

Summarizing Presbyterian Missions in Siam

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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