

Animism and the Prosperity Gospel

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I keep hearing, both first hand and from others, evidences of a theology of the prosperity Gospel creeping through the Thai church. Certainly not all Thai Christians think this way and I don't want to overgeneralize but I hear enough of it to be concerned. By the term "prosperity gospel", I mean this type of "Christian" teaching that tells people that God wants them to be healthy and wealthy, and to see health and wealth as sure signs of God's blessing in their life. I grant that God's gracious provision of good health and financial prosperity are blessings from God but Biblically speaking, the pursuit of these things should not be the goal of the Christian life (1 Tim 6:10 "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil") but rather, we should be content with what we have (Phil 4:10-13), and trust God to provide for our needs as we make obedience and faithfulness to God our primary concern (Matt. 6:33).

In many Thai churches, part of the worship service is a time for people to get up and give testimonies of God working in their lives in during the past week. There is certainly a place for praising God for giving physical healing, helping in times of financial difficulty, and other practical matters. But when these are nearly exclusively the types of praises that people are giving, then there is a problem. I asked an elderly Thai Christian, who has been a believer for twenty to thirty years, "Since you became a Christian, how have you seen God change your life?" He replied, "I was rather poor but now I am lower middle class." I was hoping for more but that was it! I was talking with a fellow missionary who told me about the weekly "testimonies" of a church elder at the church where she and her husband worship. I know this church elder personally and he is a very kind grandfatherly type of man who in many ways is a great blessing to that church. However, at the same time, he is getting up in the worship service each week telling the people how God has blessed him financially, flashing money and new electronic gadgets as evidences of God's blessing.

When I hear Thai believers who talk about God's blessings in almost entirely financial terms, I can't help but think of the prosperity gospel from the West which is making inroads in Thai churches. However, I also wonder if the animist mindset which saturates Thai culture is also influencing their thinking. On paper, Thailand is a Buddhist country but in practice, Thai Buddhists worship a variety of spirits and angelic beings. They are just as likely to seek help from a psychic, spirit medium, or a spirit reputed to be living in a large tree, as they are to seek help from a Buddhist monk. And Thai animistic Buddhism is a very practical religion. It entirely focused around seeking religious and spiritual solutions to everyday practical problems. There is no concern about glorifying or obeying any superior being other than doing a certain set of prescribed rituals in order to bring about a certain desired result - whether that be passing the university entrance exam, getting your husband to stop drinking, or being more successful in your business ventures. It is all about getting the spirits to help you pursue your own ideas of what a happy and prosperous life should look like. The variety of spirits don't have any

overarching plan or rules or priorities for how you should live your life or what the purpose of your life is. They are merely powers to be bargained with to get what you want. Seeing that this is the focus of animistic practice, I wonder if this mindset gets carried over into the church as Thai Buddhists become Thai Christians. In the animistic practice that they were used to, certain rituals were performed in order to bring the desired blessings. Now that one has become a Christian, are Christian rituals (such as going to church, tithing, singing worship songs, serving on the church committee) substituted in an ongoing pursuit of one's own idea of a happy prosperous life without concern for what God desires or what God's plan is for a their life? God desires to be glorified through repentance from sin, belief in Christ, and God-honoring living, exemplified in honesty, integrity, kindness, forgiveness, and reconciled relationships. But it seem that some view godliness (in this case, going through the outward motions of Christianity) as a means of financial gain (1 Tim 6:5).

Again, I am not sure where the unBiblical thinking is coming from, whether it be a heretical Western "Christian" religiousity or the remaining baggage from an unchallenged animistic worldview. Either way, the result is the same, and the Biblical faith is twisted into a pursuit of health, wealth, and one's own ideas about what life should be like, and not about what God wants. The tragedy is that the joy and freedom of living in Christ is much more valuable than any worldly wealth or ideas of the happy life, but many don't have the eyes or hearts to see it.