

Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand

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In an article on the ways in which Western culture has been assimilated in Thailand, Michael Moerman, an anthropologist, wrote,

The objects, organizations, and ideas which Thailand receives from the West must be modified if they are to enter and sustain the Thai way of life... Things borrowed, whether Europe's Christianity or a New York pizza, are all, of necessity, different in form and substance from the original idea on which they are based. Borrowed traits are universally transformed.¹

Western Christianity has led to the building of new institutions in Thailand: the churches. These institutions have, by and large, adopted the rituals and practices of their Western counterparts. Has Christianity in fact been assimilated to Thai culture? This article will examine that question with respect to one part of the Christian presence in Thailand: the Protestants, and one aspect of Protestant Christianity: the soteriological patterns.

Soteriological patterns may be defined as those patterns of belief and behaviour through which people seek total or partial salvation. They are the basic and underlying patterns of beliefs and practices in which people seek to make life worthwhile and to overcome life's fundamental problems and evils. In soteriological religions, states

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In 1978, he began work towards a doctorate. Following preparatory study in Britain, he went to Chiang Mai, Thailand. He spent three years there, teaching at Payap College, Chiang Mai, and doing research on the relationship of the beliefs and values of Thai Christians to those of the Thai Buddhists. He returned to Australia in June 1982. He received the degree of doctor of theology from the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology in August 1983.

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1. Michael Moerman, "Western Culture and the Thai Way of Life", *Asia*, 1, 1964, pp. 32-33.

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of being or non-being are posited in which an ultimate condition of bliss or "worthwhileness" is achieved and in which all evils are finally overcome. Not all soteriological patterns involve the attempt to achieve such ultimate states, however. Basic patterns of improving life and dealing with evils may also be included in the consideration of a culture's soteriology.

The sociologist, Max Weber, claimed that both Theravada Buddhism and Protestant Calvinistic Christianity were soteriological religions typifying extreme and diametrically opposed positions. Weber argued that there were two fundamental directions in which one can go in attempting to resolve the tension between reality with all its frustrations, suffering, and evil and the ideal state of existence. The first direction involves the attempt to escape from the conflicts of worldly existence into an "other-worldly" state of existence. Weber used the term "mysticism" to describe this direction. The second involves the attempt to transcend present reality and attain the ideal by actively trying to bring the state of the world into conformity with the ideal. Weber used the term "asceticism" to describe this direction.

According to Weber, the distinction between asceticism and mysticism is the distinction between oriental and Asiatic types of religion on the one hand, and Occidental on the other. While Asia has tended to turn towards mysticism and to seek salvation by withdrawing from the world, the West has tended to look for salvation through changing the world.² It is interesting to note that, according to Weber's analysis, the two extreme positions have met in Thailand. The Protestant missionary movement has been dominated by American Presbyterians with a Calvinistic heritage, who have come into the bastion of Theravada Buddhism.

What, then, has happened to Christianity in Thailand? Are its soteriological patterns Western, reflecting those of the missionaries who taught Christianity? Or do the Thai Christian patterns show signs of assimilation to Thai culture? The following discussion of this question arises out of three years study of Thai soteriological patterns, both Christian and Buddhist, through the literature on Thai culture, through detailed and numerous interviews with Thai Christians and Buddhists, through the analysis of sermons preached by Thai Christians and Buddhists, through the analysis of approximately one thousand three hundred responses to three questionnaires distributed by the researcher, and through a study of the historical development of Christianity in Thailand.

2. See Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, translated by Ephraim Fischoff, London: Methuen, 1963. ch.XI.

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The discussion will proceed with a consideration of the major soteriological patterns in the Thai culture and the attitudes of the Thai Christians to these patterns. Then the soteriology of the Protestant missionaries to Thailand will be outlined. This article will conclude with an examination of the soteriological patterns of the Thai Christians in relation to those of the Thai Buddhists and the Protestant missionaries.

Soteriological Patterns in the Thai Culture

Nirvana

At the heart of the Buddha's teaching lies an explanation of the problems and predicament of humanity, and a way to overcome these and attain a worth-while life. The essence of this teaching is summarized in the Four Noble Truths in which it is stated that the root of the human predicament, or unsatisfactoriness, is desire.³ By overcoming desire, one can attain a state in which there is no suffering, and in which all problems and all misery is overcome. This state is called *nirvana*.

The means to attain the cessation of desire and overcome all suffering and misery, according to the Four Noble Truths, is the Eightfold Path. This path is described as right belief, right resolve, right speech, right endeavour, right occupation, right effort, right contemplation, and right concentration.⁴ By following this path, one can attain *nirvana*. It is traditionally said that there are three levels in this Eightfold Path, each of which are attained at different points in one's spiritual career. These three levels are *sila* (precepts or virtues), *samadhi* (concentration), and *pañña* (wisdom or understanding).⁵

According to the reports of anthropologists and sociologists, the idea of *nirvana* has little direct significance for majority of Thai people. To most of them, it is too remote to be relevant. Konrad Kingshill, an anthropologist, reported in a study of Ku Daeng, a village in northern Thailand, the ideas of the Buddhist monks there.

3. *tanha* — ตัณหา

4. From Vinaya Mahavagga 1 : 6 : 10 as translated by Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism : In Translations*, New York : Atheneum, 1977, originally published by Harvard University Press, 1896, pp. 368 — 373.

5. These three levels are described in Sunthorn Na—Rangsi, *The Buddhist Concepts of Karma and Rebirth*, Bangkok : Mahamakut Press, 1976, p. 257 f.

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Nibpha-n (นิพพาน) is the place of the highest happiness, according to one of the Ku Daeng priests. It is a peaceful place without birth or death. The spirits (winja-n วิญญาณ) of people are there, but not the persons themselves. The Lord Buddha is in Nibpha-n and so are his disciples who are arahān (อรหันต์). But today people are no longer good and cannot get to Nibpha-n. Not even the priests get there, or at least, he added on second thoughts, one does not know. This view was supported by other priests and ex-priests. None believed that by being a priest a person would be assured or even able to reach Nibpha-n.⁶

The view that *nirvana* is unattainable to virtually everyone is held by many Thai people. In a book written on Buddhism as professed in Thailand by a Thai scholar, it is written that “*nirvana* is the innate property attained by the Buddha alone”:⁷ no one else has attained *nirvana*.

Nirvana does not have much significance for Thai Buddhist students. In a survey of Buddhist beliefs and practices among university students in Thailand, it was found that twenty-three percent of the students did not believe in *nirvana* at all.⁸ When students at Chiang Mai University were asked whether the concept of *nirvana* had any influence on their thinking and/or behaviour, eighty-nine percent said that it had none or hardly any, and only three percent said that it was very influential.⁹

In contrast to these attitudes, Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, a contemporary Thai Buddhist scholar, has emphasized the attainment of *nirvana*, particularly that aspect which he considers may be experienced in this life. He wrote,

One can be peaceful and calm during the day. No matter what the causes of this calm, its amount and characteristics, and its level are,

6. Konrad Kingshill, *Ku Daeng, the Red Tomb: A Village Study in Northern Thailand, A.D. 1954 — 1974*, 3rd edition, Bangkok: Suriyaban, 1976, p. 234.
7. M. L. Manich Jumsai, *Understanding Thai Buddhism*, Bangkok: Chalermnit Press, 1980, pp. 28 — 29.
8. A. de Juan Penalosa, *Change in the Belief and Practise of Buddhism Among Thai University Students*. Ph.D. thesis, Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianae, Rome, 1977, pp. 221 — 222.
9. These results were obtained by A. de Juan Penalosa. They are not reported separately in his thesis, but have been taken from the computer print—outs of the results of his survey.

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all can be called nibbana.¹⁰

For Buddhadasa, *nirvana* is a state of mind that is completely calm, without anxiety, or delusion, hatred or greed, and, most importantly, detached. To attain this state, he says, the mind must be free from all “attachments” and “clinging”. Buddhadasa says that all one needs to do to experience this state of *nirvana* is to verify every day and all day the truth of the statement that “nothing is worth getting or being”.¹¹

While most Thai people do not refer to their own states of calm as being *nirvana*, it is at this level that the conceptions underlying *nirvana* have most significance for Thai people. It is widely accepted that “desire” is wrong, particularly if it leads to discontent. If one can control one’s emotions, if one can remain calm, one can attain a state of contentment. This idea of remaining cool, calm, and content is expressed in the ideas of being indifferent and unattached (chooj – เฉย ๆ), and in the expression “it doesn’t matter” (mai pen rai – ไม่เป็นไร).

Suntaree Komin and Snit Smuckarn, two Thai sociologists, have noted the connection between the idea of *nirvana* and the importance of keeping cool as reflected in a statement they used in a survey of Thai values and attitudes. They put the statement “Not holding on or attaching oneself to lustful desires and possessions is the best way to develop peace and happiness in the heart” to their respondents. Eighty percent agreed with it. There were no significant differences in agreement between males and females, urban or rural people, or between people of different occupations or incomes levels.¹²

In another questionnaire distributed to students by myself, the following statement was included: “Problems arise only because we attach importance to ourselves, and if we do not follow our own interests, these things will cease to be problems”. In this form of the idea of detachment from the self, forty-seven percent of the Buddhist students affirmed that this did help them to cope with personal problems. In dealing with the general problems of mankind, ninety percent of the same students said that “controlling one’s heart in order to make it more peaceful” would help a great deal, more, in fact, than any of another seven

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10. Buddhadasa Indapanno, *In Samsara Exist Nibbana*, translated by Thawee Sribunruang, Bangkok : Sublime Life Mission, 1970, p. 10.
 11. Buddhadasa Indapanno, *Handbook For Mankind*, Bangkok : Sublime Life Mission, 1969, p. 109.
 12. Suntaree Komin and Snit Smuckarn, *Thai Values and Value Systems : A Survey Instrument*, Bangkok : Nida, 1979. In Thai. p. 258.

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possibilities which were suggested.

The concept of *nirvana* is distinctively Buddhist, and most Christians refer to it as such. It has no place in the Christian system of ideas. Nevertheless, in the comparison between the Christian and Buddhist responses to the questionnaire I used, there was little difference in attitudes to coolness and detachment. The Buddhist word for the cause of unsatisfactoriness, "desire", or "craving", was rated more evil by the Thai Christians than by the Thai Buddhists, although the difference was not statistically significant. The Christians expressed equal interest to that of the Buddhists in the value of "calm contentment", and they saw Christianity as helping to give them that calmness and sense of peace. The only difference between the Christians and Buddhists in responses to questions on this area was that the Buddhists affirmed more than the Christians the helpfulness of detachment in dealing with personal problems.

In conclusion, then, the explicit doctrines about *nirvana* have little direct soteriological significance for the Thai people and are explicitly rejected by the Christians. However, the related ideas that the worth-while life should involve coolness and calmness, and that this comes through extinguishing desire or craving is affirmed almost as much by the Thai Christians as by the Thai Buddhists.¹³ To the extent that Christianity is seen in Thailand to contribute to a sense of coolness and calmness, it has been assimilated to Thai cultural patterns.

Karma and Merit

A second soteriological theme in the Thai culture has to do with the Buddhist themes of *karma* and merit. The law of *karma* is summarized in the popular phrase "Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil". Buddhism teaches that all of a person's actions will bear results commensurate with those actions. Thus, it is up to each person to live according to the teaching of the Dharma, doing what is right, and gaining the benefits. Buddhism does not offer salvation freely, but teaches people what the world is like so that people know what to do and how to live, and are thus able to attain salvation themselves.

The law of *karma* is generally accepted by most people in Thailand. Suntaree

13. The Thai Christians' responses were significantly different from those of control groups of American students and missionaries, for example in their higher rating of the value of "calm contentment".

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and Snit put the following sentence to their sample of one thousand five hundred Thai people, "I believe that in regard to what we did in the past, some day the consequences of those deeds that we have done in the past will return". Seventy-five percent of the sample agreed with the statement, thirteen percent disagreed, and twelve percent said they did not know. In the rural areas, belief was much stronger: eighty-four percent were willing to affirm the statement as true.¹⁴

Merit-making can be considered as one particular application of the more general law of *karma*. One makes merit by doing good deeds, and particularly by engaging in religious activities, such as by giving gifts to the *wat*. Merit-making is often explicitly connected with salvation in terms of being a means to attain a higher status and better life in future existences. One's balance of merit and demerit determines whether one goes to heaven at death, or to hell, and how long one stays there. It also affects what one's life will be like, and what status one will have, when one is re-born on earth.¹⁵

The ideas of *karma* and merit are generally regarded by the Thai Christians as distinctively Buddhist ideas. In interviews in the churches, a number of pastors and elders said that "karma" was a Buddhist word, and not a Christian term. Others were willing to offer a reinterpretation, suggesting, for example, that *karma* is one's actions and their consequences, or even that it was what God ordained. However, when the law of *karma* was expressed in terms of the saying "Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil" in a questionnaire given to Christian and Buddhist students, its truth was affirmed just as strongly by the Christians as by the Buddhists. Eighty-one percent of the Christian students completing that questionnaire affirmed that they thought merit-making was important. Their reasons were similar to those of the Buddhists.

The ideas of *karma* and merit are not discussed using those terms in the Protestant churches because of their Buddhist connotations. Yet, the general principles underlying *karma* and merit-making are generally affirmed. The Christians are just as sure as the Buddhists that if one does good, one will receive good, and if one does evil, one will receive evil. There is a tendency for the Christians to see

14. Suntaree and Snit, p. 249.

15. S.J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North—East Thailand*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 54; B. J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic : An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand*, Bangkok : Craftsman Press, 1975, p. 247 ; and K. Kingshill, p. 233., for examples.

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merit-making more in terms of doing good deeds to help others, and less in terms of doing religious acts for the purpose of making themselves feel content, than the Buddhists. But both reasons for making merit are found among both Christians and Buddhists. The difference between them is one of degree rather than kind.

Rituals, Magic, and Spirits

Apart from the Buddhist soteriological patterns, there are other patterns of behaviour in Thai culture which are used to bring about particular benefits and overcome certain types of problems. A large variety of techniques have traditionally been considered to have the power to produce certain effects. In a village in central Thailand, an anthropologist, Robert Textor, identified fifty-seven types of non-anthropomorphic objects which were said to have some magical power. Most of these objects could not produce evil effects, but, if used properly, were thought to be able to benefit the user. Some of these objects were used to bring about a good harvest, rainfall, success in trading, or, more diffusely, good luck, prosperity, and wealth. Others were used for protection, including protection against ghosts or spirits, protection in fights, and invulnerability to guns. Others were used for curing illnesses and exorcising spirits.¹⁶

There is also a variety of spells used for similar ends. Indeed, the anthropologist, B. J. Terwiel, has argued that the concept of merit is similar to that of magical power in the understanding of many rural Thai people. Merit is seen as a beneficial and protective force which has general effects over a long period of time.¹⁷

There is also a range of spiritual beings to whom many Thai people turn for help and support. These include gods of the Indic traditions such as Brahma, the demi-gods of nature such as the Rice Mother Mae Posop, and the mother goddess of the earth, Mae Nang Thorani, and a wide range of spirits.

The spirits, and, to a lesser extent, the gods, are part of a cosmology which extends the range of agents who interact in the human world beyond human beings. Like human beings, these spirits are thought to be able to cause problems and misfortunes, and bring rewards. In the rural areas, nature and its anthropomorphic

16. Robert B. Textor, *Patterns of Worship: A Formal Analysis of the Supernatural in a Thai Village*, New Haven, Connecticut: HRAF/lex books, 1973, pp. 228–230, 306–8.

17. B. J. Terwiel, "A Model for the Study of Thai Buddhism", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 35 : 3, 1976, p. 401.

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representations are important. In the city, the forces of nature have less significance, but the social world of the city is often unstable, rapidly changing, and leads to its own range of concerns. The spirit cults reflect short-term concerns and desires for relatively quick, specific, and tangible ends. Buddhism, on the other hand, tends to address itself more to a longer-term general sense of well-being.

As has been commented by one anthropologist, Steven Piker, both magic and spirit ideas reflect an 'ad hoc' piecemeal approach to the opportunities and crises of life. There is little commitment to the benefactors. Rewards and punishments are dependent largely upon the ritualized expressions of respect and the whims of the supernatural agents. There is no explicit ethic in this. The bad person may be rewarded just as much as the good.¹⁸

There is comparatively little use of explicitly magical techniques or objects among the Thai Christians. They do not generally use the charms, amulets, or spells of the Buddhists. Some Christians wear crosses around their necks and have suggested that these are alternatives to the Buddha images and other amulets which Buddhists wear. At the same time, however, they have maintained that the cross represents the God to whom they pray and does not have any power in itself. Occasionally, people use objects such as a Bible to place under the pillow of a sick person. Other Thai Christians have spoken scathingly of such magical and superstitious practices.

On important occasions such as at weddings and birthdays, some Thai Christians make special offerings to the church. For some of them, this is a similar act to making merit. Others stress that this is an appropriate response to God's love and will not produce blessings in itself.

The idea of a power which is able to protect and bless is found among the Thai Christians. While the Christians turn to this power on similar occasions to the Buddhists, they understand the power to reside in a personal god, rather than in objects or rituals. They appeal to this power for help through prayer. They may make special offerings to God, and the Catholics often make vows,¹⁹ but the power

18. Steven Piker, "The Relationship of Belief Systems to Behaviour in Rural Thai Society", *Asian Survey*, 8 : 5, 1968, pp. 388—389.
19. Francis Xavier Bell found that over fifty percent of Thai Catholics make vows in times of crisis. See *A Socio—Religious Survey of the Catholic Church in Thailand, 1974*, Bangkok : Catholic Research Centre of Thailand, mimeographed. p. 2.

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is not generally considered to be manipulatable in the same way as the impersonal powers which reside in magical objects and rituals.

In a questionnaire I distributed, Christians and Buddhists were asked about what could be possible causes of such problems as road accidents and sickness. As many Christians as Buddhists indicated that spirits could be the causes of such problems. The spirits are just as much a part of the world for the Christians as for the Buddhists. But few Christians would supplicate the spirits when they have problems, even if they think that their problems might have been caused by the spirits. They believe that there is greater power in Jesus, God, or the Holy Spirit, than in the local spirits, and it is to the Christian God that they turn for help. Even many Buddhists believe that there is greater power in the Holy Spirit than in the local spirits.²⁰

In the comparison between Jesus and the local spirits, the idea of "power" is similar. Christians seek the help of the power of Jesus in similar circumstances to those in which many Thai people seek the help of the power of the local spirits, such as in times of sickness. Christians compare and contrast the power of Jesus with the power of the local spirits.

The comparison between the power of Jesus and that of other spirit lords, such as those who possess spirit mediums, was particularly evident at a series of Christian meetings held in Chiang Mai in March, 1982. Thousands of people, most of whom were not Christians, filled a large sports stadium to listen to an American evangelist. Many of these people had come from villages, some many miles away. The series of meetings had been advertised as "Miracles, Miracles", and an important part of the meetings were sessions of healing. It was commented by some Thai people that what the evangelist did was similar to the spirit mediums. He told people that all they had to do was to have faith in his Lord. Then he asked the Lord to heal the people. A number of people claimed at the meetings that they had been healed at that time.

Salvation from Sin through the Death of Christ

The major soteriological system preached by the Protestant missionaries to

20. When asked in A questionnaire about the statement "The power of the Holy Spirit is stronger than the power of the spirits" 28% of Buddhists respondents said that this was true, and sixty-three percent said that they did not know.

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Thailand has centred on the notion of sin.²¹ The root of all human problems is proclaimed to be sin. God has provided a means for dealing with this fundamental cause through the death of Christ on the cross. Salvation is found in the forgiveness of sin, which has become available to human beings through Christ's sacrificial death. The explanation of this has been described in terms of what is known as the theory of atonement.

The idea that Christ came, or Christ died, to save mankind from sin was occasionally mentioned in sermons preached by northern Thai Christians. Out of thirty sermons that were recorded during the research, this idea was mentioned as a point in the sermon six times. In three of these sermons, how Christ saves mankind, or what redemption by his death means, was not expounded. In the other three sermons, three different accounts were given of Christ's death. One spoke of it in terms of the struggle against the powers of darkness on mankind's behalf. In a second sermon, death was seen as the pattern of "sacrificing oneself for others". The third sermon spoke of it as the supreme expression of God's love. The idea of atonement was never mentioned or expounded in any of the sermons.

The significance of sin and forgiveness for the Thai Christians is different from the major significance it has for the missionaries. The missionaries conceive "sin" primarily as the condition of the human race. This sinful condition is understood as the alienation of human beings from God, and it lies at the essence of personal and social existence. This state of affairs is reflected in what people say, do, and think, but sin is not totally identified with these individual actions and thoughts. Salvation involves a change in this human condition, and new relationship of human beings with God. This new relationship, it is believed, should be reflected in a change in the person's behaviour and actions.

For the Thai Christians, on the other hand, sin is conceived primarily in terms of particular actions. In interviews with pastors and elders in churches, a number of examples of sins were given. Sexual sins were mentioned most frequently as those about which people were most concerned. People taking revenge on others, betting, and drinking alcoholic beverages were also mentioned. It is for these sins that one requires God's forgiveness. As such, 'Sin' is not the root problem of human beings, or a condition of the human race, but one particular problem and

21. The soteriological patterns of the Protestant missionaries to northern Thailand are discussed and documented in Philip J. Hughes, *Proclamation and Response: A Study of the History of the Christian Faith in Northern Thailand*, Chiang Mai: Manuscript Division, Payap College, 1982.

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concern.

If the forgiveness of sins was an all-encompassing soteriological schema, it might be expected that “the forgiveness of sin” would be the major reason for the importance of religion. Such was the case for most of the missionaries who completed the questionnaire. However, it was rated as seventh in importance out of ten possibilities by the Thai Christians who completed the questionnaire. The fact that Christianity teaches people how to live, for example, was considered much more important by most of the Christians. Nevertheless, the Thai Christians expressed much greater concern than the missionaries about doing sinful things. In another questionnaire, the difference was apparent in that missionaries tended to affirm that (it was the nature of human beings which caused them to do evil, and that) the essence of human nature and society was evil. The Thai Christians, on the other hand, were doubtful whether the problem lay in the nature of human beings, and generally affirmed that the essence of human nature and of society was good.

The difference in the conception of sin is reflected also in a difference in the conception of the means of forgiveness. For the missionaries, salvation has involved dealing with the sinful condition, which has been done through Christ’s death on the cross. When Thai Christians were asked in interviews how salvation was possible in Christianity, neither Christ nor his death were ever mentioned. There was no suggestion in any of the interviews, or in any of the sermons recorded, that the death of Christ was essential to forgiveness and salvation. The general response was that God forgives people because He loves them.

Soteriological Patterns in Thai Christianity

In the research on Thai Christianity, two major soteriological patterns emerged. The first of these centred on the fact that Christianity was seen as a religion which teaches one how to live. The second involved seeking the aid of the power of God.

In answers to the major questionnaire used in the research both Christian and Buddhist students gave as one of the chief reasons for the importance of religion that religions teach how one should live. In responding to another questionnaire, Christian students affirmed even more strongly than Buddhists that if we do good, we will receive good, and if we do evil, we will receive evil. Christianity is seen as a set of teachings about how one can do good. Thus, by following religious teaching, one will receive the benefits of doing good. If one follows the teaching of

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Christianity, then one should be able to enjoy a good life, and things will go well for one. This was one of the two major soteriological patterns in Thai expressions of the Christian faith.

Doing good was often discussed by Thai Christians in terms of following the will of God. Ninety—three percent of the sermons recorded spoke about doing God's will. Indeed, this was a major motif in most of the sermons. The underlying theme of much preaching is the call to people to live better lives, following God's will. The congregations are reminded that they will reap the consequent blessings.

In the main questionnaire used in the research, respondents were asked what would most help human beings to overcome the problems of their predicament. Christian respondents answered that following this higher way of life would help more than anything else. Following the way of Buddhism more closely would also be of benefit, they said. Both Christians and Buddhists agreed that self—control was of major importance. The basic human problem was not one of ignorance, for people have the Christian and Buddhist teachings as to how they should live. The problem was one of self—control in following these teachings. It is believed that God has revealed the *dharma*, the teaching about how to live through Jesus. In following it, problems are overcome, and people can enjoy peace and happiness.

It is in this context of Christianity as teaching about how to live that sin is significant to the Thai Christians. What is evil or sinful is understood primarily in terms of breaking the law. For Christians, this means, above all, breaking the law of God, or failing to obey the Christian teaching or *dharma*. The failure to keeping religious rules and practices was considered particularly serious. In the responses to the initial questionnaire used in the research, sixty—five percent of Christians who responded said that not praying regularly was either seriously or very seriously sinful. Forty—five percent considered not going to church regularly also as seriously or very seriously sinful. If one does not keep the *dharma*, one may expect to suffer the consequences of that failure.

A survey of Catholics in Thailand suggested that they also considered that keeping religious practices was very important. When asked what was the most important thing for Catholics to do, twenty—seven percent of all respondents, and thirty—eight percent of the laity, answered to attend Sunday Mass. In comparison, only thirteen percent, and eight percent of the laity, said that helping

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one's neighbour was most important.²²

Most of the northern Thai Christians interviewed believed that one would be rewarded for following the teaching of Christianity not only in this life, but also in the next. They generally affirmed that if one did good, one would go to heaven, and if one did evil, one would go to hell. A few people did want to qualify this. Thirteen percent said that this only applied to non—Christians, and Christians who had faith would go to heaven irrespective of their deeds. Nevertheless, the dominant attitude seemed to parallel the Buddhist beliefs about both the short—term and long—term effects of merit—making.

One northern Thai Christian confirmed that this comparison was valid when she explained that she and many other Christians considered the way of Christianity to be higher than that of Buddhism just as the way of the monk is higher than that of a lay—person within Buddhism. The Christian has more rules to keep and a higher standard of morality to maintain than the Buddhist. One can change from the lower standards of Buddhism to the higher standards of Christianity through repentance and acceptance of God's forgiveness for the failures and inadequacies of the lower way. After that, one is expected to keep the higher way, with God's help. While it may be more difficult to maintain the higher standards, the corresponding benefits would be much greater.

The terminology of *karma* and merit—making are not used among the Protestant Christians, but the general principles underlying them are generally affirmed. The Christians are just as sure as the Buddhist that if one does good, one will receive good, and if one does evil, one will receive evil. They see Christianity as providing an alternative teaching to Buddhism on how to do good and thus receive the benefits.

The second major soteriological theme in Thai expressions of Christianity has to do with the power and beneficence of God. Many powers and forces in the world, apart from one's personal *karma*, are recognized. For Buddhists, these include all kinds of anthropomorphic spirits and gods, and non—anthropomorphic magical objects, spells, and rituals. For the Christians, the major power and force in the world, which takes its place over that of spirits and magic, is God.

The Christians look to God for similar sorts of blessings that Buddhists and animists seek from the spirits and from magic. For example, when going on

22. Francis Xavier Bell, table 82, p. 56.

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a long journey, the Christians will not buy amulets for protection, but will often ask God for his protection in prayer. Sometimes it is the church congregation which gathers to pray for the person, as a communal activity, comparable to the *khwan* ceremony. In times of sickness, the first action is generally to turn to God in prayer to seek healing. If the illness is serious, the pastor or elders of the church may be asked to go to the home for prayer.²³

Prayer is the most important resource for the Thai Christians when facing personal problems.²⁴ Indeed, prayer was far more important to the Christians than turning to the spirits of seeking the help of the monks or making merit was to the Buddhists. Ninety—three percent of the Christians who responded to the major questionnaire said that they prayed to God when they faced problems, while only fifty—five percent of the Buddhists said that they called on the Three Gems : the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

In times of sickness, sixty—seven percent of the Christians who responded to the major questionnaire said they would pray. A similar number said they would pray before going on a long journey. None of the Buddhist or animist resources, including making merit, seeking auspicious times and places, making offerings to spirits, or holding a *khwan* ceremony, had the significance to the Buddhists that prayer had for the Christians.

God can be compared to a great spirit patron for many Thai Christians, in that they believe that he gives blessings to those who seek his help in prayer. Like the spirits, it is considered that God may cause sickness sometimes, and even such occurrences as road accidents. He does this, they say, to teach people. As with the spirit patrons, the Thai Christians do not expect God's blessings to be granted necessarily on the basis of ethical principles. One does not need to earn special blessings by good deeds. Many Thai Christians believe that God will give blessings to all who come to him in prayer and believe in his power and beneficence.

God is not usually explicitly compared with the spirits by the Thai Christians. The comparisons are implicit in the ways in which they relate to him, the sort of expectations they have of him, and the kinds of occasions on which

23. This was demonstrated in the results of the major questionnaire. Prayer was also given as the most important resource of christians in the interviews. At a number of places, communal prayer was also mentioned.

24. As indicated in the results of the major questionnaire.

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they turn to him for help. God, as the Thai Christians see him, differs from other spirit patrons in several ways. His power is considered to be very much greater, both in scope, and in the fact that it is not limited to a particular geographical area. Also, he is considered to be much greater in his beneficence than the local spirits, and more dependable in the distribution of his benefits. On the other hand, it is believed that God's expectations of those who seek his patronage are very much greater than the requirements made by the local spirits of their patrons.

Many of the early converts to Christianity turned to the Christian God particularly because they saw him as having greater power and beneficence than that of local spirits. The superior power to heal was seen as a demonstration that the missionaries had access to a power superior to that of the local spirits.

From 1911 to 1913 there was a great epidemic of malaria in northern Thailand. It was accompanied by famine. Dr. McKean, one of the missionary doctors, tells that, at first, people made a lot of offerings to the local spirits. But these did not help. The epidemic continued and the famine grew more severe. The people became poorer through the cost of the offerings. Finally, as a last resort, many tried the Christian medicines which evangelists distributed, and turned to the Christian God for help.²⁵ Large numbers of people became Christians at this time, some records indicating as many as two thousand people in the Chaing Mai area alone.

The missionaries also helped a significant number of people who had been accused of witchcraft. They reported that in some cases of illness, spirit doctors would conduct a ceremony in which the sick person had to call out the name of the spirit causing the illness. The person who was responsible for the spirit could be identified. In some cases, the homes of these people, and all their possessions were burnt to the ground, and they were ostracised from the community. Other villages would not accept them because they were considered to be dangerous. Many such people found shelter among the missionaries who were unafraid of the spirits.

The missionaries taught that once these people turned to God, these spirits which had caused them so much trouble could no longer touch them. Some people were able to avoid ostracism by becoming Christians when first accused of witchcraft. It was recognized, even by many Buddhists, that Christians cut

25. James W. McKean, "Medical Notes—Chiengmai", *Laos News*, 11 : 4, October 1914, pp. 116—119.

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all connections with spirits, and placed themselves under a higher power. One missionary, John Freeman, described what used to happen. People who had no prior connection with Christianity invited the elders or leaders of the nearest group of Christians to come and hold a service in their house. At this time, all spirit shrines in the house were torn down. By this act, the people declared that they had changed their allegiance and were now Christians. Freeman said that often, though not always, there was an end to the accusation and suspicion.²⁶ Help given to people accused of witchcraft was quite significant in the early growth of the church in Thailand.

This belief in the power of God, a power similar in kind, but greater in extent and beneficence, than that of spirits, or magical techniques or objects, continues to be a major theme in Thai Christian soteriology. The appeal to the power of God is an important resource for dealing with problems, particularly those of a short—term kind. It helps to provide a sense of security, and can be called upon to help in achieving a more worth—while life.

Conclusions

There are two major soteriological patterns, then, in Thai religious thinking and practice. One of these is the karmatic pattern which involves reliance on oneself and doing good deeds to attain beneficial consequences. Central to the second pattern is the concept of spiritual power. This power is a—moral, and it is believed that it is found in non—anthropomorphic objects and techniques, and in anthropomorphic spirits gods. In neither of these themes is an ultimate, final salvation important, but both through the karmatic soteriology and the power soteriology the Thai people seek to improve their states of affairs. The power theme tends to appear particularly in relation to short—term ends; while the concept of *karma* and the related idea of merit tend to appear more in relation to long—term ends, including re—birth in heaven and on earth.

It is significant that both of these themes of *karma* and power are found as two major soteriological patterns of Thai Christianity. These patterns of *karma* and power appear in Thai Christianity under different terminology. Their expressions are different from those in Thai Buddhism, in as far as power, for

26. J. H. Freeman, *An Oriental Land of the Free*, Philadelphia : Westminster Press, 1910, pp. 51—52.

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instance, is seen to relate almost entirely in God, rather than in objects or rituals. The two themes relate to each other in different ways in Christianity when compared with Buddhism. For example, Christians emphasize that they need to rely on the power of God to help them to do good deeds. Similarly, the blessings which come from obeying God on the one hand, and from praying to him on the other, are not generally distinguished. Nevertheless, the two themes of *karma* and power are both present in Thai Christianity, demonstrating the assimilation of Christianity to Thai cultural patterns.

These two patterns are quite distinct from the major soteriological preached by the Protestant missionaries to Thailand who emphasized salvation as the overcoming of the state of sin through the death of Christ. The word for salvation is itself is not clearly understood by many Thai Christians. This was evident in the interviews with elders and pastors in the churches, and was reflected in the variety of interpretations given to "salvation" by them. A similar comment was made in a thesis by a Thai Christian student at the Thailand Theological Seminary. He wrote,

This word (salvation) does not make sense to most Thai Christians, even to the writer himself who was born in a Thai Christian family. Salvation is of no interest at all; what is expected in a Christian life is the hope of a future life, a life after death, a life with Christ in Heaven if we walk carefully with him in the present. That means if we keep morals and follow them carefully, trying to do only good things. This idea is also possessed by a large number of Thai Christians.²⁷

The idea of a totally new, transcendent state of affairs has little meaning in Thai Christianity, just as the state of *nirvana* has little direct significance for most Thai Buddhists. Thai cosmology is basically monistic, although spiritual and material aspects of it are distinguished. The Thai people, both Christians and Buddhists, seek for a better, more worth—while life within the one arena of existence. They seek of the help of spiritual powers, especially when facing problems and difficulties. and look for its benefits within this life. They hope for a good life in heaven, or, for the Buddhists, on earth, after death, as a reward for keeping the teachings of their religion, but tend to conceive the next life as

27. Praphan Chantraboon, *St. Paul's Teaching on Salvation in the Epistle to the Romans*, thesis for B. Theol, Thailand Theological Seminary, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October, 1965, p. 14.

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an extension of this present life.

Christianity has not produced a new culture among the Christians in Thailand. It has involved the introduction of a new set of institutions. The converts to Christianity have had to change their institutional affiliations from Buddhist *wats* to Christian churches. Christianity has involved the introduction of some new ideas, such as the idea of a powerful and loving God. These new institutional affiliations and new beliefs have led to the formation of a distinctive Christian community in Thailand. However, while the Christians have their own distinctive religious resources, and their own terminology for them, the soteriological patterns follow the patterns in Thai Buddhism and animism in the ways in which they are conceived.