during his lifetime.

### THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

The first of these truths concerns suffering or *dukkha*. All existence is marked by suffering, the cycle of birth, death and decay; all unpleasantness, sorrow, pain and being separated from the pleasant is *dukkha*.<sup>18</sup> In order to better understand the nature of suffering, we must look at the nature of reality as explained by the Buddha. There are three characteristics of all existence: *anicca*, which speaks of impermanence, *dukkha*, and *anatta*, which means no soul or no self.<sup>19</sup> Thus in Buddhist thinking, all sentient beings are merely bundles of aggregates, *khandas*,<sup>20</sup> that are impermanent and constantly changing. “To the Buddhists, separate individual existence is really a fiction.”<sup>21</sup>

### THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

This background then leads to the second Noble Truth concerning the cause of suffering, which is desire or *tanha*. *Tanha* is the desire for existence, the desire to preserve self (which really does not exist), and the desire for things.<sup>22</sup> This desire is caused by *avijja*, or ignorance. When people are ignorant of the nature of reality as expressed in the three characteristics of existence and ignorant of the first Noble Truth, then a desire for existence arises, and this desire creates karma (Thai-*kam*).<sup>23</sup>

Karma is a rather complicated concept that is variously understood within the framework of Buddhism. However, in its most basic sense, karma means action, which can be good or bad or neutral, but which produces a reaction.<sup>24</sup> Wan Petchsongkram notes that karma causes one to be born, it reinforces by making good deeds better and evil worse, it acts as a barrier by standing in the way either positively or negatively of the

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<sup>17</sup>For an excellent concise overview of the key concepts of Buddhism see Hong-Shik Shin, *Principles of Church Planting*, pp. 226–231.

<sup>18</sup>Phra Sasanasobhana, *Phraputtajao Song Soon Arai* [What did the Buddha Teach?], trans. and ed. Phra Khantipalo and Phra Nagaseno (Thailand: The War Veterans Organization of Thailand, 1967), p. 5.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>20</sup>Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, trans. and ed. France Hudgins (Bangkok, Thailand: Thai Gospel Press, 1975), p. 208.

<sup>21</sup>Ezra Mothanaprakoon, “A Critique of Buddhist Soteriology From a Biblical Perspective,” paper presented for Seminar in Asian Theological Issues, Far East Advanced School of Theology, 12 January 1987.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade*, p. 129.

apparent course of one's life, and it can cause reversal of one's circumstances.<sup>25</sup> Thus it is karma that causes one to be caught in an endless cycle of rebirths and the consequent suffering. As an unchanging law of cause and effect karma, cannot be escaped, one will always be paid back, for both good deeds and bad at some point in this life or in future lives.

### THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH

The Third Noble Truth has to do with the cessation of suffering. When one is freed from the cycle of rebirths and of suffering by extinguishing desire, one enters Nirvana (Pali-*nibbana*, Thai-*nippaan*). “Nirvana is cessation, extinction, and detachment, but not only that, it is unconditioned and uncompounded, and it is stopping or eliminating causation.”<sup>26</sup>

### THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

The Fourth Noble Truth deals with the path to salvation, the cessation of suffering. This is called the Noble Eightfold Path which consists of right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, mindfulness and concentration.<sup>27</sup> This state is attainable by one's own efforts through renouncing the world and following this path. Meditation plays a very important role in following the path and in renouncing the world. As it is practiced, there are two stages: *kammatthana* and *vipassana*.<sup>28</sup> The first form helps in creating detachment and understanding the impermanence of everything, while, “From *vipassana* arises wisdom...and when this wisdom comes we are able to relinquish our grasp on everything. We can cut ourselves off from the world for we are not any longer intoxicated with it.”<sup>29</sup> In this state, ignorance and desire have been destroyed and attachment has been broken so that one can enter *nibbana*.<sup>30</sup>

## OVERVIEW OF RELIGION IN THAILAND

A. Thomas Kirsch points out that there are three basic subsystems that make up what he calls Thai religion.<sup>31</sup> This consists of Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanism, and animism.<sup>32</sup> Kirsch notes that these three subsystems are, “functionally specialized so that they mutually support each other and rarely conflict.”<sup>33</sup> John Davis says that Asian-Theravardians “see no inconsistency between an organic Animistic world view with its multitudinous gods and spirits, and a mechanistic Buddhist world view; they marry conveniently and live harmoniously together.”<sup>34</sup> In addition to these three subsystems,

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 129ff.

<sup>26</sup>Hong-Shik Shin, *Principles of Church Planting*, p. 229

<sup>27</sup>Phra Sasanasobhana, *Phraputtajao Song Soon Arai*, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup>Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade*, pp. 102–122.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>A. Thomas Kirsch, “Notes on Thai Religion,” in *Clues to Thai Culture*, ed. Central Thai Language Committee (Bangkok, Thailand: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, May 1981), pp. 146–147.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>34</sup>Davis, p. 45.

within Buddhism itself, there is a continuum of practice.<sup>35</sup> There are intellectual Buddhists who emphasize the philosophical aspects, liberal Buddhists who try to conform Buddhism to modern life, folk Buddhists who practice traditional Buddhism in its modified animistic form, and nominal Buddhists who consider themselves to be Buddhist by virtue of being Thai, yet do not participate in Buddhist practices or ceremonies.

For those who practice Buddhism at least to some degree, it is useful to think in terms of a continuum with *nippanistic* Buddhists on one end and *karmatic* Buddhists on the other. *Nippan* is the Thai term for Nirvana, the state that one enters upon breaking out of the cycle of rebirth. There are relatively few *nippanistic* Buddhists who are seriously endeavoring to follow the eight-fold path of classical Buddhism. The majority of the practitioners can be considered *karmatic* Buddhists for whom the essence of their religious practice is the collecting of good merit in order to be reborn into a better state in the future. Here the focus is not so much upon the actual practice of Buddhism as the ritual elements of making merit. For these people the goal of liberation from their karma to reach Nirvana is too difficult and impractical with all the demands of daily life. The goal of bettering their karma through making merit via a variety of means becomes the core of their practice. This is the orientation of the folk Buddhist, mixing both Buddhist and animistic practice without any sense of incompatibility.

In discussing with a Thai Buddhist monk this issue of the compatibility of animistic shrine behavior with classical Buddhist doctrine, the explanation was couched in terms of the “strength” of a person’s belief and understanding of truth. A strong person can walk up steps without any help, but a weaker person needs to use a railing. For those who can see the truth of the *dhamma* there is no need for animistic practices, but for other people who are not yet at that point to be able to understand the truth, the “railing” of spirit shrines and such beliefs is helpful.

There are two final points that are important to consider when looking at the religious context of Thai society. First, the Thai equate being Thai with being a Buddhist. They make a connection between nationality and religion. This is a major factor in their view that Christianity is a foreign religion and a stumbling-block in their understanding of the Christian religion. Their assumption is that all “white” people, like Europeans and Americans, are Christian and that everything they see in tourists and through media represent Christian values and behavior.

A second point is that Thais maintain the view that all religions are equally good because they teach us to be good people (*thuk sasana di muan gan sawn hai rao ben khon di*). Nearly every witnessing conversation I have ever been involved in has begun and ended with this saying. What is interesting is that although this is verbalized frequently when Thais come into contact with people of other religions, they do not mean by it that they completely believe in the true relativity of all religion. First, this saying seems to be a way for them to politely respond to the encounter with those of another religion in a face saving and calm manner that avoids any tension of opposing beliefs. The reality is that they do not want their children or a relative or their own people to change their religion to another supposedly equally good option. Equality of religion is espoused but it does not mean people feel that they should be able to choose freely among the different options. To be Thai is to be a Buddhist. A second point is that I

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<sup>35</sup>Alex Smith, *Strategy To Multiply Rural Churches: A Central Thailand Case Study* (Bangkok, Thailand: OMF Publishers, 1977), p. 88.

have both read things written by monks and spoke with people who will use this saying and at the same time show their belief that Buddhism is the “real” truth by reinterpreting Christianity in Buddhist terms.

## THE PRACTICE OF BUDDHISM IN THAILAND

As can be seen from the discussion in the previous section, there is a wide range of belief and practice among those who call themselves Buddhists. In this section I want to examine how Thais in general approach their Buddhist faith.<sup>36</sup> These remarks are of necessity an oversimplification and generalization, but they are indicative of broad patterns found in Thai society.

The first point that must be made is that Thais on the whole have a very limited knowledge of philosophical Buddhism.<sup>37</sup> I have seen a government study that came out some years ago indicating that 75% of the people in Bangkok have never been to a temple. Suntaree Komin’s research on Thai values showed that people in the city showed increased activity at spirit shrines and less of a connection to temple activities.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, as mentioned above, there is a very strong animistic influence in Thai religion. In a practical sense, this means that for many people their chief concern is not how to follow in detail the tenets of philosophical Buddhism, but rather how to properly relate to the spirit world so as to gain help, peace, power and other tangible benefits in the present life. Third, a survey has shown that for Thai farmers, their main concern was about money and personal security and not religious perfection.<sup>39</sup> Another survey done among converts in central Thailand showed that for 53 percent the love of God was a significant factor in their conversion (with 25 percent making it the primary cause).<sup>40</sup> This shows that for a large number of people, deep human needs of love, acceptance, and security take precedence over the doctrinal considerations which make the love of God a stumbling block for the strict Buddhist.<sup>41</sup> Fourthly, the hope of Nirvana is for most people very far off and not a practical reality.<sup>42</sup>

What then precisely is the “core” of beliefs that Thais in general understand from their Buddhist background? Most would probably agree that playing a central role are the concepts of karma, merit (*bun*), and particularly the making of merit (*tam bun*) in order to improve one’s lot, both in this life and following existences.<sup>43</sup> Kirsch also argues that reincarnation is a key concept as it relates to the concept of karma with its accumulation

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<sup>36</sup>For much more detailed work in this area see Davis, chapter 3; Mejudhon, pp. 21-46; and Wisley, chapter 3.

<sup>37</sup>Alex Smith, *Strategy*, p. 88; Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade*, p. 35.

<sup>38</sup>Suntaree Komin, *Psychology of the Thai people: Values and Behavior Patterns*, (Bangkok, Thailand: National Institute of Development Administration, 1990).

<sup>39</sup>Mary Cooke, “A Thai’s Attitude Toward Religion,” (Overseas Missionary Fellowship, Bangkok, Thailand), p. 2. (Typewritten lecture notes).

<sup>40</sup>Smith, *Strategy*, p. 174.

<sup>41</sup>Wan Petchsongkram shows how the Buddhist ideal of detachment makes the concept of God’s love problematic because it means that God is full of passion and attached. *Talk in the Shade*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>42</sup>Hong-Shik Shin, *Principles of Church Planting*, p. 230.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.* See also A. Thomas Kirsch in “The Thai Buddhist Quest for Merit,” in *Clues to Thai Culture*, ed. Central Thai Language Committee (Bangkok: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, May 1981), p. 121.

of rewards and punishments that are worked out over many lifetimes.<sup>44</sup> If many people do not completely understand the four Noble Truths, they do probably understand (from their own personal experience) that life has suffering and that there is a cause and effect relationship in all of this. The common man also has some concept of the necessity to keep the moral precepts, which are a part of the Buddha's teaching, in the lower level of the *dhamma*,<sup>45</sup> which for rural religion can be found embodied in the five prohibitions (*silha*).<sup>46</sup> These precepts are certainly not always kept, but at the least they provide a common moral framework which everyone understands and give people an understanding of wrongdoing that centers on the actual committing of an evil deed or act.<sup>47</sup>

In a practical sense, people are interested in bettering their present lives or succeeding ones by the collection of merit and the avoidance of demerit (*baab*). The other-worldly aspects of true Buddhism, though expressed through Buddhist ritual<sup>48</sup> and understood at least to a degree by the general populace, tend to be pursued only by those who are older and who have the time to expend in religious pursuits. Those who have families and jobs can only concern themselves peripherally with the gaining of merit through ritual means.

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## HEARING THE GOSPEL THROUGH THAI BUDDHIST EARS

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As I began to understand the influence of Buddhist thought in the decoding of the Gospel message as we typically encode it in the Thai language, I realized that even though my Thai friends were not usually voicing their objections or misunderstandings, every point of the Gospel would raise questions or confusion based on their worldview. This is why often times a Gospel presentation is a "reciting of conundrums" to the Theravada Buddhist.

In this section I want to illustrate briefly what the traditional points of the Gospel message as encoded in Thai "sound" like to a Thai Buddhist listener<sup>49</sup>. For the purpose of this example I will use the format popularized by the Four Spiritual Laws tract, a style that has been translated and used widely in Thailand in numerous different witnessing

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<sup>44</sup>A. Thomas Kirsch, "The Thai Buddhist Quest," p. 121.

<sup>45</sup>Wan Petchsongkram in *Talk in the Shade*, (pp. 38–42; 124–128), notes that within the framework of Buddhism there are actually three categories of teaching or *dhamma* and that this can be broadly divided into two parts: those precepts dealing with an ordinary or mundane level of life (*lokiyadhamma*), and those which specifically deal with the Four Noble Truths leading to ending the cycle of rebirths (*lokuttaradhamma*). Most people are only really familiar with and attempt to practice to a degree the teaching which has to do with the more mundane level as it is embodied in the five precepts or prohibitions.

<sup>46</sup>The five prohibitions are as follows: Do not destroy life, do not steal, do not commit fornication, do not lie or speak falsely, do not drink intoxicants. These five precepts are considered to be universally applicable, and form the basic understanding of morality for the common people.

<sup>47</sup>Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade*, p. 141.

<sup>48</sup>A. Thomas Kirsch, "The Thai Buddhist Quest," p. 126.

<sup>49</sup>The material here I got primarily from John Davis in his introduction to *Poles Apart*, pp. vi-viii).

tools. I am not picking out every possible objection or point of confusion, rather I am just highlighting major areas that are most definitely issues.

## GOD LOVES YOU

There are two issues that come to the front immediately when we start to talk about God and his love for us. First, there is the whole concept of God. Buddha did not deny there could be deity, rather he indicated that it was not an important issue. The worldview behind this is that all beings are part of a karmatic continuum and thus all are in need of being freed from the karmatic cycle. In Thai we have difficulty because there is no single word that expresses the idea of God who is creator and over all. Normally we use two terms put together, *phra* and *jao*. *Phra* is a word with a wide range of use and is used as a prefix for numerous words. By itself the term can mean lord, god, priest, and Buddha image. As a prefix it can be used in a conferred title, and as a title placed before kings, things associated with royalty, divinities, objects of worship, sacred places and things. Thus there are numerous common terms with the *phra* prefix: *phrajan* (moon), *phraatit* (sun), *phrasong* (monk), *phrajaopaendin* (the king). The term *jao* means a prince, ruler or holy being. Compounded as *phrajao* the common understanding today of Thais is that this refers to the *phra* (god) of the *farang* (white people). So there is no clarity in the term in terms of referring to the living God of the universe.

The second problem comes when we talk about God loving us. The Four Noble Truths remind us that the path to being freed from suffering is to extinguish all desire. Thus it is a value to be cool hearted, and the separation of the monk from all worldly things is seen as the ideal. For God to love means that he is hot, involved and still connected with the desire that keeps the cycle of rebirth happening. This means that God is *awicha* (ignorant) because he does not understand that suffering is caused by desire.

## MAN IS SEPARATED FROM GOD BECAUSE OF SIN

The concept of sin in Scripture takes on its meaning in the context of a relationship with the living, personal God who is our maker and to whom we are responsible and owe our obedience. The Thai word we must use at this point is *baab* which carries the idea of sin in the sense of demerit. There is no sense of guilt because there is no one to be guilty toward. *Baab* contrasts with *bun* (merit) and the goal becomes to have more *bun* than *baap*.

Thais, for the most part, see sin as embodied in an evil deed or act. *Baab* also is used in contrast to merit in the sense of demerit and does not carry as strong of a connotation as the biblical concept of sin as being an offense against God. Nor is there anything in Buddhist belief to convey the idea that we commit sin because we are sinners, born with sin. The typical idea is that sin can be expressed through the body and the heart, and that if it is not an overt act, then it does not really count as sin.<sup>50</sup>

There is also no concept of a sin nature where people commit acts of sin because they are sinful by nature. Thai people will say that humans are basically good but it is through *awicha* (ignorance), lack of education and bad models that they become bad. There seems to be the general feeling that if people had the right opportunities in life they would be good and moral and follow the *dhamma*.

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<sup>50</sup>Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade*, pp. 141–145.

## JESUS DIED ON A CROSS TO FORGIVE YOUR SIN

In a worldview with karma, the law of cause and effect, at the center, and where all evil deeds will be inexorably paid back in some life, a person who is given the cruel death of crucifixion by the government at a young age is very suspect. It is obvious to a Thai person that Jesus must have committed serious wrong in a previous life in order to have that happen.

## PUT YOUR FAITH IN CHRIST

When we conclude by saying the wonderful gift that God has given us, eternal life, is received by faith, again, this creates tension with Buddhist doctrine. In the first place, in the Buddhist worldview, people have eternal life and are trying to break out of that already to the state of Nirvana where there is no more rebirth. Secondly, the Buddha said that one must *pungtuaeang* (depend upon yourself). There is no other who can help you.

## CONCLUSION

This brief exercise reveals why we so often do not make any sense to Thai listeners when we share the Gospel. The terms that we are compelled to use have a radically different meaning than what we are intending. There are also vast conceptual differences as well, relating in particular to the idea of a living and personal God versus impersonal karma. We cannot assume simply because people listen politely and do not object that it means the same understanding is being created in the receptor as in the message sender. When we take into account the worldview, beliefs and assumptions of Thai listeners it demands that we contextualize the message in order to create an understanding that is in line with the biblical message.

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## A CONTEXTUALIZED GOSPEL MESSAGE FOR THAI BUDDHISTS

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The last section makes it clear that the Gospel as usually explained has a very foreign ring to the Thai listener. I now want to make some tentative suggestions as to how we can work to reduce this sense of foreignness and weave into a presentation of the Good News answers to some of the questions that are naturally raised by our listeners. One of the primary sources that I have utilized in this is the work of Wan Petchsongkram.<sup>51</sup> Wan spent eight years as a Buddhist monk before becoming a Christian. He currently serves as the senior pastor of the Rom Glao Church. The book was developed from the translation of taped lectures in Thai to a group of Christian leaders back in 1972. The purpose was to look at popular Buddhism and suggest “guidelines for presenting the Christian message to the Thai Buddhist in terms which he would find intelligible.”<sup>52</sup> As a new missionary, Wan’s material helped me both understand Buddhism and see new ways to experiment with sharing the message in Thai society.

Two principles are foundational to the process of message contextualization. The first is that if we are going to make the Gospel presentation itself more understandable we have to be able to “hear” what they hear from our communication and build into it in

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<sup>51</sup>Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, trans. and ed. by Frances Hudgins (Bangkok: Thai Gospel Press, 1975).

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

advance answers to objections and questions that naturally arise. My experience has been that very rarely will Thais voice their objections or questions in the context of a witnessing encounter. The fact that they do not verbalize these things does not mean they are not there. So the goal here is to anticipate the problem areas where the Christian message, as couched in the terms available for us in Thai, creates some sense of confusion or question in the minds of the listener. Rather than bringing these points of difference out in a confrontational fashion, it is better to provide the clarification right in the presentation itself.

A second point is that this process of message contextualization can only take place if we are willing to utilize Thai terms and concepts and invest them with new and higher meanings. The justification for doing this can be found in the New Testament itself where Greek words like *agape* and *euangelion* were taken from the local context and invested with new meaning to show what God had done through Christ. Filbeck argues that in the process of communication, there is some thing behind and deeper which forms the foundation for the giving and receiving of messages, than just encoding, transmitting, and decoding. This deeper foundation concerns the way in which the society of both communicator and receiver is organized.<sup>53</sup> He makes the point that we must realize the particular sociological foundations of our listeners if we are going to communicate in a way that can be understood.<sup>54</sup> The words and concepts used within a given society designate certain mutually agreed upon realities and are expressive of both worldview and social organization. If we choose to communicate in words that are not a part of the normal concepts commonly understood by people, we make it very difficult for true communication to take place. Conversely, if we use words that already have a range of meaning within that society then our listeners are going to naturally decode them and make meaning based on their understandings and not the ones that we may intend.

I am arguing that in order to create a successful “environment” for communicating, we must be willing to take words that are used by Thai Buddhists as our starting point and accept the fact that there may be an initial gap between the biblical meaning and what they are understanding. The point is that we are already being “misunderstood” in our traditional presentation of the Gospel, and we seek to correct those misunderstanding through constant clarification and explanation. I am simply suggesting that by using terms and concepts that are familiar to local people as a starting point and investing them with new or intensified meaning we can lessen the tendency for the message to feel completely foreign. At the same time the ongoing process of clarification and explanation in dialogue must happen to move towards full biblical meaning.

### **ENTRY POINTS FOR SHARING THE GOSPEL**

The approach that I am taking for sharing the Gospel is based on the idea of a core “track” that provides a logical presentation of the message, modularity of concepts, and the use of illustrations to clarify each major point. The idea of modularity means that each of the major concepts about man, God, Christ and faith that we share in a Gospel presentation can be compared to a self-contained unit with its own points and

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<sup>53</sup>David Filbeck, *Social Context and Proclamation: A Socio-Cognitive Study in Proclaiming the Gospel Cross-Culturally* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1985), p. 3.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

illustrations. Depending on where you engage a person you can begin with a different module but the point is that there is always the “track” to get back on so that your listener has a connected line of thought rather than random chunks of information.

There are numerous ways to begin a conversation to share the Gospel. It is my personal opinion that in most instances, it is best to start talking about man’s predicament before attempting to talk about God. As was noted in previous discussion, the average Thai is familiar with the *sil ha* (the five prohibitions) and with karma, and is probably involved in making merit (*tam bun*), both ritual and otherwise, that hopefully will help to improve this life or a future existence. On the other hand, he or she probably has little or no conception at all of a living, personal God. I think it is important to try and utilize terms that are familiar to people as starting points for talking about the Good News of what God has done in Jesus Christ. I frequently use the idea of the performance gap and common objections to begin.

## THE PERFORMANCE GAP

Joseph Cooke has pointed out that for most Thais there is hardly ever a great sense of guilt because of wrongdoing.<sup>55</sup> Their culture is oriented towards shame not guilt. This is in part a consequence of the fact that the Thai Buddhist incurs guilt (in the legal sense of wrongdoing) only in one dimension, the manward side, since he has no belief in God.<sup>56</sup> However, Cooke notes that in this single dimension it is quite probable that those who take seriously the following of *sil ha* and other precepts, find themselves with a performance gap.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the behavior that they are able to produce and what they want to produce, is not the same, creating a gap.

### *Starting with Suffering*

Keeping in mind what Joseph Cooke has said in regard to the lack of a sense of guilt that the Thai have concerning wrongdoing, it seems that rather than trying to create a sense of wrongdoing, we should begin where they are, with an understanding of *dukkha* (Thai-*thuk*), which is suffering. By using one of the three key terms that mark human existence in Buddhism, we can zero in on what they commonly understand and experience—the frustration, suffering and difficulties of life—and we can begin to steer them in the discussion to see that this *thuk* comes because of problems that are within us, rather than external to us.

There are a number of ways of dealing with this area and of illustrating it. Brasert Gusawadi has an excellent illustration about a tree and its fruit. A mango tree that gives off sour-tasting fruit cannot change itself at all, but in order to get sweet fruit, we must obtain a variety or species that bears sweet fruit and plant those seeds.<sup>58</sup> In other words to solve man’s problem of the performance gap, we cannot change on our own but need the impartation of new life.

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<sup>55</sup>Joseph Cooke, “The Gospel for Thai Ears,” July 1978, p. 3. (Typewritten).

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>58</sup>Brasert Gusawadi, “Witi Atibaay Tang Hang Kwam Rod Doy Chai Ruub Wongglom Sung Maaythung Gaay Jai Lae Winnyan [A Method of Explaining the Way of Salvation Using Concentric Circles with the Meaning of Body, Mind and Spirit]” (Overseas Missionary Fellowship, Bangkok, Thailand. (Typewritten.)

### *Starting with Karma and Ignorance*

A missionary with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship has developed a Gospel presentation called “The Way to Freedom—The Way to a New Life,” which has a similar starting point of dealing with man’s problems.<sup>59</sup> It looks at man’s life in three concentric circles from family and friends out to the hostile spirit world. It characterizes man’s life using two key terms which the Thai Buddhists are familiar with: *awicha* (*Pali-avijja*) and *kam* (*Pali- kamma* or karma). Here man is seen as locked in *awicha* (ignorance), and also reaping what he sows, which is the law of *kam*. This approach has much to commend it because it ties man’s condition into two common key Thai word-concepts that also have a contact point in Scripture.

Another method that starts off from the concept of karma is to use the introductory two questions of the Evangelism Explosion presentation modified for people with a karmatic worldview. Rather than asking if one would go to heaven after they die, you ask if they would be liberated from the law of karma (*pon jaak got haeng kam*). The follow up question is to ask how they think that people are able to be freed from their karma.

### *Starting with a Thai Proverb*

Another place to begin from in dealing with the performance gap is to use the Thai proverb, *kwamruthuamhua aowtuamairawt*. This means that though knowledge floods one’s head, he cannot use it to save himself. After setting the stage by showing how many problems occur both in society and personally, and by zeroing in on the listener’s own perceived difficulties, this proverb can be very helpful in showing that even though we may possess lots of knowledge about what is right, we still cannot actually follow through on it and do it; we need power to act, not just knowledge. In this regard, the illustration of the man drowning and having someone try to teach him to swim and having another pull him out of the water is very helpful.<sup>60</sup>

### *Starting with a Common Saying on Good and Evil and the Desire Concept*

Another possible place to begin in talking about man and his problems is to use the very well known phrase, *thamdii daidii thamchua daichua*. This is a saying about the law of karma which means, “do good-receive good, do evil-receive evil.” We can use Galatians 6:6-8 to show that this principle of retribution is one that God uses in governing the world. The question can be asked, what happens if you do both good and evil? What do you receive then? This draws upon the fact of their experience that no one consistently does good. At this point, I think it is permissible to use the word *tanha* (desire) or *kileedtanha* to speak of the sin principle in man rather than the word used in the Thai Bible, *nuanang*. *Nuanang* is two words meaning the flesh or skin, and hide compounded together; in order to be understood it must be explained. However, *tanha* is a religious word that is well known, and the concept that we cling to life and commit acts of sin because of *tanha* is well recognized by the common man. Thus in Galatians 6:8, we can show that because of *tanha* we consistently do not do good and cannot break the

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<sup>59</sup>“The Way to Freedom—The Way to a New Life,” Overseas Missionary Fellowship, Bangkok, Thailand. (Typewritten.)

<sup>60</sup>This illustration is found in the language study book *Practical Communications* by Overseas Missionary Fellowship.

cycle of karma that we are caught in. However, the text says that if we sow to the Spirit we reap eternal life. This can become the bridge for showing how we can break out of *tanha* and karma. We need new life; life from God's Spirit.

## COMMON OBJECTIONS AS ENTRY POINTS

One lesson that I learned from my witnessing encounters over the years is that in Thailand before you can really share the content of the message you must correct misunderstandings first. There are a number of relatively "stock" phrases that represent some local beliefs about the relationship of Buddhism to the evangelism of the Christians. Rather than this being seen as a negative factor, it can in reality serve as a bridge for entering into a conversation about the message of the Gospel. In this section I examine four major objections and methods for answering them and moving on to share Christ.

### *To Be Thai Is To Be Buddhist*

There are a couple of ways of handling this concept. One is to note that the Thai were not always Buddhists, that the religion traveled to their region. We explain that just as not all Americans are Christians, so not all Thais are solid practitioners of Buddhism. People are not simply born into their religion, they must chose to practice it on a daily basis.

### *We Must Follow Our Ancestors*

Sometimes Thai believers are accused of selling their nationality. In a village setting when something goes wrong the Christians will be blamed because they have left the path of the ancestors. I have dealt with this by trying to get people to think about how much change has been introduced into Thai society. Years ago there were no modern medicines, no school system, or vaccines. All of these are things that the Thais did not have but then were introduced into their culture. Thais have had a remarkable adaptability because if something seems beneficial to them they will take it and use it for the good of their country. The ancestors themselves changed and adopted new things and we can do this also.

### *I Do Not Sin*

The first time I heard this it stumped me. After thinking about it I found that the perfect illustration for dealing with this had to do with the concept of filial piety. This is where love, loyalty and obedience must be expressed to one's parents. I set up the following scenario which is readily understood. I ask them to remember their parents who worked so hard to facilitate their education. Then I ask them how their parents would feel if they were to walk down the street and randomly pick out someone and call them their parents and *graabwai* them (prostrate and put the forehead to the ground and make the *wai* position with the hands to the forehead and then on the ground). This is shocking to a Thai for whom showing filial piety and gratitude (*katanyu*), is so important. I then tell them that this is precisely what all of mankind has done. We have rejected God who is our maker and worshiped things that are created rather than the creator himself. We are *akantanyu* to the one who made us and this is the cardinal sin, to have other gods before him. So no matter how ethically moral our life is, if we have broken that commandment, we have sinned.

## *All Religions are Equally Good*

The best answer that I have ever heard to this dilemma comes from Pastor Wirachai. When someone tells him this he affirms that statement. Yes, religions do teach us to be good. He then starts on this line of reasoning. Suppose you were out working or playing and got your face all dirty. When you come into the house you go to the mirror and it shows you the state of your face, how dirty it is. The mirror itself cannot help you. At this point you need outside help to clean up. In the same way the religion, like the mirror, cannot clean us up either. Religion will help to show the state of our heart. Trying to keep the commandments of any religion will reveal that we have trouble doing so, the religion and the commandments show us the state of our hearts. However, just like the mirror, the religion itself cannot cleanse us from our sin. It takes help outside of us from Jesus Christ to be able to remove sin from our lives.

### **THE MAJOR POINTS OF THE GOSPEL**

#### CONCEPTS ABOUT MAN'S DILEMMA AND THE PROBLEM OF SIN

Many of the entry points for sharing the Gospel begin the discussion in light of the performance gap, the problem that people have between what they hold as an ideal and how they really live. Buddhism and its concept of suffering begin with man's dilemma. I personally have found it most easy to engage Thais in talking about man's problem using the fruit tree illustration of Brasert Gusawadi that was noted above. Wan Petchsongkram talks about the common word *tujarit*, meaning dishonesty, as actually meaning evil action. When compounded, it can be used to speak of evil physical action, evil speech, and evil in the heart (*gaaytujarit*, *wajitujarit*, *manotujarit* respectively).<sup>61</sup>

These words can be used in addition to *baab* to show concrete expressions of sin in our lives. The sour fruit of our lives is expressed as evil physical actions, evil speech and evil in our hearts. It all has its start in the seed, the sour species that produces sour fruit. Using *tanha* as previously mentioned to refer to something like the sin principle (biblical "flesh"), we can show that we commit evil deeds, because from within we have a problem, the *tanha* problem, and that man is in desperate need of a change deep from within if he is to truly change his actions.

The advantage of using these starting points and then talking about man's dilemma is that it can be done by connecting with a variety of terms and concepts such as karma, suffering, ignorance, or proverbs and sayings that are very common to Thais. This has the result of making people feel like you are "talking their language" and understand where they are at and opens the door for further conversation.

#### CONCEPTS ABOUT GOD

Once we have established that man indeed has a serious problem that stems from within, we can then set it in its larger context as being a separation from a real, living, personal God who made us and who is interested in our lives. Wan Petchsongkram notes that the question of God's existence and the creation of the world are the key hurdles; those who can say yes to those two questions usually are willing to see Jesus Christ as the Son of God.<sup>62</sup> This is a very difficult area, for we are moving from the known (man's

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., pp. 99-100.

experience in the world) to the unknown and unseen. Tissa Weerasingha suggests that since “Buddhist doctrine does not deal with the issue of a First Cause,...the biblical doctrine of creation would fill a crucial cosmological deficiency.”<sup>63</sup>

One of the common objections about God being the Creator is that the world is in such a sorry state, it surely means that if someone did create the world, he must be *awicha*, ignorant, and a perpetrator of evil.<sup>64</sup> When one does talk about God as Creator, there must be an emphasis that what God made was good and whole and that it was man through his disobedience and the entrance of sin that ruined things. Wan Petchsongkram has a fascinating way of relating the creation story in which he shows how both *awicha* and *tanha* sprang up in man’s heart and that this is the source of the world’s problems.<sup>65</sup>

Also, in dealing with arguments for the existence of God, it is good to be conversant with concepts and evidences that point to the existence of a Creator. Dealing with the First Cause, the argument from design, and the argument from human personality and morality are all profitable ways to begin.

Due to the fact that in Buddhism the ultimate reality is impersonal, Joseph Cooke recommends that we stress the personhood of God, since this is really one of the essential rock-bottom differences between Buddhism and Christianity.<sup>66</sup> He suggests that this can be done through emphasizing the personhood of God in creation, using the realities of relationships in Thai society to develop analogies, and by demonstrating our own personal relationship with God.<sup>67</sup> One way that I have found to talk with people about the personality of God as a starting point is to talk about the term *singsaksittanlaituasakonlok*, which means all the powerful sacred things in the universe. *Sing* carries the idea with it of a “thing” and I will remark that this concept is almost right, but there is actually a *phu* (a person) who is the most high sacred one. This often opens the door to discuss the nature of God and then on to other parts of the Gospel.

Once we have established that God exists, it is then necessary to talk about what He is like and to show that He is truly interested in us. This Good News is that God, who we cannot see, has revealed Himself to be a God who is interested in us, who has not thrown us away, and who wants to restore us to the fellowship with Him that He intended us to have. Normally, in a Western presentation of the Gospel, these points are explained in terms of the love of God which brings us salvation. However, as noted above, the love of God can be a concept that is a stumbling block to an educated Buddhist, and the word used in the Bible and Christian circles for salvation, *kwamrawt* is not one that carries a great deal of meaning for the average person. Fortunately there are several excellent concepts that can be used to convey these truths.

We can talk about the mercy and compassion of God using the term *metta*. This is a very high word in Buddhism, and can be translated as beneficence or grace.<sup>68</sup> Also the

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<sup>63</sup>Tissa Weerasingha, “A Critique of Theology from Buddhist Cultures,” in *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, ed. Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshnaur (Taiwan: Tai Shin Color Printing Co. Ltd., 1984), p. 304.

<sup>64</sup>Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade*, pp. 84–85.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 85–89.

<sup>66</sup>Joseph Cooke, “The Gospel,” p. 20.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>68</sup>Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade*, pp. 152–153.

word used for grace, *phrakun*, is very important. These words can be used and illustrated to show that even though we ruined our lives through sin, and even though we have turned our backs on the One who made us, He is still seeking us out and does not abandon us. Joseph Cooke notes that this theme of grace and love that does not abandon us even when it is awkward or inconvenient or when we fail to measure up, would most likely be very important to a Thai.<sup>69</sup>

One illustration from Thai life that is helpful, is the practice of the King releasing prisoners on special occasions. In the Thai language this is expressed as occurring *doy phrakun*, or through the grace of the King. We can show how through our own efforts at doing good and making merit we cannot get rid of our evil heart and evil actions, but God through His grace, even though we do not merit it, brings us release and forgiveness, just as the King releases prisoners who deserve to be in prison.

## CONCEPTS ABOUT SALVATION IN CHRIST

The idea of salvation from sin is essentially foreign in terms of the common terminology used in the Thai language. It is probably more fruitful to use the concept of being released from the cycle of karma and sin (*lutponjaakkamlaebaab*). Another option would be to use the term *vimutti* (Thai-*wimutti*) in order to talk about salvation. Wan Petchsongkram notes that this Pali word means to liberate or free and could appropriately be used of Christian salvation.<sup>70</sup> However, in my experience, this word is not widely known by Thais; they have heard of it, but unless they have studied religion in some detail, they are prone not to really know what it refers to right off. Since it is not well known or understood it does not have much advantage over using the term *khwaamrawt* (salvation) and explaining it.

When speaking of the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus, it is necessary to emphasize the free and voluntary nature of His sacrifice as we see in John 10:18. As noted above, there is a tendency to think that because Jesus died a violent death as a criminal that he must have had very bad karma in His past life. There must be positive teaching at this point and illustration of sacrificial acts that stem from a desire to help another. Alex Smith has pointed out a key historical story concerning the Thai queen Phranang Srisuriyothai.<sup>71</sup> The substance of the story is that she disguised herself as a warrior to help her husband in the fight against the Burmese. As the Thai king was about to be killed in the battle, the queen rode her elephant between the two fighters and was killed, but her husband was spared. This type of true story which illustrates vicarious sacrifice can be very helpful in conveying the meaning to the Thai listener who has no background in his religious beliefs for such an act.

In speaking of the death of Christ, and using the terminology that His sacrifice enables us to be delivered from the effects of karma, we must also emphasize the broader scope which is included in his death and resurrection. This includes His victory over sin, over death, and over Satan and evil spirits. In this way we can make practical applications to the actual place that people live in. Christ's resurrection brings us power for living the new life, not the deadness of mere precepts and prohibitions, as good as they may be. It also frees us from the tyranny of death, and for the many people who are

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<sup>69</sup>Joseph Cooke, "The Gospel," pp. 13-14.

<sup>70</sup>Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>71</sup>Alex Smith, *Siamese Gold*, pp. 276-277.

tormented or afraid of evil spirits, His victory over the enemy and power to cast out demons is very important. In a similar vein, the inbreaking of God's Kingdom rule which is inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus and which is carried on by His people saw the demonstration of God's mercy in miracles of healing. All of these aspects must be given in order to show that the victory Christ has purchased for us through His shed blood touches on every area of our daily lives.

One question that the Gospel communicator is sure to face when trying to explain about salvation by grace through faith and not through our works, concerns merit (*bun*). People are so accustomed to the merit/demerit system and the law of karma paying them back good for good and evil for evil, that the idea of being freed from the weight of our evil deeds without doing anything seems very foreign. I have experimented to a degree with using the concept of merit transference as a way of conveying this idea. It has to do with explaining the idea of our being justified by faith through Christ's death in the category of Jesus being our *bun* (merit).

The idea came to me while attending a Thai funeral. Prior to the cremation there was a whole sequence of offering cloth that I did not understand. I asked a Thai friend sitting next to me what was happening and he said that it was making merit. Then the question became, making merit for who? Was it for the person giving the cloth or to the deceased? He replied that the offerings of cloth were to make merit for the person who had died. I realized then that although Thais do not talk about the transference of merit, they do believe in it and it is found in rituals like this. So I have tried using that concept in the following way:

I ask the question, "Why do you make merit?" The answer usually involves some concept of trying to gain merit for a better life both now and in the future. I then make the point that that *bun*, either through ritual or through good actions, is done for a reason, and therefore there is some ultimate direction that it points toward. At this point I make the case for the fact that our own *bun* is simply not enough, because when we look closely at our lives we have more demerit (*baab*) than merit. In this way we can never, through our own actions, deeds and *bun*, ever escape from our *kam* (karma) or make our way into heaven or be accepted into fellowship with the God who made us.

The verse I use come from the language of Paul in Ephesians and Colossians where he says that in Christ we were made alive, even though formerly dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:5 and Colossians 2:13). Jesus, who committed no sin, was a perfect sacrifice and has become *bun* for us and has wiped out karma and delivered us from death and made us pure in God's eyes. We do not acquire his *bun* by our deeds but by trusting in him, and as we do so he transfers to us all the benefit of his *bun*.

It is obvious that the biblical term we are dealing with here is righteousness. The difficulty is that since there is no concept of God, and sin that breaks a relationship with God, there is not a sense of need for righteousness. The forensic sense of justification developed by Paul is not a motivating factor for a Thai Buddhist. The issue of merit on the other hand, is right at the front of the average person's current thinking and experience and provides a starting point for talking about what Christ has done in his work on the cross. Further research needs to be done on this to see if explaining Christ's work in terms of transference of merit creates understanding and builds a bridge to grasp the biblical meaning of the cross and justification.

## CONCEPTS ABOUT MAN'S RESPONSE TO GOD'S GIFT

We have looked at some possible ways to approach talking about man and his problem, about God and His character, and about the redeeming work of the Son, but man must make a response through faith if he is to enter into the blessings of a relationship with the living God. I want to make two suggestions for this area. The first concerns the use of vocabulary in explaining the concept of faith.

In the Bible saving faith has cognitive, emotional, and volitional elements. This can and should be explained in Thai. However, I have noticed that there are a number of words which express the idea of believing in the verb form and faith in the noun form: *chua*, *sattha*, *luamsai*, and *waiwangjai*. More detailed study could reveal that in terms of their current usage, one of these words could fit the idea of volitional commitment better than mere cognitive belief in the facts. As an instance of this, I have heard people, when referring to losing a sense of faith and trust in another because of their poor behavior or example, to say that they are *not sattha* and not *not kwamchua*. Perhaps *chua* is the broader term which includes and emphasizes cognitive assent, and *sattha* carries more of the idea of trusting or giving yourself to another. Further research in this area may open up a new way to communicate the fullness of saving faith.

I have heard some bemoan the fact that in Thai there is no clear word for commitment, thus making it very difficult to express the concept of "commitment to Christ" which we use so frequently in English. However, I do not view this as much of a problem on two grounds. The first is that we do not find the word "commitment" in the New Testament, but rather the concept, stated and illustrated in many different ways. We should seek to develop these biblical categories that include the synoptic Gospels and leave our sole reliance on John's language of belief in order to get a broader and more accurate picture of what it means to follow Christ. The second reason is that there are other phrases like *mawbhai* (to give oneself over), and *jamnon* (to surrender) that can be used to convey the concept in Thai without having to have a word that specifically means commitment in the English sense.

In talking about saving faith, it is not enough to use correct vocabulary, we also must talk about the practical development of the life of faith. It is often difficult for people who are so indoctrinated into the works concept found in the merit and karma system to conceive of living a life "free from the Law" so to speak. They often feel that if there is no compelling reason to do good, then why should you do it? Hearing about salvation by grace through faith raises the same line of questioning that Paul addresses in Romans 6, and the Thai is prone to think that it is all "too easy."

However, I think there is an analogy to be found in the thinking of Thais as it relates to respect for and gratitude towards parents that helps us to change the emphasis in a healthy direction here. Showing gratitude to a parent (*jaikatanjuu*) is very important, and the child who does not show gratitude by sending money and taking care of his parents as they grow older is looked down upon. Parents have sacrificed for us, and we should sacrifice for our parents. We can use this concept to great benefit when talking about the practical outworking of the Christian life. We are saved and delivered by grace (*phrakhun*), but we live our Christian life by showing gratitude to our heavenly Father (*doysadangjaikatanjuu*). He has sacrificed His own Son that we might be restored to fellowship with him, and it is our duty to show gratitude by living our lives to please Him.

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR AN EVANGELISM STRATEGY IN THAILAND

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In my opinion the contextualization of the message is a critical and overlooked element in bringing Thai people to respond to the Gospel. However, it is only one element among many. In this section I am going to propose what I believe to be some of the most vital components that need to be a part of any strategy for evangelizing and discipling the Thai.

1. **There must be dialogue.** A canned approach, no matter how well done, is not going to allow for the kinds of interaction needed to work through the objections and misunderstandings that are always right below the surface. Dialogue also allows for the exploration of the implications of what the Christian faith will mean for their daily lives, activities and rituals.
2. **Kosuke Koyama advises that we should concentrate on the Buddhist and not Buddhism.**<sup>72</sup> He notes that Buddhism is not a set of doctrines, but people who are trying to live according to the doctrine of the Buddha. Rather than becoming caught up in trying to make comparisons and contrasts between religions, it will be much more profitable if we look at the life of each individual that we are dealing with and discern their needs and hopes and fears. It is with people that we enter into relationship and must demonstrate the truth of the Gospel in our own lives, not to some abstract doctrine. This also means that when we work with people, we should emphasize the practical nature and application of the Gospel to life and not simply esoteric discussion about doctrines. I have found many people who are more than happy to debate the virtues of Buddhism as compared with Christianity who are simultaneously suffering from tremendous personal and family problems. They do not see any connection between what they believe and how they are living. When we emphasize what the Gospel will *do* in a person's life and try to move in this realm, we may be able to avoid being derailed by unproductive discussion.
3. **Build into the Gospel presentation information about the Christian life.** Thais do not think of religion in terms of belief as much as a set of practices. When they ask about becoming a Christian they phrase it *kao khrit tong tam arai* ("If I enter Christianity what do I have to do?") They are not concerned about a set of doctrines but about the kinds of ceremonies and rituals that must be done. There are a number of issues that will have to be confronted when a Thai person seriously considers that claims of the Gospel. These include such things as making merit by giving food to monks, temple attendance, and how to conduct oneself at various Buddhist ceremonies. Helping people to see what a Christian life will look like in their social setting is an important part of getting them to think through the ramifications of what it will mean to be a follower of Jesus.
4. **Put the Gospel message in context through relationships.** We have a tendency to emphasize the verbal aspects of the message to the exclusion of the relational setting. A major part of helping the Gospel message to make sense is to share it over time in the context of a relationship where the listener can see Christ's power at work in someone's life. What may be unclear through a verbal presentation of the message

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<sup>72</sup>Kosuke, Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974), pp. 129–132.

can become understandable when seen demonstrated in a person's life. I have watched new converts share their faith effectively with others without doing any of the things that I have suggested here. What their presentation lacked in artfulness and clarity, the power of the experience of Christ in their life became compelling to their listeners and drew them to want the same for themselves. This is not an argument against contextualizing the message, but is a reminder that the effective witness bears testimony to what has happened to them.

5. **Emphasize sharing the Gospel as a process.** My experience has been that Thais have bought into the idea (often modeled by missionaries) that proclaiming the Gospel should be concluded with persuading someone to “say the sinner’s prayer.” All too often this treats a prayer of confession of faith as something that borders on magic rather than coming from a more reasoned decision based in personal understanding. There have been numerous occasions where I have heard both Thais and missionaries lamenting the fact that after some kind of evangelistic event where there were lots of “professions” that nobody ever became connected with a local church. It is really just a case of premature birth where the “profession” has not been based on an adequate understanding of the meaning and implications of a relationship with Christ and so there is no ability to grow spiritually. It is not a true conversion experience, but rather indicates a level of interest, they are seekers, but not converts. If we view sharing as a process and a dialogue we create space for people to think things through and respond.
6. **Make room for a display of God’s power.** I learned from watching Thais share their faith that they would focus on felt needs rather than try to argue with people about religious beliefs. Where I was in the habit of trying to share the whole message and deal with things apologetically, they were much quicker to find out how they could pray for a person and encourage them to pray on their own for personal needs. Bringing prayer for a person into the witnessing encounter opens the door for God to reveal himself in some way through healing or answer to a need. When this happens it serves to open a person up to do more seeking. Just as the parables of Jesus were used to move people both closer and farther depending on their response, I have seen healings and answered prayer have this same type of parabolic function. Some people respond and move closer while others turn away and reject what has happened.
7. **Develop church structures that connect believers with non-Christians.** Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, a second major issue alongside message contextualization that I believe is responsible for slow response among the Thai has to do with church structure. The “one church building-one paid pastor-one congregation” traditional model effectively separates those who have new life in Christ from those who do not. A strategy for evangelism that is based in reaching personal networks rather than an individualistic approach uses social solidarity as an advantage rather than seeing it as an obstacle.

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## CONCLUSION

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The preceding material has made it clear that there is no one “right” way to share the Gospel to Thai people and that the reasons for the slow response of the Thai over the many decades are multiple and complex. Contextualization of the message is only one element of a number of factors that need to be addressed.

The material presented in this paper is a work in progress. It has grown out of reading and interacting with others who have approached this subject and from many personal experiences in attempting to share the Gospel in one-on-one and small-group contexts over the past 16 years. The act of thinking through these issues highlights the need for further research to answer the many questions that grow out of this line of inquiry. It is my hope that the material here will be able to receive thorough examination and criticism from both missionaries and Thais and lead to the development of helpful tools to use and pass on to others as we work together in endeavoring to bring the Gospel message to the Thai people.

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