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MODULE: BA RESEARCH PAPER

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**HOW CAN DISCIPLESHIP BE EFFECTIVELY CONTEXTUALISED FOR THOSE FROM A THAI
BUDDHIST BACKGROUND?**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Praise be to the Lord Jesus Christ who have been so gracious to me throughout my life in Him. Thank Him for providing me with a new family in Christ.

I am so grateful to Anne Jarvis for her great help with correcting my English and her loving supports in many different ways.

I am so grateful for great help and supports for my lovely and kind friends, tutors and staffs of whom I cannot mention them all.

INTRODUCTION

The consistent misinterpretation of crucial Christian concepts by former Buddhist Thai-Christian, as well as the reputation for their being resistant to the gospel in the history of Christianity in Thailand, suggests that there are 'uncovered areas' in the mind-set of Thais which hinder their understanding of Christian teaching. Before one can effectively contextualise God's word for Thai-Christians, one must first seek to find those 'uncovered areas.' Along this line of thought, this dissertation will start with carefully examining issues that tend to be the misconceptions of Thai-Christians, so as to identify the problems. Then, through relating the issues and the experience of the present author with worldview theory, this discovery will lead us to believe that the root of the problem lies in their old worldview. This emerging knowledge, thus, causes a change in the direction of the essay. This will be explained in the second part. The third part will be an exploration of the Thai worldview, focusing on how Folk Buddhism functions in Thai life in reality, as well as finding out why the Thai believe what they believe, and what their thought patterns are. While the former will enable us to effectively contextualise the passage, the latter will illuminate how God's word can be faithfully and truly communicated to the hearts of Thai-Christians. Then, the last part will seek to suggest how a discipleship leader can effectively interpret a Bible passage in a way that speaks to the 'heart,' by explaining how the old worldview hinders their understanding of God's truth. Finally, if the process of worldview transformation takes place in Thai-Christians, enabling them to understand God's word with His help, one can hope there will gradually be a real change in the Thais' life in Christ, reflecting His glory in both word and deed – "being transformed from glory to glory."¹

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¹ 2 Cor. 3: 17-18.

PART ONE

ISSUES: THE MISCONCEPTIONS OF THAI-CHRISTIANS

Data in this section comes mostly from Philip Hughes's research over a three-year period (1978-1982), when he conducted a survey collecting data from Thai-Buddhist and Thai-Christian students that revealed that both Thai-Buddhists and Thai-Christians perceive the chief aim of religion is "to teach how one should live."² Moreover, his interview data showed that neither Christ, nor His death was mentioned when students were asked how Christian salvation was possible.³ Additionally, Thai-Christians believed a worthwhile life was measured by coolness of heart and mind coming "through extinguishing desires or cravings".⁴ There was no mention of Christ's death as an essential fact as a means to forgiveness and salvation in any sermons recorded.⁵ Thus, it is no surprise that his data reveals that Thai-Christians believe that following Christian teaching, and even Buddhist teaching, was the key to overcoming their predicaments - for them the problem of human beings did not lie in human nature,⁶ but in self-control.⁷ This notion can also be reflected in this statement of a Thai-Bible college student:

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.⁸

Many interpret their salvation in Christ more in terms of enabling power in helping them to live a good life (like in Buddhism),⁹ but it is better and more powerful way,¹⁰ and the reward is life after death.¹¹

Furthermore, Hughes found that Thai-Christians generally believed that "the essence of human nature and of society was good."¹² They perceive merely individual sinful behaviour,

² Philip Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand." *The Journal of the Siam Society* 73, no.1 (Jan 1985): 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

in terms of breaking God's commandments, and "the failure to keep religious rules and practices."¹³ For example, 60% of Thai-Christians consider the lack of regular prayer¹⁴ as either seriously or very seriously sinful.¹⁵ The concept of sin is more an individual act.¹⁶

Thai Christians may perceive their relationship with God based on their ability to perform and please God. This can be reflected in one Thai Christian's opinion after disaster, saying, "those who have merit will get out alive."¹⁷ Furthermore, 81 % of Thai-Christians thought "Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil" was important.¹⁸ According to Taylor, this seems to reflect their underlying belief in merit-making, as they perceive their life in God is mainly dependent on their good actions: "life is about merit."¹⁹ His conclusion arose from his qualitative data revealing that Thai-Christians "consider it necessary to repay God when He does good to them" - considerably more than English-Christians do.²⁰ The similar idea of having a transactional relationship with God also is highly held, even by Thai-church leaders, as it is evident that Thai-Christian preachers primarily see doing God's will as a means "to live a good life,"²¹ resulting in their blessing.²²

The fact that Thai-Christians value the quality of being calm as evidence of a mature Christian character²³ may lead us to believe that God's character, to a Thai-Christian's mind, is "a God who is tranquil and calm, who has steady emotions and does not strive towards a goal and purpose."²⁴ Their understanding of God may also be influenced by their relationship with the beneficial spirits, in that they tend to believe that obedience only results in blessings.²⁵

¹² Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand", 34.

¹³ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Stephen C.R. Taylor. "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians" (Christian belief influenced by Buddhism.) Paper published in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Jan 2001: 3.

Website of Stephen Taylor: www.bbsthailand.org/stevetaylor.htm (Accessed 6 June, 2012).

¹⁸ Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand", 29.

¹⁹ Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians", 2.

²⁰ Ibid., 1-2.

²¹ Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand", 35.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians", 2.

²⁵ Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand", 34.

ADDRESSING THE OLD WORLDVIEW: THE KEY FOR EFFECTIVELY CONTEXTUALISING DISCIPLESHIP FOR THAI-CHRISTIANS

Consider Steve Taylor's statement:

Whether they be Christians for one year or for 20, whether they be farmers in the northeast or office workers in Bangkok, the majority of Thai Christians I have surveyed believe that Christians are able to promise God certain things so that he will answer their prayers. They also find it necessary to find some way to repay God when he answers their prayers.²⁶

According to Paul Hiebert's article on conversion and worldview transformation,²⁷ this statement demonstrates the continuity of Thais' misunderstanding of the key concepts of Christianity and suggests that the underlying principles of the old worldview of the Thais may not successfully be transformed through the processes of teaching and discipling.²⁸ As has been seen the old worldview of Thai-Christians indicates that the importance of religion is "to teach people how to live." This has been considered to be greater than the forgiveness of sin for most of them.²⁹ Did these Thai-Christians intend to use their old presuppositions? Did they realise what they were doing? The answer is, of course not, as can be seen in that Thai Christians deliberately refuse to admit belief in any Buddhist concepts when they are asked by using Buddhist terminology and concepts, such as the law of *karma* and merit-making.³⁰ But, the same group shows strong signs that they still believe in those concepts when questioned about them indirectly.³¹ The reason that most people are not aware of their old worldview is also linked with the fact that "worldview is what they think *with*, not what they think *about*."³² Worldview provides the mental structure, such as the logic and assumptions that people use to explain reality, or how they feel about themselves, and make moral judgements.³³ These "cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions provide people with a way of looking at the world that makes sense out of it."³⁴ **This can be reflected in the present author's experience as a Thai-Christian.**

²⁶ Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians", 1.

²⁷ Paul G. Hiebert, "Conversion and Worldview Transformation." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 14, no.2 (1997): 83-86.
http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/14_2_PDFs/06_Hiebert.pdf (Accessed 6 June, 2012).

²⁸ Ibid., 85.

²⁹ Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand", 34.

³⁰ Ibid., 29-30.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Paul G. Hiebert, "Conversion and Worldview Transformation", 85.

³³ Ibid., 84-85.

³⁴ Ibid., 85.

AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE PRESENT AUTHOR, AS A THAI-CHRISTIAN

The author, a former Buddhist, became a Christian in Cambridge, England through a miraculous answer from God. This means, although at the moment of inviting Jesus Christ into the author's life, through repeating a sinner's prayer, the author did not have so much conviction about her sins, but because of her vivid experience of encountering God's love, added to seeing Jesus's life in the Bible. Consequently, this love of God and the sinless life of Christ caused the author to see that she was indeed a sinner, who needed the saving grace of God. This, at first, led her to think it would cease to be a problem in time. However, from her past experience this became the real issue for the author as a Thai Christian, as, after becoming a Christian, she was convinced by the Scripture to imitate Christ's life. After a period of time the author grew weary, as her obedience did not come as a response to God's love or from gratitude of heart anymore, but from duty. From reflecting back to that experience, the cause of this "bitterness" might be the fact that the author subconsciously stopped seeing herself as a sinner, but rather 'an innocent' who was being convicted of sins. The reason was very possibly that the old understanding of the concept of sin was in operation, not biblical sin. In addition to that, the present author subconsciously believed that 'human nature was good', and that those who do wrong as a result of being forced into those actions should not be counted as guilty of sin. This realisation came from her reluctance to agree in a case of Pilate that he had sinned against God. This was because the logic of the law of karma, which can be reflected in this statement "one may be forced to do something wrong but because there was no evil motivation, there may be no negative consequences,"³⁵ was being used to evaluate what was right or wrong. This influenced the way that the present author made a judgement in the case of Pilate. This shows that the old worldview was deeply rooted in her thinking, and consequently this subconsciously impacted on how the present author interpreted the Bible.

In the first part, we have seen how Thai-Christians are very likely to understand their life in Christ more in the light of their old worldview in Thai Folk Buddhism, than what is the revealed truth of the Bible. In the second, we saw how the old worldview was able to operate unwittingly in the life of the present author. Only after reflecting back the present author admitted that those ideas affected her thought. This may be supported by the fact that the present author is living in England and gradually learning to see things in 'new eyes.'

³⁵Alexandra R. Kapur-Fic, *Thailand: Buddhism, Society and Women*. (New Dehli, Abhinav Publications, 1998): 101.

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Consequently, this cause the present author became aware of her own worldview and started to recognise her own culture through 'new eyes.'

This realisation has led the present author, as an insider, to put more emphasis on how to create an appropriate context for discipleship in which Thais live, so that practical and crucial information on discipleship is available. This will bring about a better understanding why the Thai-Christians perceive Christian teaching in the way that they do. A lower degree of focus will be on a model for a contextual discipleship course for Thai church leaders or those involved in teaching Thai-Christians. It will take into account the misinterpretations of Thai-Christians which very likely come from the fact that the old worldview has not been deeply and seriously addressed, as a part of the real issue that needs to be continually brought into the teaching of the Bible if we are to effectively start to redefine and transform the Biblical concepts in Thai minds. Otherwise, their response to the Christian faith, being unrelated to their inner thought patterns, will remain limited and immature."³⁶ This seems to suggest that for Thai-Christians to grow in their maturity in the faith, their worldview needs to be transformed, and that will not happen if their old worldview is not continually confronted. To respond to that need, it seems to be more beneficial to the field that the present author, as an insider, explore the Thai worldview so as to clearly present what areas of Thai thinking or understanding need to be brought under Christian teaching. Due to the word limit, the theoretical discussion of the contextual model and discipleship model will not be examined.

³⁶ M.M. Thomas in Taylor. "A Prolegomena for the Thai Context: a Starting Point for Thai Theology", Paper published in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Jan 2005: 2. Website of Stephen C.R. Taylor: www.bbsthai.org/stevetaylor.htm (Accessed 6 June, 2012).

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PART TWO

SOME CHANGE IN THIS RESEARCH

The main resource for issues facing Thai-Christians was Philip Hughes' research. For the fact that his questions were thoroughly shaped by his three-year study of soteriological patterns in Thailand, added to other disciplines, and with more than 1,300 respondents to each question. Steve Taylor's work was also examined. He conducted this among 19 groups of Thai-Christians,³⁷ (almost 500 Christians in a variety of denominations and length of years as Christians) and English Christians.³⁸ At first, the present author, as a Thai-Christian and former Buddhist, found it hard to believe in many findings from the data in these two surveys. It is possible that the Thai worldview is far more deeply rooted in the thinking of the present author than had been realised or she wanted to acknowledge, according to Paul Hiebert's suggestion.³⁹ This can also be seen in the similar response of Thai-Christians regarding merit-making (described above). Consequently, this emerging confusion led the author to decide not to do an up-to-date survey to investigate existing issues, and the fact that worldview is 'what people think *with*, not what they think *about* (described above),' thus, the person in order to gain a good quality of the survey regarding the worldview issues needs to be an expert in conducting their questions. Furthermore, "to understand the role of worldview in the cultural systems,"⁴⁰ one must not only examine only what people do and then describe their specific beliefs and practice,⁴¹ but rather seek to "show the link between explicit theories and practices and the larger knowledge systems in which" the worldviews are embedded.⁴² These reasons therefore, leads the present author to take an advantage as being an insider to attempt to provide an appropriate context in which Thai people live, to be used for a better understanding of why Thais understand some Christian concepts in the way that they do. Also, to propose what the possible presuppositions or assumptions that they are using to form their understanding of God's word are. Thus, the next part will be an attempt to present the Thai worldview.

³⁷ Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians", 1.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: and Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009):137.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁴¹ Ibid., 84.

⁴² Ibid., 84.

PART THREE

THAI WORLDVIEW

In order to effectively contextualize discipleship for Thai-Christians, former Buddhists, it is necessary to consider the heart of the two religions, that is between *Dhamma* and God - for comparing them we notice how dissimilar these two worldviews are. While Buddhists are seeking to reach the state of non-existence, with no concept of God, Christians are waiting to live forever with their Creator God. We begin to see the very different worldviews of the two. Thus, it is important to focus our study more on how religion functions in Thai real life, rather than to directly compare the concepts between the two religions. For example, *nirvana*, a Buddhist's highest goal, should not be directly used in comparison with Christian salvation. Firstly, while Christian salvation is Jesus's work on the cross setting us free from sin and death, our part is merely to believe in Him,⁴³ whereas *nirvana* is a state of 'non-being', and can be achieved by human effort alone. Secondly, life in Christ may offer not only the restoration of the broken relationship with God, but the healing of personal and social relationships, and that for all believers.⁴⁴ But in order to be enlightened, Buddhist monks have to live in a solitary place, which means they do not normally live with others in society. Indeed, those out of monastic life cannot reach *nirvana*. The last example highlights the fact that in order to clearly understand the reason behind Thai-Christians' misinterpretation of biblical concepts, such as salvation, God and sin, one must seek to first comprehend more the practical view of the Thai in their 'real life,' not merely in their life theory. Therefore, this section will be an exploration of the Thai worldview, but due to the word limit the focus will be directed solely by the crucial factors of Thai epistemology and thought patterns and mainly relating to Thai Folk Buddhism that shapes Thais' beliefs and behaviour in reality. This information will then be used to propose the possible explanation of why Thai-Christians consistently have misunderstandings about Christianity. This insight into the needed areas will be an important guideline for directing church leaders to be aware of cultural blindness as well as to develop their teaching that will start the process of transforming their worldview. This will enable Thai-Christians not only to grow gradually in the truth as revealed in Scripture, but also to continually see the cultural blindness that hinders them from having a true picture of the reality of God's saving grace.

⁴³ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ: The Centrality of the Cross* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009): 195.

⁴⁴ Millard J. Erickson. *Christian Theology Vol. 3: Conceptions of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985): 889.

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THAI EPISTEMOLOGY AND THOUGHT PATTERNS

In Buddhism *Dhamma* is the 'truth',⁴⁵ the law of nature, used to explain the way all things are.⁴⁶ This 'truth' was not invented as a philosophy, but discovered by Buddha.⁴⁷ Thus, the Buddhist view of life is "*a way of seeing reality rooted in experience*," focusing on what is practical and empirical, *not metaphysical*.⁴⁸ In view of this fact, it is likely that "*a way of seeing reality rooted in experience*" is the explanation of the development of Thai epistemology, why Thais believe what they believe,⁴⁹ and thought patterns. The first reason can be seen in the fact that Thais do not have faith in 'reasoning' as the way of arriving at the truth.⁵⁰ For they tend to think, "that "reason" is only a reckoning of one's own thoughts, but it is not the correct method of arriving at the truth."⁵¹ Second, this Buddhist view of life may also explain why Thai epistemology comes out of 'what they feel,' not what they think, according to a Thai philosopher.⁵² His example is:

When you feel your mother is very good, you have a feeling that your mother is very good. So if your mother is very good, what do you do to her? So the feeling of giving back to her, so you have to do something for her. With the feeling there is no argumentation, like this is premise, and this is conclusion.⁵³

This statement demonstrates that Thai philosophy is obviously contradictory to that of the West that seeks "to control emotion in order to get a clear definition."⁵⁴ It is no surprise, therefore, to know that while the Western thinker "likes to define, the Thai likes to narrate."⁵⁵ That means the Thai "do not find the need to define what they see or experience,"⁵⁶ as what one counts as reality is experience. The Thai view of reality rooted in experience can also be reflected in the fact that more than 60% of 300 Thai-Buddhists who are scientists had doubts about the doctrine of rebirth, but only 2.7% of the same group desired to reject Buddhism.⁵⁷ The reason is likely to be based on their value in the fact that an individual's insight can be

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Harris, *What Buddhists Believe* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998): 35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Taylor, "A Prolegomena for the Thai Context" (Paper): 6.

⁵⁰ Stephen C.R.Taylor, "A Prolegomena for the Thai Context: A Starting Point for Thai Theology." Doctor of Theology Thesis. International Theological Seminary, June 2003: 69.

Website of Stephen C. R. Taylor: www.bbsthailand.org/stevebbs/stevetaylor.htm

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Taylor, "A Prolegomena for the Thai Context" (Paper): 8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ John R. Davis, *Poles Apart?: Contextualizing the Gospel in Asia* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1987/ Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1993): 43.

varied in degree depending on their practice of 'right concentration' in the eightfold noble path.⁵⁸ Many Buddhists believe this is how an individual gains wisdom. This notion is reflected in the way that meditation can be defined as "a devout reflection on life by cultivating wisdom (*panna*) which sees things "as they really are".⁵⁹ This is probably the reason why they do not deny what they do not experience as not true. In other words, Thais accept other people's beliefs or 'truth' without having to experience it themselves, but it is not necessary that they put it into practice in their daily life.

A further point is that Thai-society is a group-oriented society, for it has "an emphasis on the freedom of the individual, but in the context of relationship to others, that is, in group-based or intimate relationships rather than through formal roles and institutions."⁶⁰ This means they traditionally "do not use abstract reasoning in specific situations, but their fundamental logic is "a concrete-functional based on relational, often fuzzy, categories."⁶¹ For example, in a classroom situation they may learn corn only grows in dry and sunny places and they acknowledged that without a doubt.⁶² If asked outside the classroom, "Can corn grow in England, which is cold and wet? Their answer will be "I don't know, I have to be there, for it depends on many other factors."⁶³ We come to see that in general group-oriented people are relational based, and thus they refuse to use abstract truths in their everyday life.⁶⁴ By considering Thais as relational based, we see Thais will not apply their learning from an abstract 'truth' into their everyday life. It is no surprise, therefore, that "overall the Thai are not motivated towards education for its own sake (i.e., the love of learning),"⁶⁵ unless this increases their status in society.⁶⁶

We come to see that although Thai epistemology and thought is deeply rooted in "experience as opposed to reasoning,"⁶⁷ this does not mean they reject what they do not experience as truth if they are being informed of it or it is shared by others. One should always remember that, without their own experience, Thais will not put it into practice. In order to make our

⁵⁸ 'Vinaya Mahavagga 1:6:10', cited in Philip Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand", 25.

⁵⁹ Taylor, "A Prolegomena for the Thai Context" (Thesis), 59; Seree Lorgunpai, *World Lover, World Leaver: The Book of Ecclesiastes and Thai Buddhism* (Edinburgh: PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1995.): 193.

⁶⁰ Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 109-110.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁵ Larry Dinkins, Dissertation (on line), 73.

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⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Taylor, "A Prolegomena for the Thai Context" (Thesis), 69.

truth a reality for Thais, it must appeal to their feelings and be relationally based, otherwise the truth will not be applied in the hearts and minds of the people.

THAI FOLK BUDDHISM

As has been seen, for Thais, truth can only be *their* truth when it is rooted in their own experience or appeals to their feelings, or is explained using 'a concrete-functional based on relational.' By looking at the fact that they have no faith in gaining wisdom from argumentation, we may see a part of the reason why Thais are so open to accept other people's truth, despite the fact that it is different from their own. This proposition may explain why it is possible for Thais "to hold opposing ideas without feeling the necessity to synthesize them in the same way."⁶⁸ This is evident in their mixed religious beliefs and practices of Animism, Brahmanism and Buddhism,⁶⁹ for it supports the notion that Thais can hold various contradictory doctrines together with no problem.⁷⁰ Indeed, the natural Thai character is naturally pragmatic, holding a practical survival-oriented worldview towards life today.⁷¹ That means some sets of religious belief will be chosen in relation to their present circumstances. To put it simply, Thais choose to practice what works for them without being concerned about having the 'right doctrine.' For example, Thais believe there is a specific time when one must have an important life event, such as celebrate a wedding, or move to a new house, or start a new business, both at a local and national level. This Thai behaviour pattern is under the influence of the Animistic beliefs that human life is surrounded by "a larger system, which is governed by chaos, threat and uncertainty."⁷² Thus, one's future cannot be projected; one must protect one's own well-being in everyday life by naturalizing "the external chaos" by entering into contracts with good spirits" from time to time, especially when faced with unfortunate situations. This also explains the reason why the present and the immediate of one's life are often their only concern,⁷³ and they tend to think less towards the future. This notion is confirmed by Larry's statement: "Thais have a short-term perspective and live spontaneously in the present."⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Taylor, "A Prolegomena for the Thai Context" (Thesis), 70.

⁶⁹ Paul De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists." Feb 2002: 2.
<http://www.thaicov.org/resources/documents/contextualizing.html> (Accessed 6 June 2012).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Dilane Senapatiratne, Saw Allen, and Russell H. Bowers, *Folk Buddhism in South East Asia* (2003): 2.

⁷² Kapur-Fic, *Thailand*, 49.

⁷³ Ibid., 50.

⁷⁴ Dinkins, Dissertation, 95.

The influence of animistic belief, leads the Thai to also believe that human beings are under the unknown force which cannot be explained by human's comprehension or ability. In fact, it is such a disrespectful act to try to find out the reason, and can be harmful to one's life destiny. This can be reflected in a Thai saying *mai-chuea-yha-lob-lua* (Do not look down on spirit although you do not believe in their existence, for it can cause you harm). By carefully considering the meaning of this saying, one can sense there is the sense of fear of this unknown power, which can cause a trouble to one's life, so it is not surprising to see this practice, even among those who do not say they believe in the supernatural beings. For example, there is a prevalence of the use of amulets for protection and safety among Thai-Buddhist professors. Therefore, this fear discourages people from further exploring the spiritual matter. This may be the reason why their animistic belief is coexisting comfortably with Buddhist faith, even though the doctrines contradict each other.⁷⁵ The continual existence of animistic practice may also be explained in term of its function as responding to serve the immediate needs of Thai people for their today life, in which Buddhism is lacking. In other words, it can be said that Thais find a sense of security in this animistic practice, which Buddhist teaching does not or cannot give them.⁷⁶

THAI FOLK BUDDHIST INFLUENCES IN TIMES OF TROUBLE

We have seen how Folk Buddhism, especially the innate fear of the unknown force, drives the Thais to behave and practice in certain ways with a pragmatic and present mind-set in their everyday life. The perspective of life is to be 'only for today', i.e. '*moment-orientation*.' Added to this is the Buddhist teaching of *anicca*, providing an explanation for the nature of life or reality with the concept of 'impermanence.'⁷⁷ That is everything will pass away.⁷⁸ It is no surprise that Thais have the 'innate' worldview of 'the desire or *hope for a good future only leads to sufferings*,' and those who have hope for the unseen future are living in 'ignorance.' This notion can be explained in the application of the underlying principle of *anatta* – 'no self or soul'.⁷⁹ For instance, in this case, a person who has the 'self-realisation of nothing is eternal' can detach herself from 'impermanent' things (a good future). By thinking and behaving in this way, it prevents the person from living in 'ignorance' or 'delusion' (*moha*).⁸⁰ For ignorance in Buddhism lies in the belief that "the impermanent is permanent, and that the self

⁷⁵ Paul H. Deneui, Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists, 3.

⁷⁶ Hiebert in Pual Deneui, contextual, 3.

⁷⁷ Harris, *What Buddhists Believe*, 36.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Ven in Harris, *What Buddhists Believe*, 38.

⁸⁰ Harris, *What Buddhists Believe*, 42.

is a distinct and separate entity which must be protected, promoted and gratified."⁸¹ This is not to say, however, that Thais do not have hope. They certainly have, but only in the present and their hope should not be held so tightly. The supporting reason is that for them 'anything can happen' (because of their fear of the spirit), and it will be wiser not to have strong desires, because 'everything will pass away.'⁸²

From these facts, we may come to see why some believe that religion in the Thai mind may merely serve "psychologically as a release mechanism,"⁸³ for the individuals to cope with their daily life, as "it shifts the blame for the one's failure on "bad *karma*.""⁸⁴ In other words, the 'impermanent' and the law of *karma*, seem to play a greater role in helping their followers "re-establish some degree of psychological equilibrium after the stressful event in life," than in being a moral instruction toward *nirvana*. The function of religion in this sense seems to serve only for "*immediate salvation*" – that is the release from the moment of sufferings,⁸⁵ not as guidance for living their daily life or for reaching their eternal purpose in *nirvana* - 'Buddhist salvation.'⁸⁶ The other side of the coin is, however, the natural mode of Buddha's teaching, that is "not to compel people to act in ways not of their own choosing, but to alter their *disposition* so that they would be prepared, through a combination of rationality, morality, and social consciousness, to take action out of reasoned volition."⁸⁷ With this free spirit of Buddhism, in my judgement, one cannot simply conclude that Buddhism only serves for a psychological purpose.

A HUMAN'S DESTINY IS WHOLLY THEIR RESPONSIBILITY

As has been seen, the natural mode of Buddhist teaching is "not to compel people to act in ways not of their own choosing." This notion, to some extent, indicates how Folk Buddhism builds in Thais not only a 'free spirit' of controlling one's life, but also that 'their life is the consequence of their actions.' It must be noted here that the word 'action' in the concept of the law of *karma*, "begins in the mind with volition" or motivation.⁸⁸

Furthermore, Buddhist doctrine teaches that if craving is eliminated, then suffering cannot occur.⁸⁹ The road toward 'Buddhist salvation', *nirvana*, is built on this simple 'truth.'

⁸¹ Harris, *What Buddhists Believe*, 43.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸³ Kapur-Fic, *Thailand*, 540.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 344.

⁸⁶ Kapur-Fic, *Thailand*, 539.

⁸⁷ Gauri Viswanathan, "Religious Conversion and the Politics of Dissent." In *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*, edited by Peter van der Veer (New York: Routledge, 1996) 104.

⁸⁸ Harris, *What Buddhists Believe*, 50.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

Therefore, in theory *nirvana* can be achieved through "the attainment of Realisation-by-insight which destroys craving and thus brings *samsaric* [the cycle of birth and death] existence to an end."⁹⁰ In other words, *Nirvana*, Buddhist salvation, is a state that can be achieved by overcoming all desire – a state which one can attain by control of the mind, as it all begins in the mind.⁹¹ For this reason, Buddhists are totally convinced that their salvation depends on their actions. The Buddhist understanding of the law of *karma* is explained here:

Buddhism is a religion which has a free spirit. There is no 'have to'. It depends on what you do. If you do good, you will carry the result with you. If you do bad, you know it. You will carry the result of that *kamma* [*karma*] yourself. No one is going to interfere with you. Nobody can take away your bad *kamma* or good *kamma* for you. You are on your own. You are master of your own life. But you must hold responsibility for what you do.⁹²

This means Buddhists believe their *present actions* determine their fortune and their destiny wholly depends on each person. Their sins (*bad karma*) cannot be atoned for. Each one "*must hold responsibility for what you do.*"⁹³

From carefully examining the Thai worldview, we can see how the 'truth' can only become real to Thais when they experience it. They believe what they believe because they feel it, not understand it. They have an 'innate ability' to hold many ideas together without replacing one idea with another. The perspective of life is to be 'only for today' - '*moment-orientation.*' Lastly, each one "*must hold responsibility for what you do.*"⁹⁴ Now, we may begin to see the reason why Thai-Christians understand Christian concepts in the way that they do. This will be discussed in the next part.

⁹⁰ Weerasingha, *The Cross and the Bo Tree*, 40.

⁹¹ Weerasingha, *The Cross and the Bo Tree*, 102; Harris, *What Buddhists Believe*, 50.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

PART FOUR

HOW THE THAI OLD WORLDVIEW CAN HINDER THE BIBLE MESSAGE

This part will seek to propose an explanation of how this ingrained logic and assumptions in the Thai old worldview function, followed by some suggestions for discipleship in response to these needs. An illustration as to how these insights can be helpful knowledge for a church leader in teaching and discipling the Thais will be given. An example of the preparation for preaching and the Bible study will be presented at the end.

"A WAY OF SEEING REALITY ROOTED IN EXPERIENCE" (EVERYTHING CAN BE TRUE) HINDERS ETERNITY (THE ONLY ABSOLUTE TRUTH)

Overall, we have seen how the Thai view of life is highly under the influence of "*a way of seeing reality rooted in experience*". Indeed, it can be said, that '*experience is opposed to reason*.' This may be the reason why Thais easily accept other people's truth without argumentation, for Buddhist wisdom comes from personal experience (described in 'Thai epistemology and thought patterns'). Nevertheless, one should remember that their acceptance does not mean Thais think that the accepted truth is reality to them. For the Thais, truth can be their conviction only when they experience, or feel its truth for themselves. This insight suggests we should firstly find a way to do Bible study, which provokes feelings in the Thai, such as 'Simply The Story'. This method is inspired by Nathan's story: how he used a story to help convict David of his sins.⁹⁵ The underlying principle of this method is also appropriate to Thai people, who have a "deep sense of independence" (ego orientation).⁹⁶ The effectiveness of this method is demonstrated in the considerably greater response of the Thai to the Gospel shown when an evangelist uses this method.⁹⁷

Furthermore, this cultural blindness also enables us to understand more why *neither Christ, nor His death was mentioned, when Thai-Christians were asked how Christian salvation was possible*.⁹⁸ This result seems unthinkable for most Christians - not to testify about Christ on the topic of salvation. Christian salvation only comes through believing in the work of God

⁹⁵ Dorothy A. Miller, *Simply The Story: Inductive Bible Study "Oral style"*, (STS Handbook) (Hemet, CA: The God's Story Project, 2012 - 3rd edition): 13.
http://www.simplythestory.org/downloads/PDFs/STS_Handbook%2002-20-2012.pdf (Accessed 6 June, 2012).

⁹⁶ Kapur-Fic, *Thailand*, 522.

⁹⁷ Larry Dinkins, "The Young Storyteller", on 'God@Work' website.
http://www.omf.org/omf/us/resources_1/newsletters/east_asia_insight/east_asia_insight_2012/god_work?utm_source=US_EAI+March+2012+USE&utm_campaign=4.3.12+EAI&utm_medium=email (Accessed 6 June, 2012).

⁹⁸ Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand", 34.

through Christ, for “God in Christ has borne our sin and died our death to set us free from sin and death.”⁹⁹ Alister McGrath expresses it by saying “in order for humanity to be restored to God, the mediator must sacrifice himself.”¹⁰⁰ Doubtless, though, this group of Thai-Christians certainly believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and that salvation is theirs the moment they believe in Him. But surprisingly, the majority of Thai-Christians did not mention Christ or His death in relation to it. Perhaps the reason was that Thai-Christians have been taught about salvation, even over a long period of time, but the Western way (using abstract ideas with discussion) has been used for teaching the Thais. However, they need “*a concrete-functional based on relational*” if it is to be applied to everyday life and be real.¹⁰¹ Anything less is not sufficient to make a Thai confident in their conviction.

In order to confront this issue, we need to create a series of studies as to why God's truth is absolute, by choosing certain passages in Scripture, especially on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.¹⁰² By purposely confronting the issue, Thai-Christians will gradually grow in their confidence of God's word as well as have a sense of eternity. But we need to remember, “learning to see our own worldview is a long and difficult process.”¹⁰³ This suggests we should start to introduce God's absolute truth starting with children, even in Sunday school, through drama or story-telling.

UNCERTAINTY (FOLK BUDDHISM) HINDERS CERTAINTY (CHRIST'S RESURRECTION)

The Thai character is naturally pragmatic, holding a practical survival-oriented worldview towards life today.¹⁰⁴ That is the set of religious belief will be chosen in relation to their present circumstances and without being concerned about 'right' doctrine. This behaviour may stem partly from their fear of the unknown force (described above). Consideration should be given to how Thais perceive the importance of Christianity more as “to teach how one should live,”¹⁰⁵ rather than the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. This may be reflected in their 'innate' worldview that 'those who have hope for the unseen future are living in 'ignorance.' The adjective 'innate' is used here to connote the idea that this belief is so deeply held within and not many Thai-Christians will be aware of this (at least the present author believes this). For example, the present author experiences difficulty in thinking about eternal

⁹⁹ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 195.

¹⁰⁰ Alister E. McGrath. *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 408.

¹⁰¹ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 118.

¹⁰² <http://www.dahlfred.com/en/blogs/gleanings-from-the-field/519-the-surprising-power-of-bible-narrative-with-thai-a-tribals-dr-larry-dinkins>

¹⁰³ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 321

¹⁰⁴ Dilane Senapatiratne, Saw Allen, and Russell H. Bowers, *Folk Buddhism in South East Asia* (2003): 2.

¹⁰⁵ Hughes, “Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand”, 34.

hope; uncertainty and fear is created in the author's heart when thinking about it (subconscious fear of the unknown forces). The truth of Christ's resurrection, initiating "a new age spiritual power and, ultimately, resurrected life (Rom. 6: 4; 2 Cor. 4: 11),"¹⁰⁶ does not become the reality. But, by studying this topic, the present author realised that this fear of the unknown force remained because it had not been confronted and submitted under God's authority in prayer.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, we need to create awareness of this among Thai-Christians. For instance, we need to prepare a series of stories to convey the meaning of Christ's resurrection. The method will be similar to the one described above.

HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY HINDERS JESUS'S WORK ON THE CROSS

Buddhism deeply builds in the Thai-Buddhist the idea of 'a 'free spirit' of controlling one's life, which also means 'the followers must be held responsible for what they do.' This Buddhist principle creates the world of 'You get what you do.' Most Thai-Buddhists perceive this notion like a natural law. That means they believe with *no* further discussion (described in Thai epistemology).¹⁰⁸ There is no surprise, therefore, that 81 % of Thai-Christians believed "Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil" was important.¹⁰⁹ For it is almost the only way that Thais explain 'fairness' in their life in reality. For example, most Thai-Buddhists interpret their sufferings, or problems at the present time with the law of *karma* – their misery is caused by their misdeeds in their previous life, so this explanation satisfies and enables most Thais-Buddhists not merely to cope, but rather to have a positive attitude towards their daily negative experiences in life.¹¹⁰ As the idea is strengthened by some passages in the Bible, such as 'You reap what you sow,'¹¹¹ so this may explain why 60% of Thai-Christians consider the lack of regular prayer,¹¹² as either seriously or very seriously sinful,¹¹³ and many Thai-Christians believe that following Christian teaching and in fact Buddhist teachings was the key to overcoming their predicaments. For them the problems of human beings did not lie in human nature,¹¹⁴ but in self-control,¹¹⁵ adding to the experience of the present author. In view of this, in the light of Thai worldview relating to *karma*, it is likely that the cause of all

¹⁰⁶ Richard N. Longenecker. *Contours of Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 183.

¹⁰⁷ 2 Cor. 10: 5.

¹⁰⁸ Taylor, "A Prolegomena for the Thai Context" (Thesis), 69.

¹⁰⁹ Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand", 29.

¹¹⁰ Kapur-Fic, *Thailand: Buddhism, Society, and Women*, 97.

¹¹¹ Gal. 6: 7-9.

¹¹² Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand", 29.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 35.

misconceptions lies in that fact that their understanding of biblical sins were under the influence of their Buddhist concept of sin. With this in mind, we begin to perceive why Thai-Christians do not speak about Christ or the cross when salvation is mentioned. For Buddhists have "little concept of sins," so if their concept of sins have not been redefined to the biblical one,¹¹⁶ doubtless the cross has lost its power to the Thai-Christians. Consequently, they cannot grow in their maturity in Christ.¹¹⁷ Therefore, in order to start the 'redefining process,' one must walk them to see we introduce them to discover it in the life of Christ. The method will be similar to the one described above.

Now we come to see that the task of transforming worldview is not a one-time occurrence, but it is a demanding process that the Thai church-leader needs to be continually coming back to in their preparation of a Scripture passage. If this old worldview is not consistently confronted from time and time again, this may not only be effect their maturity, but also cause to fall away from the faith, as it was pointed out by a Thai-Christian pastor. He stated the problem lay in the lack of the clarity of the assurance of salvation, not in the message of the gospel.¹¹⁸

Therefore, in order to start to transform the worldview, one must continue to bring these Buddhist principles under their preparation for the Bible teaching every time when the message can be interpreted in the light of Buddhist teaching. This will be demonstrated in a case study (below). The theological conviction of the present author about contextualisation comes from "translation model." That is, it starts with God's word and "put in the way that the receptor can understand."¹¹⁹ But it will not only be faithful to the truth and culturally appropriate, but also in the way that the receptor may be challenged to confront with their old worldview themselves. Consequently, as their life before and after knowing Christ has been connected, so the personal feeling with God's truth is created. Therefore, God's truth becomes their reality in which the Thais may apply in their everyday life (explained in Thai epistemology). Furthermore, from creating the teaching which enables the Thais to discover for themselves, it is also appropriate to the Thai character, that is "a big ego, a deep sense of independence, pride and dignity. They cannot tolerate any violation of the "ego" self."¹²⁰ By doing it, the teaching is done in a subtle, indirect and general way.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Hiebert, "Conversion and Worldview Transformation", 84.

¹¹⁷ Isa. 5: 13.

¹¹⁸ Nikorn Sitthijariyaporn, *New Life in Christ* (Khonkhen: CCMA, 2004), Preface.

¹¹⁹ Minh Song, "Contextualisation and Discipleship: Closing the Gap between Theory and Practice," 15.

¹²⁰ R Kapur-Fic, *Thailand: Buddhism, Society, and Women*, 522.

¹²¹ Kapur-Fic, *Thailand*, 524.

A CASE STUDY: 1 JOHN 2: 15-16

The worldview that will be used to give an insight to interpret this passage will be 'impermanent,' 'detachment,' and 'coolness of heart.'

In the Thai mind verse 15 can be interpreted in the light of the law of *karma* 'do good receive good, do evil receive evil.' Verse 16 can confirm Thai-Christians that their Christian life has to be life without cravings similar to that of Buddhist teaching in *nirvana*. That may mean the concept of eradicating all cravings could be seen as Buddhist concepts of 'detachment'. Thus, if this concept is being used, Thai-Christians will think that God desires them to extinguish all desires so as to 'gain' His love. However, the passage is to warn us to not treasure 'worldly things,' but not in order to 'gain' His love, but only to 'stay' in God's love (v. 15).

Therefore, we come too see how this knowledge of these worldviews can give the insight to those who prepare themselves for teaching and discipling the Thai-Christians.

CONCLUSION

As has been seen, in order to effectively contextualise God's truth in order to disciple Thai-Christians from a Buddhist background, we began with carefully examining the issues of the misconceptions of Thai-Christians, such as salvation, sin and God Himself. This led us to see that Thai-Christians still perceive the importance of Christianity as being more 'to teach how to live' than 'forgiveness of sin.' This urged us to thoroughly seek to find out the cause of these issues by deeply interacting the problems found in other research in literature, and the experience of the present author herself, with worldview theory. As a result, we became convinced that the answer lay in the Thai worldview. Through engaging the findings from the influence of Thai worldview with the Thai-Christian issues, we realise if we are to enable Thai-Christians to be able to truly 'hear' from God, one must continually apply these insights not only in setting out the theme that directly encounters with the issues, but also in interpreting God's word on every occasion when they are teaching Thais about God. As a result, with hope in our loving God, we can expect the growth of Thai-Christians in their understanding of God so that they grow in their joyful obedience and loving relationship with Him. Certainly, this will lead them to be effective disciples who 'bear much fruit.'¹²²

¹²² John 15: 5, 8.

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