

HeRD #432 - Accommodation

Some months ago I had the privilege of listening to an elder preach a sermon on the relationship of Thai customs to Christianity. He raised the question of giving donations to the local temple for various occasions. The elder, who is quite conservative theologically, asked his congregation straight out, "Can we give donations to the temple?" One would have expected him to answer in the negative, but he didn't. He argued, instead, that Christians can give financial gifts to temples. His rationale is intriguing. He cited Jesus' statement, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21) and stated that after we've given our tithe to the church, we are free to dispense with the rest of our income. We've given to God what belongs to God. It's perfectly acceptable, thus, to give some of what's left to the temple. In fact, it's important for Christians to show "namchai" to their Buddhist neighbors by doing so. "Namchai" amounts to a generous, other-oriented kindness and concern for the other's well-being. In this case, it can be translated as "love for one's neighbor."

This is a striking example of "doing theology" in a northern Thai setting. In this case, the elder worked out his theology from two traditions. As a good Protestant, he began his argument from Scripture. He specifically cited one passage and alluded to another (love your neighbor). These two passages instructed him to love his Buddhist neighbors and gave him permission to do so, but only after he'd affirmed his primary allegiance to God through tithing. It is especially worth noting that he forged his specific action on the anvil of northern Thai values, ones he shares with his neighbors. In his context, making an occasional donation to the temple is a way of showing "namchai" (love). His indigenous theology, thus, affirms key northern Thai values while discarding narrower Western Protestant strictures.