

DAVID KING ET AL.

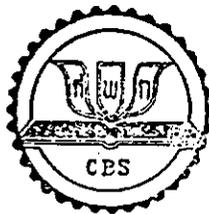
CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

ANALYSIS : THAILAND

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by

David King
O. B. O'Brien
Larry Persons



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Professor Moore
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WHY SO MANY FORMER THAI MISSIONARIES TO WHY ARE THE KIM'S +
 KOYAMA'S NOT PRESENTLY IN THAILAND EFFECTING + IMPLEMENTING THEIR
 INSIGHTS + VISIONS?

INTRODUCTION

①
 Kosuke Koyama, a former missionary to Thailand, has penned the following words in an imaginary letter to Dr. Daniel McGilvary (1828-1911), a pioneer missionary in northern Thailand for over half a century:

. . . I have become very curious to know whether your audience understood your preaching or not, if you will pardon me for asking. In my ministry here today I am forced to see how thoroughly strange and unrealistic--how "Western"--is the Christian vocabulary to the ears of my Thai neighbours. How did you explain the thoughts such as "Buddha (groaned under his load of guilt", "Our Jehovah Jesus is the only self-existent being in the universe", "He did this out of infinite love and pity for our race after it had sinned", "Everything seems to imply the contrivance of mind:; "Suffered and died to save us", "The incarnation, life, and death of Christ and redemption through his blood", and "eternal life"? Don't you think, Dr. McGilvary, that you spoke too directly or inflexibly to your audience? . . . If you had said that "Buddha groaned under his own load of dukkha", "Our Jehovah Jesus is the only arahant in the universe" . . . then your audience might not have added their own seasoning to the ingredients. It is pretty well seasoned already! But of course you cannot say that Jesus Christ is an arahant. This would be candy-coated poison. It might go down the throat without irritation, but when it reached the stomach it would paralyse the vital organs. [Suppose you wanted to say that "Jesus is an arahant", then you would have to do it with endless conditional sentences and explanatory paragraphs. That would require too much labour and only invite misunderstanding. . . .

Here Dr. Koyama handily sets before his readers the dilemma which faces every person who seeks to communicate cross-culturally: How does one communicate using familiar forms in a culture without altering the meaning of the message as it is understood in his own culture?

This question is, after all, at the base of all theology. Is not good theology that which defines God and his revelation to man in culturally perceptible terms? If so, all theology should really be contextual; and

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any attempt to dress Truth in the garb of a given culture is an attempt to "do theology." The task of this paper is to research what kind of "theologizing" is going on in the Church of Jesus Christ in Thailand today.

One who proceeds to delve into this subject will discover early on that there is not much written theology to be found. Samuel Kim reports that "the Thai people appear to be more interested in external and visible symbols and elements than in sophisticated philosophical thought and speculations. It is rare to find genuine Thai thinkers of the Western variety."² There are really almost no Christian writers and thinkers who produce theological materials. Kim's summary of the situation is that "all theological developments and efforts of indigenization are completely monopolized by foreign missionaries." It is ~~the~~ ^{the} Church today faces a theological vacuum.

If theology has been "spoon-fed" to Thai Christians, what is there

for the writers of this paper to describe or diagnose? What will be the purpose of this study? First it is important to state what the paper will

not be. It will not be an attempt to write a "Thai theology"--that is call to a "bookish" Christianity for Thailand. Rather, the writers assume impossible because the writers are not Thai. Neither will the paper be a that whether or not one is "doing theology," contextualization is going on anyway. Or in different words, any behavior of the Church is rooted in some theological presupposition--whether or not that presupposition is consciously perceived. If so, it lies before the writers of this paper to work backwards from that which is observable in the life of the Thai Church to that which has so far gone unstated--the underlying theological presuppositions. This is at best a highly tentative effort and at worst an exercise in foolhardy speculation.

The following material is divided into three major sections. The

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WESTERN DOCTRINES
BY INDIGENIZING THEM
IN THE CHURCH

THAI CULTURAL VALUES

Cultural values are those things that standardize the worth, the effect or the function of any given phenomenon in a culture or society.

In order to fully understand the things that take place within a given

cultural setting, these values must first be integrated into one's under-

standing. One cannot fully understand the Thai in their everyday acti-

vities unless he first sees those things that are important to the Thai people within their culture.

Thai culture is generally a scene of **social** harmony and **non-conflict**.

The foreigner or Westerner will rarely observe face-to-face rejection, refusal or confrontation. Exposing the true feelings is looked upon as

shameful embarrassing--a thing to be avoided for the Thai a prescribed

propriety of action for every situation. This prescription is closely

followed for the sake of the preservation of the status quo, since for

the Thai this is what **brings** him comfort and **satisfaction**. In other

words, the social cosmetic is what the social aspect of Thai culture is

about and it sets the stage for understanding the values within the culture.

The social cosmetic is exactly what it **says--the cover up of reality**. It is important to know that the cosmetic is not necessarily reality--not

even to the Thai. It is most certainly a way of avoiding embarrassment

or some other sort of anxious situation. For instance, a visitor to

Thailand is **overcome** by the extreme politeness of the people. This is

** AGAIN OUTWARDLY APPEARANCE // EVENLY MISSIONARY IS GIVEN NICKNAME BY THAI NOT NECESSARILY COMPLIMENTARY BUT ALWAYS ACCURATE. MINE IS ONE OF FEW OUTWARDLY USED "FAT" MIND/KINDS - I.E. FAI*

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evidenced in what seems to be a genial interest in others and a genuine concern for the welfare and comfort of others. What the first glance observer does not realize is that this activity can be a cover up for completely different feelings. The Thai maintain this attitude normally as a disguise **for** their true anxiety over the apparent intentions of others. In this way they can harbor bitter **feelings** and still not disrupt the peaceful, relaxed facade that is so typical of the Thai people. In this way also they can refrain from **unnecessarily** offending someone with an unbridled tongue. The point is that the maintenance of the most comfortable situation is a priority of priorities. The values must be preserved at **all** costs and the social **cosmetic**==though it has many parts --is the **instrument** by which this preservation can be achieved.

THAT'S IT
COVER-UP

Then what are these values? What is it that makes them such a priority to the Thai people? Why do they affect **the** culture in such an **all-pervasive** way?

QUESTIONS
WHAT ARE THE VALUES?
WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?
WHY ARE THEY ALL-PERVASIVE?
SCIENCE
THREE VALUES CATEGORIES
SPIRITUAL
INDIVIDUALISM
AUTHORITY

Both Wendell Blanchard⁵ and Frank Moore⁶ have categorized these values into three areas which form a neat analysis. The areas that they list are: 1) the spiritual aspect, 2) individualism, and 3) authority.

Spiritual Development and the Attainment of Merit

In this area the person of the monk is the ideal. He is the representative of the one who has attained spiritual perfection in his walk. The Buddhist monkhood or the Sangha is something that commands great respect. In fact, even some of the poorest Thai **are** known to give up to **25%** of their annual **income** to the **priesthood**.⁷ For the majority of the Thai, religious morality is a **priority**, whether it is a genuine **conviction** or not. The primary goal of this religious morality is the attainment of

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merit. This is achieved by the performance of certain prescribed. **BUT REMINDING NEXT TRIP**
 QUESTION NEED TO BE ASKED PURPOSE OF MERIT. **PERSONAL FAREWELL ONE OF THE MAIN PURPOSES**
 E. ESCAPE ROUTE **MONK WIFE PRISON** D ON COMMUNITY - FAMILY PRESSURE 2. MINOR FUTURE

One of the most prominent values associated with merit-making is that of generosity. Generosity is an **aspect** of Thai culture that immediately strikes a first observer in Thailand. It is directly tied to merit-making in that merit-making motivates a **generous** spirit on the part of the Thai. Some giving is expectedly more meritorious than other giving. For example, giving money for the construction of a Buddhist temple falls second only to giving **one's** life to the monkhood. There are specified degrees of meritorious giving. Blanchard goes on to cite

some of the tacit rules concerning giving:

"The Thai say that a person who gives must sincerely want to and must never have any later regrets. When 25 Thai farmers were asked the question, 'Who would receive more merit: a farmer who gave 30 baht and had no regrets or a farmer who gave 50 baht and wished that he had given only 25?' 22 answered that the first farmer would. When asked... (if the second farmer instead) gave 1000 baht and wished he had only given 25 ... 10 specified the first and 15 the second. The 15 explained that so much good would accrue through the 1000 baht that the donor even though he regretted all but 25, would eventually gain more merit."⁸

Generosity is then a primary value under the category of spiritual development. Another cultural value most worthy of mention concerns the idea that in order to be a truly loyal Thai, one must also be Buddhist. To be Thai and to be Buddhist are one and the same essence in the mind of the Thai. They might even go so far as to say that the most devout Buddhists can only be the Thai. Supreme loyalty to the cause of the Buddha goes hand-in-hand on a list of priorities with the worship and admiration of the king and queen whose pictures can be found very near to the altar of Buddha in many homes.

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THAI +
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to personal demands for appropriate action. Some of the cultural values that fall within this realm of individual responsibility are the following:

1) KRENG CHAI--This term is a very difficult one to explain with only one other word. It is best understood by a collection of words and phrases such as: self-effacement, respect for others (especially authority), humility, extreme consideration, avoidance of embarrassing self and others, avoidance of any kind of intrusion and avoidance of any kind of imposition.

This virtue has a high value for the Thai socially. One tacit value is that it serves as a rationalizing principle for any actions that would otherwise be an embarrassment. The point is made best by example:

a) A Thai does not criticize his employer. This could be seen as cowardice or fear by his peers, but the Thai explains that it is KRENG CHAI--out of his honor and respect that he does not criticize.

This is necessary since any evidence of weakness, fear or cowardice is a cause for shame--something abhorrent to the Thai.

b) A Thai offered a position of substantial responsibility may very well refuse because he feels unsuited for the job. His sense of both KRENG CHAI and the possibility of failure prevent him from assuming too great a task. To accept the position would bring shame both to him and to his employer and that must certainly be avoided. KRENG CHAI allows

for this excuse.

c) One of the reasons for the lack of confrontation in the Thai culture is the fact that they feel a definite need to save face at any cost. It is therefore a rare occasion indeed when a Thai will give an honest or even direct answer to a question. In fact, it would be exceedingly rude to expect him or press him to do so. This would be grounds for great offense to be taken.

WEEKLY REPORT (MAY 1954)

10/21/54
MINISTRY
ATTACHED ALSO
NO
KRENG CHAI

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HE DESIRES TO PROTECT YOUR FACE ALSO PLEASE

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ADD ENJOYABLE

2) SANUK--SABAI--SADUAK--These words mean "fun, comfort and conveni-

ence **respectively**. The Thai are masters of optimism to the same degree that they are masters of the neglect of **reality**. One of the multiple positive **releases** for the pressure brought on by the effort to maintain the social cosmetic is **SANUK--SABAI**. The Thai are gifted in the ability to derive enjoyment from practically every situation with which they are faced. There is consequently a high rating of the desire to have **SANUK--a good time**. Fun is something to be sought, while those things that are not fun are to be ignored. As a rule this principle is Surprisingly applicable across the board. It is an accurate **commentary** on the standard of value (in a general way) for the Thai as well as an accurate determinant and prescription for behavior. This is evident especially in the area of commitment to anything. As long as something is **SANUK** it is worth pursuing. When than thing ceases to be **SANUK**, it should be set aside in order that other **SANUK** might be pursued. **SANUK** is one of the things "that makes Thai people so **attractive**."¹² Yet on the other hand the entire concept of seeking fun and comfort and convenience above all else makes the Thai appear to the Westerner as lazy, slow and unmotivated. The concept is so universal that it is even included in one of the Thai greetings which is translated, "Are things comfortable for you?" The question is a rhetorical one somewhat like the English "How are you?" It nevertheless is very real part of the Thai lifestyle and mindset. Some further examples of this idea are the following:

- a) Often villagers will travel to the cities for the purpose of finding a job only to return in a short time because the job wasn't **SANUK**.
- b) On the other hand, the Thai are sometimes more than willing to perform a particular task because for them it offers a very high level of **SANUK**. These jobs might even be done free of charge.¹³

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c) National holidays are a time of feasting and **celebration** with everyone getting involved. Herein lies **another** integral aspect of SANUK --that is, the ultimate in SANUK is achieved when the most number of people are experiencing it (e. g., the yearly water festival, etc.).

d) It is not at all **uncommon** to see some early morning workers on their way to work on the back of a truck, whooping and yelling and clapping and laughing since there is no **special** reason not to. Roadside observers of the group smile as it blows by, saying, "They are **'producing'** fun."

3) Moderation and Peacefulness--These two values would fall second to none. Moderation is a virtue that brings good health and balance to one's life. It has been called the "keynote of Thai social relationships."¹⁴ The emphasis here is on a lack of **extremes**--they are to be avoided. The very closest of relationships must be somewhat distant to a point of **moderation**. The key to relationships along this line is that they not be too friendly and yet not too distant. For example, "children are reared to show deference and respect to parents, but they are not expected to be **compulsively** dutiful and obedient."¹⁵

The number one social value (according to Frank Moore) is peacefulness and a tranquil state. This is a **treasured** state for the Thai, and it ought to be maintained at all costs. The attitude is typified by non-aggression and quietude. **Interestingly**, no matter what other virtues a man might have, he is not a good man unless he is peaceful. There is social condemnation for the man **who himself** is not peaceful or who causes others not to be peaceful. On the other hand, in the act of praise and laud for someone, most often there will be reference to his **peacefulness**. The means that the Thai use to maintain this particular social value is a three-fold one. . . .

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FUNCTIONAL THEOLOGY

Because so little is written in the area of Thai contextual theology, this section will list some of the **observable** phenomena in the attitudes and behavior of the Thai Christians. It is assumed that these phenomena sprout in part from the theological presuppositions of the Thai Christians. ① The phenomena may be pictured as hybrid plants born of the crossing of the Thai culture with the invading **supracultural** truth about God in a seedbed of **circumstance**.

1. **Modernization and Materialism**

As **modernization** has become a strong factor influencing the Thai culture.¹⁸ Thai Christianity has been seen to be placing great **importance** on the **acquisition of material goods**. Part of this is due to the new force in Thailand of **advertising--especially** in the medium of **television**. Thai people generally applaud things which are believed to be

¹⁹ new or progressive. While it might be thought that the new, young ²⁰ pastors being trained in the national church might then be well received, such is not the case. Authority in the Thai church is associated with age or elevated social status. The **SANUK OF** newness is seen by the Thai to be beneficially employed simply **for** its inherent enjoyment.

① 2. **Fornication and Adultery**

While the New Testament directives on sexual purity are **taught** and **seemingly** understood in the Thai church, fornication is for the most

① IT IS OVERLOOKED IN ORDER TO SAVE FACE OF PERMISSIVE

OBSERVABLE PHENOMENA

WAS 27
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part tolerated with minimal objection.²¹ A stronger stand is taken by the church on **adultery**.

In spite of virginity being viewed as a preferable way to enter marriage (especially for women²²), many Thai teenagers have²³

engaged in sexual relations before marriage. The SANUK of sexual pleasure is often a greater motivating factor in behavior in the Thai Church than is holiness. Here craving wins out over the Buddhist ideal of the dissolution of desire, an ideal supposedly respected in the culture at large. Inside the church, fornication between teenagers is often "winked at"²⁴ and seen as a regular part of the maturing process.

In times past the Thai church has had many problems with the

taking of minor wives, even on the part of pastors⁽²⁵⁾. Because of KRENG CHAI and CHAI YEN it is difficult to try to exhort an individual over the matter of practiced sin in their lives--especially pastors. One of the writers of this paper knows of a pastor long left undisciplined while living in an adulterous situation. Finally, he was disciplined on the pretext of his adultery, but his discipline was really instigated by a personality conflict. There has been considerable growth on the part of the Church in this area and the taking of a minor wife does not loom large as a difficulty in the Thai church today.²⁶

(25) TRUE IN CHURCH - CONDOMES BUT NOT COMMIT ALWAYS PUT IT OFF WHEN OPENLY KRENG CHAI

3. Social Understanding of the Thai-Buddhist Equivalency

WALK THROUGH THESE PARTS OF

Since Buddhism is all-pervasive in Thai culture, Thai Christians often find themselves in a perplexed position when trying to live out their Christianity. Should, for example, the Christian participate in community projects when they are centered at the local Buddhist temple, especially when such projects are often understood to be merit making? How does the Christian student deal with the opening exercises at his school--exercises which often include participation in Buddhist prayers?

COMMUNITY PROJECTS
SCK VQMM EXERCISES

3. THIS IS MAIN CONFLICT INDEED!

if the **leader** of a group holds a particular **view**, the others usually affirm his ideas externally, **thereby** maintaining social ease and helping the leader save face. In this situation, if one disagrees with a particular decision or **program**, non-participation is a strong face-saving way to **express one's** disagreement.

8. Importance of the Preaching Event over Doctrine

Inside the Thai church doctrinal **dogmatism** or accuracy is not a factor of **overwhelming** importance. However, large import is place upon the preaching event itself inherently and esoterically. In the Buddhist temple teachings, the devotees find essential worth in just being there **hearing** the sound of the teaching even though they may not understand **what** is being said. People talk quietly among **themselves** while the Buddhist monk teaches, and they experience religious fulfillment in hearing the sound of his voice. This phenomenon **carries** over into Christianity to **some** extent. Because of this, the prestige and the event of the preaching concerns preachers more than doctrinal accuracy.

9. Importance of Material Goods over Doctrine and Loyalty

A large problem for many years in the **Gospel** Church of Thailand has been the seeming ease in which churches, **pastors**, and church leaders will change their denomination and doctrinal **standing**. Many times this change of affiliation is to a **non-Christian** church organization like Jesus Only or Jehovah's Witnesses. Other groups instigating these **deno-**
minational changes from GCT churches are Church of Christ (in the Parker Henderson flavor), Seventh Day **Adventists**, and the Assemblies of **God**.
 The **C&MA** mission in Thailand does not subsidize individual churches or pastors **anymore** (though they did a couple of decades **ago**). Many pastors

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part of **its constituents**. The **Thai values for freedom and individuality** seem to impede unity. Even now two **C&MA related** churches in Bangkok want to remain **independent** of the GCT due to wearying of the **GCT's internal problems**.³⁸

On the local level, there is a definite lack of discipleship of the Christians in churches. A sense of unity is lacking among the believers in the local churches and on the national level.³⁹

There are some exceptions to this. Some Thai Christians have caught an understanding of the "kingdom of God" and then live their lives exemplifying the unity of the believing Family. This appears to be a phenomenon with r/c cultural equivalent. It may be that this understanding and exemplifying is a supernatural manifestation of God's Spirit in their lives.

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THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

This is not meant to be a systematic treatment of the traditional doctrines of Christianity as they are viewed by the Thai. More accurately, this section will be a sort of "free-lance" effort to determine what the behavior of Thai Christians betrays concerning their **view** of God and the Christian's responsibility toward God.

It is unfortunate but inevitable that much of what follows will sound negative. This is because the tug of Thai culture has produced certain aberrations in theology as the Western reader knows it. The writers of this paper are not disparaging Thai Christians for combining Thai values and Christian teachings to form a uniquely flavored Christianity--quite to the contrary. A premise of this paper is that more Thai need to be "doing theology." Contextualization which goes on unconsciously is much more dangerous than that which is the result of a conscious grappling with the issues. The following presuppositions bear this out.

1. God is CHAI YEN.

GOD HAS A COOL HEART

TRUE People will often project onto God those attitudes which are highly valued in their culture. Behavior in the Thai Church often suggests that God might be thought of as having a "cool heart." It is hard enough that converted Buddhists should think of a God with personality, but that God should express strong emotions is a bit much to accept. The Buddhist ideal of tranquility and **self-control** is the cultural value which has influenced this presupposition about God.

a situation God is viewed as One who values politeness over honesty, and One who **expects the** same code of behavior from his children. Such thinking would go on to **make** any disagreements on church committees appear as ^{SHOULD MAKE THE} ~~SINFULLY~~ ^{EM L} ~~UNPROMISING~~ impolite and intolerable. An outspoken leader may have his way even when

principles of God's word call for his fellow brothers in Christ to oppose him.

But since God is not always CHAI YEN, what significance should this have for the Thai Church? ^{TEACHING PROPER ENWORDING}

2. God behaves much like the rule of Karma.

Tied to the concept of an emotionless God is the idea of an impersonal God who is behind a framework of causality. He rewards men for good deeds and punishes ~~men~~ for bad deeds.

Thai Christians, while trying to understand the root of suffering and hardships in their lives, might easily see God as a Father who both rewards and punishes his children according to their deeds. If so, Christian behavior performed with God in mind might too often be done with the hopes of "appeasing" God. It is interesting that the common word used for "God" in the Thai Church is PHRACHAO. This is "a truly Thai term referring to 'something which one fears and must beseech or flatter . . .'"⁴⁴

But does the Bible view God as a Father who punishes his children for bad deeds by sending suffering? And if this punitive aspect of God is stressed to an extreme, where is there room for an understanding of God's pure grace? God is not impersonal. He **is** present with men and women, and he loves his children dearly. He will not deal with a child as a heartless tyrant, ruling with an iron grip. While he makes **men** responsible for sin (Buddhist Karma insinuates that man is not responsible) he also breaks the fatalism of pure justice with a call of forgiveness through repentance

("Buddhism has no possibility of forgiveness, for 'Karma is the iron law to which there is no ⁴⁵exception'"). And God does not punish his children in the same way as the accumulation of demerit is **believed** to bring punishment. Rather, God disciplines his children in love, not as a payment for wrongdoing but as a catalyst for growth in **righteousness**.

To equate **God's** actions with Karma is to **greatly** depersonalize God. Such aspects of worship as praise and adoration are inappropriate if God is not seen as being intensely personal. And if God is not seen as a God of purpose it is natural that Christians would most often turn to **him** in prayer in order to avoid what they perceive to be a calamitous situation befalling them. This is little different from former times when they used to call upon the spirits with hopes of altering their predetermined bad luck.

3. A sense of history is not needed in order to accept revelation.

Kim, in speaking of the Thai, says, "People whose existence is relatively free of crisis, and for whom time flows perpetually in a circle, have little sense of history."⁴⁶ In contrast to the Western linear view of history, the Thai tend to give history a cyclical interpretation (cf. Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler⁴⁷). For the Thai, nature speaks louder than history: **AS NATURE EXISTENCE IS CONSIDERED HE BEGINS WITH THE COSMOS.**

Nature is cyclically oriented. Man's life itself is a small circular movement within mother nature's broader circular movement. When a man's life is viewed and **experienced** in terms of a circular **movement**, he becomes relatively free from the sense of despair and crisis. **Once-for-all-ness** breeds psychological tension and turmoil. **Circular movement** is, without really intending to be so, a negation of **once-for-all-ness**. There are always second, third, fourth, fifth . . . chances for man and nature to accomplish what they intend to do. . . . The **many-time-ness** of nature confronts the doctrine of **once-for-all-ness**. The **once-for-all** style of life is an unfamiliar style of life in the land of benevolent nature. 48

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It is interesting that that this presupposition about history is linked with the presupposition about God's "cool heart." Koyama explains that "a theology of neglect of history is the theology of God who stepped out of history (God of oriental deism) and who **therefore** cannot meaningfully be moved to **wrath.**"⁴⁹ He goes on to explain:

NULVA NAAH IS STEPPED OUT HISTORY

ALSO EVILS IN THE GOD

The Thai mind tends to identify God with an **absolutistic** idea beyond history (a timeless, apathetic **God**). But the wrath of God has a unique power to **historicize** God. In short, if God can truly be moved to wrath, he cannot be a timeless, apathetic God beyond history, but he must be God in history ("Thou" in history), in the sense of **the** drama described in the Bible. 50

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What kind of effects might this neglect of history have upon Thai Christians? First of all, it tends to produce a "lazy faith." If

there is a many-time-ness to life, why must one be particularly upset over failures or lack of growth in one's Christian experience? The Thai

Christians do not naturally look back to a particular "commitment experience!" and in this way "lock" themselves into history. They have a

tendency to take each day as it comes and live it in a way perhaps quite unrelated to a previous spiritual decision. For this reason they seem

in no hurry to grow spiritually, and they live a type of "roller-coaster" Christianity.

there is a many-time-ness to life, why must one be particularly upset over failures or lack of growth in one's Christian experience? The Thai Christians do not naturally look back to a particular "commitment experience!" and in this way "lock" themselves into history. They have a tendency to take each day as it comes and live it in a way perhaps quite unrelated to a previous spiritual decision. For this reason they seem in no hurry to grow spiritually, and they live a type of "roller-coaster" Christianity.

Secondly, the above view of history can serve to downplay the significance of Jesus Christ. Whether to the Westerner or the Easterner, if his Christology is orthodox he must admit that the Incarnation is a highly important event for mankind. The "once-for-all-ness" of Jesus Christ is thoroughly supported by the Scriptures. If God's ultimate revelation has already appeared in humankind's past, then how can a Christian ignore history? As Kosuke Koyama is so eloquent on this subject, the present writers quote him again:

God in Christ speaks to man. He is interested in man in history. This historical substance of love is love in the specific sense that it can hold within itself the amazing possibility to make itself sensible and intelligible to the man of any given culture and and given time. 52

Thus, the importance of history ought to be strongly asserted by every Christian. There is no such thing as history without direction and purpose. If the Thai view of history must be included in the message of the Thai Church, the most that can be done is probably to speak of history as a "spiral" --having circular and seemingly meaningless characteristics, but **definitely** headed in a **well-defined** direction.

4. God's grace is cheap.

Many Thai Christians renounced their faith under the pressure of

54

the Japanese during World War II. Many of these were reinstated into their faith after the war was over. The amazing thing is that this phenomenon took place with little sense of repentance on the part of many who had recanted. How could this be? One **reason** is that Thai Christians

For too long have thought of **God's** grace as being cheap.

There are at least two reasons for this tendency. First, Buddha **essentially** taught the ability of the self to free oneself. "For the

Buddhist, self-effort and '**bootstrap**' deliverance through their own human energies and ability, is a cardinal principle." ⁵⁵ Thus the Thai naturally

assumes that salvation must be earned. "The concept of '**grace**' is an absolutely foreign and unfamiliar word in Thai mentality." ⁵⁶ They can't conceive of receiving a free gift of salvation or forgiveness, to the point that they think, "If it is free, it must not be worth much."

Secondly, **the** cheapness of grace in Thai theology is a product of the attitude that the Christian life should be **SANUK-SABAI**. Samuel Kim

says that the concept of **SANUK** provides people with "a measure of how much

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they wish to commit themselves to particular activities."⁵⁷ Buddhism doesn't require sacrifice or commitment. The Thai "try to avoid serious religious and personal commitment because it is too much bother and rather disturbing."⁵⁸

DO YOU
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TO PARTICULAR
ACTIVITIES.⁵⁸

Yet, the Scriptures teach that discipleship is always costly: The Christian who would follow Christ must learn to do many things which are not SANUK and which take them away from feeling SABAI. "The cost of discipleship must be paid. But our problem is, the people just do not understand why." is the comment of a former missionary to Thailand.⁵⁹

DO YOU
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TO PARTICULAR
ACTIVITIES.⁵⁹

Kim states that cheap grace is "now a common disease among Thai churches."⁶⁰ It has fostered that strongly Thai idea of "getting away with all you can." In Kim's eyes, "today, the greatest problem and hindrance to the Christian witness is the degraded Christian standard of life."⁶¹ There has been much misconduct among leaders. Certain sexual sins have been "winked upon." Internal disputes have been common. True repentance and contrition have been the exception. Standards of "holiness" have not been a concern. Sinning Christians do not face up to their sins responsibly. The idea is rampant that sin has little consequence, for one can always ask for forgiveness afterward. It is a picture of the "sinning that grace may abound" found in the writings of Paul.

DO YOU
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Christianity without a standard of holiness, without sorrow over sin is no Christianity at all. Yet here one sees a case where Thai cultural values have so warped the doctrine of forgiveness that God's call to righteous living has become fainter than a whisper.

DO YOU
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TO PARTICULAR
ACTIVITIES.⁶¹

5. Conversion need not require subsequent self-denial.

It is quite remarkable that though there is no concept of "self" in Buddhism, Thai society caters so well to the pursuit of entirely selfish

DO YOU
WISH TO
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TO PARTICULAR
ACTIVITIES.⁶²

QUESTION
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Understanding Christianity is secondary to **actually** practicing its rituals. This can be evidenced in the phenomenon that the act of preaching is held to be above the studying of the doctrines of the faith.

Western logic does not **usually** appeal to the Thai. The apologetic approach which attempts to challenge the Buddhist doctrines appeals only to the thinking, educated Buddhist. This category of society is very small.

Alex Smith maintains that preaching should shun the use of logical progressions in favor of such things as parables, symbols and analogies.

63 TAKE STONES FASCINATE THE THAI

Herein an area in which the Church can engage in some legitimate adaptation to Thai culture.

The possible danger in the above presupposition, however, is that the Thai Christian may grow to feel that understanding his faith is not of great priority. The many distorted presuppositions above ought to be a testimony to the fact that failure to analyze leads to false doctrine, and false doctrine leads to flagrant sin in the life of the Church. If the act of raising crucial questions about Christ's demands on Thai culture is an act quite "un-Thai," then here certainly is an area where Thai Christians must reject their cultural characteristic.

7. The Body of Christ has loosely fitted parts.

Thai individualism here shines through. Because the Thai Buddhist's approach to religion is one that is very individualistic, converts to Christianity often find it hard to adjust to a fellowship of believers committed in such a personal way to one another. There remains an effort to keep high walls so that no one can share the secrets of one's heart. There is a residual attitude that "I don't owe any other Christian anything, and certainly I am not accountable to him for sin in my life!" The Thai Church often forgets that God has replaced "individual" irresponsibility"

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with this accusation that they reply **adamantly to** the contrary. Except for perhaps rejecting the DEVA RAJA concept of **the** monarchy (the god-king), all Christians are strong supporters of the monarchy.

TRUE

But is Christ **cross-cultural**? And if so, does he enter any culture with the message that all ties must be cut? And can a Church truly be "salt" in a society if it is in retreat from the **society**? With the above presupposition it is no wonder that the Church in Thailand has not appeared to be a viable option for the Thai people.

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This choice lies before the Thai Christian: Whether or not it makes you "feel comfortable," whether or not it is the "Thai" thing to do, WILL YOU OR WILL YOU NOT CHOOSE TO WRESTLE WITH THE TENSIONS CREATED WHEN CHRIST BECOMES INCARNATE IN THAI CULTURE? If you will not, don't turn to the missionaries and expect him to do it. He can only be a "source of good alternatives" - a "stimulator," a "doctrinal conscience."⁶⁵ YOU must do the actual thinking. If you will, ONLY THEN will you discover that Christ is not calling you to reject your culture. Only then will you see that Christ is calling you to merely affirm him in your culture.

WILL

IN "A THAI HOPE OF REDEMPTION"

QUESTION OF CONTINUITY OF THIS STORY

1. THINK CRITICALLY OF WHAT PARTS OF THAI CULTURE ARE REDEEMABLE.
2. OBTAIN THE THINKING OF THAI CHRISTIANS & THEIR REACTIONS TO DEBATE IN STORIES IN THIS NARRATIVE.
3. THEN WORK OUT YOUR OWN REASSESSMENT OF RESEMBLANCES WITH BUDDHIST FRIENDLY & UNFRIENDLY BURDENING.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Kosuke Koyama, Waterbuffalo Theology (Maryknoll, NY, 1974), pp. 81-82.
- ² Samuel Kim, The Unfinished Mission in Thailand (Seoul, Korea, 1980), p. 268.
- ³ Kim, p. 209.
- ⁴ Alex Smith, The Gospel Facing Buddhist Cultures (Taichung, Taiwan), p. 7.
- ⁵ Wendell Blanchard, Thailand (New Haven, 1958), p. 480.
- ⁶ Frank Moore, Thailand (New Haven, 1974), p. 180.
- ⁷ Blanchard, p. 480.
- ⁸ Blanchard, p. 481.
- ⁹ Larry Persons, Church Development Analysis: The Gospel Church of Thailand (Nyack, NY, 1981), p. 28. j
- ¹⁰ Larry Persons, p. 22.
- ¹¹ Blanchard, p. 482.
- ¹² Larry Persons, p. 26.
- ¹³ Blanchard, p. 484.
- ¹⁴ Moore, p. 182.
- ¹⁵ Moore.
- ¹⁶
- ¹⁷ Kim, p. 9.
Kim, p. 11.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Kosuke Koyama on October 22, 1981, at Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY.
- ¹⁹ Interview with Bill Carlsen on November 20, 1981, in Nyack, NY.
- ²⁰ Larry Persons, p. 45.
- ²¹ Interview with Wayne Persons on November 14, 1981, on deputation in Pennsylvania.

- 22 Herbert Phillips, Thai Peasant Personality (Berkeley, CA, 1965),
p. ?.
- 23 Wayne Persons November 14 Interview.
- 24 Wayne Persons November 14 Interview.
- 25 Koyama Interview.
- 26 Carlsen Interview.
- 27 Koyama Interview.
- 28 George Heckendorf, 1981 Perspective on the Present Gospel Church of Thailand Situation (Khon Kaen, Thailand, 1981).
- 29 Wayne Persons November 14 Interview.
- 30 Heckendorf, 1981 Perspective.
- 31 Interview with Wayne Persons on November 23, 1981, in Nyack, NY.
- 32 Wayne Persons November 23 Interview.
- 33 Koyama Interview.
- 34 Heckendorf, 1981 Perspective.
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- 36 Wayne Persons November 14 Interview.
- 37 George Heckendorf, Church Development Analysis Questionnaire (Khon Kaen, Thailand, 1981).
- 38 Wayne Persons November 23 Interview.
- 39 Wayne Persons.
- 40 Koyama, Waterbuffalo Theology, p. 146.
- 41 Koyama, WT, p. 147.
- 42 Smith, p. 19.
- 43 Kim, p. 115.
- 44 Smith, p. 24.
- 45 Appleton, as quoted by Smith, pp. 6-7.
- 46... 17
Kim, p. 17.
- 47 Kim, pp. 131-132.

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