

# Dancing to the Temple, Dancing in the Church: Reflections on Thai Local Theology

Herb Swanson

## Introduction

Asian Christian theology, as a self-conscious international movement among Asian theologians and church leaders, is a recent phenomenon, one that some Asian churches have contributed to more than others. Few Asian nations, however, have been as "silent" theologically as Thailand, and from an international perspective, it would seem fair to wonder if "Thai theology" even exists, particularly among Thai Protestants. There are no "name" Thai theologians or regionally discussed Thai theologies. In recent decades, the Thai Protestant church has produced several scholar-teachers in Biblical Studies, Ethics, Church History, and Practical Theology. One can point to a number of Thai and English language theses, articles, and books in each of these fields, written by Thai authors themselves. Noticeably absent from this list of theological fields is Systematic Theology. There are no courses in Thai theology, as such, and Thai seminarians confront the seldom-used term "Thai theology" with an air of perplexity, occasionally even asking, "What do you mean by 'Thai'?" One can scan the tables of contents, bibliographies, and indexes of monographs, anthologies, and journals in the field of Asian theology and only rarely come across a Thai name or contribution. The situation within the Thai church itself seems strikingly similar. Thai churches have developed no self-conscious theological tradition of their own and generally seem content to repeat the theological truisms they learned from their missionary founders and benefactors.

If one listens gently, however, it eventually becomes clear that Thai Protestants have a theology profoundly grounded in Thai social conceptions, one that takes God to be the church's Spiritual/Heavenly Patron. It has a Christology equally grounded in the Thai language and the institution of the monarchy, a "processional" understanding of Christ as the Royal King of Power who rules over creation and the church compassionately. These and other theological themes remain largely hidden from view, still awaiting scholarly investigation—still waiting for Thai theologians to voice them in a more reflective, systematic manner. The church in Thailand, that is, continues to wait for its own theological successor(s) to Koyama's *Waterbuffalo Theology*, the only widely known professional theology produced in the (northern) Thai context.<sup>1</sup>

Although most of Thai Protestant theology, like the theologies of all churches and nations, is largely repetitive, conservative, uncritical (of itself), and very ordinary, it has its creative moments—moments when churches and individuals accomplish something more than merely repeat the commonly held theological truisms of their denomination. Such moments reveal the context of Thai theological reflection and point to the key themes, which covert Thai theologians explore as they unconsciously "do" theology. The author witnessed and participated in such a moment, which took place in a Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) congregation near Chiang Mai and presents it here as a story that lifts the veil on covert Thai theology—if not fully, at least in part.

The Suwandangrit Church is located some 20 kilometers east of Chiang Mai in the community of Ban Dok Daeng (literally, "Red Flower Village"), a relatively prosperous rural-suburban village similar to many other older communities that ring this rapidly growing urban center. The only thing that distinguishes Ban Dok Daeng from most of those other villages is that it has a Christian church. It is a mark of distinction that some of the village's residents would just as soon do without. There has long been a deep undercurrent of tension between the Buddhist majority and the Christian minority, which is largely clumped together in its own "quarter" in the south end of the village. Why that tension has existed and what the Suwandangrit Church has done in recent years to overcome it is the focus of this story.

## The Church

American Presbyterian missionaries founded the Suwandangrit Church on Christmas Day 1880 in the village of Mae Dok Daeng (meaning "Red Flower Creek"; the name has since been modified). For a time during the 1890s, the missionaries called it the "Diamond of the North," a precious faithful church that set the standard for other congregations. Through good times and bad, it remained a large church by Thai Protestant standards, usually numbering over 200 communicant members. In 1933, the church officially renamed itself the Suwandangrit Church, the name being a combination of the names of two of its founding fathers. After 1950, however, the congregation experienced hard times, caused by a combination of events including the withdrawal of a large part of its membership to form a separate church, internal squabbles that saw some members leave the Christian faith entirely, and the sheep-stealing depredations of sectarian missionaries. By the early 1970s, only a small handful of people still gathered for worship in Ban Dok Daeng, but in the late '70s the congregation began to show some signs of renewal; and over the course of the next twenty years, it quietly, modestly grew in numbers and activities under the leadership of two key elders. In 1990, it built a new church building, and the congregation could no longer be typified as weak, although it remained a modest sized church. Since the mid-1980s, the church has drawn further strength from the presence of two families that include three theologically trained individuals, including the author's family, which moved to Ban Dok Daeng in 1993 after a long association with the church going back to 1981.

Like other Thai Protestant churches, the Suwandangrit Church has generally stood apart from the communal life of its village in spite of the fact that there were several interfaith nuclear families and that most of the Christians have Buddhist relatives. Christians took no part in *wat* (Buddhist temple) activities other than to help with cooking at temple festivities when called upon to do so. Christians would attend those festivals and other events, such as funerals, but strictly as visitors. In this atmosphere of mutual distrust, the church lived largely for itself and took no thought as to how it might act as a witness to the love of God in Christ or carry out peacemaking activities. Its neighbors, in any event, would have treated any form of community involvement with suspicion, based on their general perception of Christians as being soul winning "head hunters."<sup>2</sup>

## The Revolution of 1996

In 1990, the Suwandangrit Church dedicated its new church building. Not long thereafter Wat Ban Dok Daeng, the local temple, began to construct a new *phraviharn*, the main building and ritual center of any Thai Buddhist *wat*. By early 1996, the building was nearly complete, and the temple committee made plans for a *poy luang*, a major three-day celebration. The committee informally communicated with the church's leaders, wanting to know how the church would participate in the festivities. They made it clear that the usual policy of silence by the church was unacceptable to the larger community. Representatives of the *wat* suggested, unofficially, that the church join the rest of the community in donating a *tonkuatan*, a "money tree," to the *wat*. These "trees" are made of bamboo frames shaped into different forms, most frequently resembling a tree. Money and other offerings such as packets of soap, spoons, candies, and other small items are hung on the trees. Some are quite artistic and show time, effort, and creative thought. They can stand as tall as two meters in height and require from two to four persons to carry them on their shoulders to the *wat*.

This request sparked a crisis in the life of the church. During the early months of 1996, it held a series of council and congregational meetings that discussed the temple's overtures at worried length. Although some members expressed irritation at the *wat* for being pushy, the major issues that emerged were theological ones. What is the extent to which the church can participate in the activities of another religion without violating the First Commandment? Does official participation in *wat* activities constitute idolatry? Underlying these precise questions was the deeper feeling that it is "wrong" for Christians in Ban Dok

Daeng to mix religiously with Buddhists. The issues, then, had to do with theological boundaries and ecclesiastical identity, and, not surprisingly, the church split into two groups over them. One side wanted to limit any participation as much as possible, some even wondering if donating money to the temple in and of itself violated the biblical commandments. The other side desired better relations with their Buddhist neighbors. Northern Thai rural values place heavy emphasis on unity and generosity, values the church had long transgressed in its quest for ecclesiastical purity. Both groups in the dispute looked to their own leading elder. The church had no pastor, and the lay moderator at that time was the leading voice urging participation in the temple's festival to as full an extent as possible.

Inevitably, the congregation turned to its three theologically trained members for advice. All three observed that the church had great freedom in deciding what to do. They urged that the Bible enjoins Christians to love their neighbors and to be peacemakers, but all three also reminded both sides regarding the Pauline injunction to preserve the unity of the church. While helpful, this advice did not resolve the issues or differences. It happened, however, that the then Moderator of the CCT, the Rev. Samran Kuangwaen, appeared in worship one Sunday morning; the Suwanduangrit Church is his home church, and he comes to worship with the church whenever he has the opportunity. The moderator of the church, after worship, asked him to speak about the issue of the church's participation in the temple's celebration. Ach. Samran encouraged the church to participate as fully as possible—just so long as it did not actually join in formal Buddhist ritual. There had already been some movement toward responding positively to the temple's overtures, and now that movement gained momentum. The question was no longer whether the church would join in the temple's celebration of its new building, but only the extent of its participation.

That momentum was confirmed at the church council's meeting in February 1996 when the leading voice of the "separatist" side agreed that the church should involve itself in the temple's celebration. He spoke, he said, in light of the assurances of the theologically trained members and the opinions of the CCT's Moderator. His assent did not resolve all of the tensions involved, and throughout the church's discussions and subsequent actions some members remained silently hesitant and uneasy. In further discussions and meetings, however, the membership progressively decided that the church could donate money to the *wat*. It could put its donation on a money tree. It could join the other villagers in an evening procession in which the temple faithful carried their family money trees to the *wat*. Finally, the members decided that the Christians could actually enter the new *phraviharn* and receive the traditional blessing given to those who brought their offerings to the *wat*. The congregation decided, on the advice of its lay moderator, that receiving such blessings did not constitute an act of worship even though it was done in the presence of Buddha images, Buddhist monks, and with hands held up and together in an attitude of respect. The Suwanduangrit Church, thus, on the evening of 1 March 1996, joined its neighbors in a procession to the *wat*, its own money tree in tow.

In an email to family and friends at the time, the author related the following (edited) description of the event: "As befits the season, the day started out cool and then quietly heated up as the morning passed. By midmorning, various families were assembling their offerings to carry to the *wat* in the evening. These frequently consisted of foldaway chairs and tables, all of an agreed upon brand and style. Folded out, they were lashed to long bamboo carrying poles. Flowers and other decorations were added to give color and festive highlights to the offerings. Other homes were assembling the more traditional 'money trees' that go with *wat* (temple) festivities.

"At the church, we began to gather just before 10:00 am to work on our money tree. It was a simple frame, more than a meter in height. To this frame, we attached 'branches' of split bamboo into which were inserted bills of various denominations 20s, 50s, and 100s. The church itself donated 2,000 baht and members added to it another 3,000 plus baht. As some members sat on mats attaching the bills to the branches, others made paper flowers, and still others came and went bringing with them their gifts for attachment. Buddhist neighbors and relatives had some part in all of this, but church members themselves did most of the work.

"As the day wore on, the village was inordinately busy and alive as people were busily engaged in the preparation of food, of offerings for the *wat*, and in socializing on a village wide scale. About 7:15 pm, the church's bell began to ring, perhaps a little more rapidly and insistently than is usual. We quickly made our way down the street to the church building. It was all lit up and a fair crowd was gathered there, including some 30 or more church members plus assorted neighbors and relatives. In the midst of the crowd was the church's money tree with the church's name, "Khrischak Suwanduangkit," featured prominently on it. Around the church, we could hear the rhythmic beat of the drums and gongs that accompany processions in Thailand—and now and again the trilling ululation that goes along with them. Candles were passed out for the Christians to carry, we grouped together for a couple of pictures, and then the moderator formed us up to process to the *wat*. As we went, we merged with groups coming out of their homes with their offerings of tables and money trees. The narrow streets were quickly filled with bouncing, swaying money trees. Drums and gongs led us. Here and there, "well oiled" dancers clapped and jiggled to the rhythm of the drums. Again, the trilling wove its way through the sounds of chatter, of drums, and of shouting children. None of this is new in Ban Dok Daeng. What was new was the Christians, straggling along at the back—but in the procession. Several times, Buddhist villagers, standing on the sides of the street, expressed their pleasure at our presence ("*yindee, yindee*").

"The whole procession took less than 30 minutes to complete. The *wat* grounds were lit up with bright neon lights everywhere. Pennants and flags decked it out, and a crowd had assembled to *wat* the parade of offerings and gifts. We entered the grounds behind the others and joined them in processing once around the *viharn* before entering it. The interior of the *Viharn* was crowded with offerings and gifts and the assembled faithful, men to the front, women to the back. At the very front sat the beaming abbot, microphone in hand. As we pressed into the cramped space inside, one of the *wat* faithful talked at us continually on the PA system. Welcoming, informing, cajoling us to crowd in. He kept up a constant patter as we worked our way towards the culminating ceremony of the evening.

"Eventually, the crowd quieted down, and the brief ceremonies began. This was the moment of truth for the Christians. One of the objections voiced among us from the beginning was that we would have to participate in Buddhist ritual. Christians have long been taught that we are not allowed to do so. The moderator quickly found a solution to our dilemma. In this particular case, the heart of the ceremony was a "nonreligious" blessing given by a lay leader rather than the abbot. The moderator instructed us that we could raise our hands in the Thai prayer like gesture of respect (*wai*) during this blessing. He was careful also to remind the *wat* folks in advance that the Christians should not be put in an awkward situation about religious ceremony. They know this already, having lived with Christians for about twelve decades now. And we were blessed, and we joined our neighbors in showing respect for the moment. It was surely the first time in the history of the community that the Christians joined the Buddhists in such a moment in the Buddhist context. During the brief period of religious chants that followed, we reverted quietly to our style of unobtrusively waiting with our hands folded in our laps.

"There followed remarks by the abbot in which he profusely thanked the Christians for their participation. He used our Christian words entirely correctly. He knew how we style ourselves and think of ourselves. It was clear from his words that our presence was deeply meaningful for him, something he surely never expected to witness. At this point, we all dispersed, the whole event, from beginning to end, lasted only slightly longer than an hour. After all the discussion, worry, and preparation the actual event was almost anticlimactic."

Life for the Suwanduangkit Church then returned to its normal routine, apparently little changed by its "revolutionary moment" in March 1996. During the next five years, however, it sponsored two special worship services in memory of church members who had died. In a somewhat unusual gesture, it invited non-Christian descendants/relatives to participate in both services. The ritual was purely Christian, but time was given for all participants to place flowers before pictures of their departed parents, grandparents,

spouses, and other honored relatives—an act that again cut across religious boundaries, this time in a Christian context. It must be admitted, however, that many members retained their separatist attitudes and, at times, openly resisted suggestions that Buddhist villagers be included in Christian events. Resentment lingered over past acts of petty persecution, supposed and actual, by the Buddhist majority.

## **The Revolution Comes Home**

The revolutionary moment of 1996, then, seemed to be nothing more than a moment. The fundamental shift in the church's relationship with its neighbors remained largely hidden—until November 2000 when the Suwandangrit Church was close to completing its new multipurpose hall. The village head man and others approached the new moderator, the elder who had been identified with the separatist faction of the church in 1996, and asked if the *wat* could hold a procession and bring a money tree for the church in anticipation of the dedication of the new hall. These representatives said they wanted to repay the church's generosity of 1996 and show their community unity. The congregation readily agreed to the temple's request and, for good measure, did up its own money tree. One family in the church decided to prepare a separate money tree, and on 8 October 2000, three money trees were brought as offerings given during a brief Christian worship service.<sup>3</sup>

The precedent had been set, and as the church neared completion of its new hall, both it and the community began to discuss plans for the dedication. In the past, the church would have simply held a major worship service, inviting Chiang Mai area churches to attend; on this occasion, however, it also had to make provision for a community celebration. The committee in charge decided to hold a festive evening approximating a temple festival. It invited a Christian music group that emphasizes using traditional northern and popular northeastern Thai music in worship to provide the music for the evening. A group of women prepared traditional dances. Games and food stalls were added to the arrangements and the committee worked out a program for the evening. Central to these preparations was a special blessing service at which money trees from the *wat*, the church, and several families were to be presented; the church even received word that a neighboring church planned to bring a money tree as well. The contrast between all of these plans and 1996 could hardly have been greater. The "separatist group" had all but disappeared; members of families that in the past tended to stay aloof from the Buddhist community now happily worked on money trees for the church.

On the evening of 29 December 2000, the church held its own festival, decidedly along the lines of a northern Thai temple festival. Important things happened. Eight money trees were presented and blessed. A large crowd of the church's Buddhist neighbors attended, processing to the church just as they would to the *wat*. The Christian men prone to drink stayed sober (or at home). There was no Christian worship service, as such, but during the blessing ceremony a group of members led the assembled crowd in singing a hymn set to the northern Thai dialect; most of our Buddhist neighbors could not sing it very well, but they were so taken with the hymn that they asked the leaders to please lead them in it a second time. The blessing itself, delivered by a Christian clergyman, incorporated Christian as well as traditional formulas and the assembled crowd, Buddhist and Christian, received it with inordinate attention and silence. After a meal, the evening's festivities began. The music was very good, the churchwomen's dancing pleasing and fun, and the games and other activities were all well received. Being a Christian or with Christians, for once, was fun.

The final episode of this story takes place at Wat Ban Dok Daeng. In mid-March 2001, the temple dedicated its own multipurpose building and cremated the former abbot in an elaborate and expensive ceremony that attracted a huge crowd. The temple festival that preceded the cremation attracted even larger crowds. By this time, precedent had become tradition. The Suwandangrit Church now had its own money tree, and the discussions concerning the church participation in the temple's celebration had to do strictly with matters of procedure. What night would we process to the temple? How much should we give? In the

end, a large group of Christians joined with a number of individual Buddhist families in a mini-procession that the Christians led, dancing to the rhythms of Christian gongs and drums (in 1996, the Christians walked at the back and did not dance). The congregation gave the temple a generous donation, no one in the church questioning the propriety of the gift or raising objections to its size. On the day of the abbot's cremation, individual families as well as neighboring temples set up food stalls, giving away free eats of a wide variety. Among those stalls was one that carried the name, "Khrischak Suwandangrit."

While it is still too early to judge, it appears that the Suwandangrit Church has established a new, more open relationship with its Buddhist neighbors in Ban Dok Daeng. The members speak openly and happily of a new sense of unity in the village. A wedding held in the church's new multipurpose hall between a young member and his Buddhist bride included pieces of traditional northern Thai ritual seldom seen in a Christian wedding, if ever. Faced with the problem of a cemetery with little room left, members of the church seem willing to consider the possibility of cremation with less fearful reserve than would once have been the case. The church has conducted its first cremations, again mixing in more traditional aspects associated with Buddhist cremations. In light of these hints and indications, it is not an overstatement to term the events of 1996 and 2000-2001 as "revolutionary".

## **Reflections**

While the events in the life of the Suwandangrit Church over the last five years are not representative of local Thai Protestant theology and in fact, are decisively atypical of the behavior of all but a very few Thai Protestant churches, they still reveal important themes in local Thai theological reflection. They instruct us, that is, in how Thai churches go about the task of behaving theologically. First, the congregation's theology was church based, the "work" of the whole church rather than particular individuals. It was a "negotiated theology" and a "political theology" that, perhaps unintentionally, adhered to the Pauline injunctions to not engage in activities that will destroy the unity of the church or cause weaker members to stumble. In 1996, the members of the Suwandangrit Church intensively negotiated among themselves the congregation's theological response to its neighbors' demands for greater village unity. The church preserved a semblance of unity that smoothed the way for the events of 2000 and 2001 with members who remained aloof from the church's initial venture into the *wat* participating enthusiastically five years later. At the very least, it seems evident that Thai local theology as conducted in Ban Dok Daeng demonstrates a deep concern for community.

Second, Thai local theology, in this case, emerged in the immediate, even dominating presence of the church's Buddhist neighbors. Buddhism and Buddhists are an inescapable reality for Thai local theology. It should be remembered, however, that the Suwandangrit Church's Buddhist context is not that of classical Buddhism, the Buddha, or even the most creative Thai Buddhist teachers such as Buddhadasa. The Buddhism the church encounters in Ban Dok Daeng is village, culture Buddhism, a religious suasion that has its weaknesses as well as its strengths. During the debates of 1996, for example, one of the congregation's elders forcefully argued that Buddha images are idols if one considers the way in which our flesh and blood neighbors actually treat them. He worried over the question of whether the church was not implicitly condoning idolatry by participating in the dedication of a *phraviharn* filled with gleaming images of the Buddha. In this village context, then, Thai communal theology necessarily looks on the religion of its neighbors with a certain ambivalence as it seeks to discern its duty to God and neighbor.

At the same time, the relationship between the religious thought of the temple and the theology of the church in Ban Dok Daeng also exhibits a more complex relationship than members of the congregation might admit or even realize. The church shares a great deal with the temple in terms of attitudes about worship (merit making), stewardship, and living according to a religious law that regulates communal and personal behavior. Its active worship life almost exactly parallels the temple's ceremonial life as to occasion (such as funerals, weddings, and housewarmings) and religious meaning (seeking cosmic/divine protection

and benevolence). The case is the same in terms of financial giving. Both temple and church emphasize building up a large, well-developed physical plant. The church, furthermore, shares its Buddhist neighbors' concern to live proper lives according to a defined dharma (teaching), the Christian dharma being taken from the Bible. Apart from the lyrics of translated Western hymns, the sense and experience of God's grace in Christ is seldom mentioned. The Suwandangrit Church's theology, thus, is communal in yet another way, namely in the fact that the church unconsciously draws on religious themes taken from its larger community.

Third, the story of the Suwandangrit Church's all but revolutionary reorientation of its relationship to its community reveals that Thai local theology looks to respected, trustworthy authorities to validate its theological views. During the debates of 1996, the congregation turned repeatedly to the three theologically trained members of the church for reassurance that it could actually donate a money tree to the *wat* and take part in the temple's blessings ceremony. If, at any time, any of the three had objected to these acts, the process would have come to a halt. The role of the CCT's Moderator was even more important as he spoke with the authority of the whole church. He was doubly respected as a "local boy" who had risen to the highest elective office in the national church. His assurances were crucial. He spoke with some feeling about the tensions between Christians and Buddhists in Ban Dok Daeng, tensions he had experienced personally. He urged the church to change its relationship with the village, virtually saying that the more it felt it could do (up to a point) the better it would be for the church and the community. Thai communal theology, thus, requires the sanction of respected authorities. One could hardly expect it to be otherwise, given the nature of Thai society itself, which tends to be conservative and dependent on the voices of strong patrons even in this age of budding democracy. The Suwandangrit Church found itself in the unusual position of being urged to change by its authority figures, and the Revolution of 1996 could not have taken place if those figures had not given the church permission to carry it out.

Fourth, Thai communal theology pays attention to the Bible. The current moderator of the Suwandangrit Church, who was very hesitant in 1996 about the church's actions, has publicly justified the congregation's (and his own) changed attitude about the *wat* on a number of occasions, citing the Bible in each case. At one point, he argued that the congregation had done nothing more than what Jesus himself did when Jesus sat with tax collectors and other sinners and when he attended community festivities, even turning water into wine. The comparison of our Buddhist neighbors with the biblical tax collectors may not be the happiest parallel possible, but it does indicate a changed perception of how the church should relate to those it formerly held in disdain. At another time, he insisted that the church was merely fulfilling its role as a peacemaker, in accordance with biblical injunctions. As we have already seen, the theological "authorities" of the congregation laid considerable emphasis on the biblical mandate to love one's neighbor. To be sure, most of the members of the congregation have only a rudimentary grasp of biblical teachings, but they are sufficiently Christian and Protestant to worry over whether or not their actions might conflict with those teachings.

Fifth, Thai local theology concerns itself with boundaries, particularly in ritual and worship. Once it was resolved in 1996 that the congregation could finance its own money tree and march in procession with the rest of the village, the focus of the most anxious discussions fixed on the ritual the Christians would have to participate in inside the *phraviharn*. Was it religious? Would it involve paying religious respect to the monks or the images? The church crossed the final hurdle in its encounter with its neighbors when the then moderator assured the members that nothing more was involved than the giving of a traditional northern Thai blessing that was not essentially religious. That claim requires careful consideration, for it reveals a key tension in contemporary Thai theological thought. If one attempts to take a strictly "objective," Western Enlightenment view of the matter, the moderator's claim that the temple's blessings ceremony is not "religious" seems questionable. A Buddhist "lay reader" led the ceremony in the temple in a merit-making context. Yet, the church, including even the leading elder of the "separatist" group, accepted the moderator's assertion the ceremony was "really" only a traditional Thai one and not essentially religious.



It must be understood that the Suwandumrit Church was actually engaged in a redefinition of religious boundaries, a key issue for Thai local theology. Missionary Christianity planted within the Thai church a Western style dualism deeply concerned with protecting Christian purity from any defilement by "heathen" practices.<sup>4</sup>

The Thai church has especially emphasized refraining from participation in Buddhist-animist ritual and ceremony as a key way of protecting its purity, and one finds Thai Protestant Christians constantly worrying over the question of idolatrous behavior in situations in which they are faced with having to join in Buddhist rituals—such as at funerals, opening exercises in schools, and community events. The general rule has been to take a hard line approach, one that adheres to as strict a definition of the boundaries between Christianity and Buddhism as possible. This is, admittedly, a very Western way of looking at religious boundaries, and contemporary Thai theology is profoundly marked by this foreign approach to interreligious engagement (or, disengagement).

Tongchai Winichakul's excellent study of the impact of Western conception of the maps and mapping on Thailand provides an instructive parallel to the role of sharply drawn boundaries in Thai Protestant Christianity. Tongchai observes that before the advent of Western mapping, shifting allegiances among the rulers of Southeast Asia's empires and petty states left political boundaries fluid, diffuse, and ill defined. Smaller states frequently gave allegiance to two power centers, so that travelers only gradually moved across the "boundary" between those centers. The European colonial powers, however, could not tolerate this hazy attitude toward boundaries and insisted upon carefully surveying and marking out the lines between each state and territory.<sup>5</sup> Asia's rulers, today, accept the Western concept of political boundaries, and, by the same token, the Thai church has accepted a Western conception of how Christians draw boundaries between themselves and the world. It is a conception that is not "natural" to the Thai religious consciousness, which generally holds to the principle that "all religions teach the same thing, namely that people should do good instead of evil." Our neighbors in Ban Dok Daeng have no trouble joining the church in its worship or in praying with its members when they pray, but Christians have absented themselves from as much of Buddhist ceremonial life as possible.

The congregation's moderator in 1996 was, unconsciously, resorting to a more Thai-like attitude about religious boundaries when he claimed that the temple ceremony was "traditional" rather than "religious". Such an attitude allows the church to redefine its neighbors' religious life in new ways, ones that do not threaten the purity of the church. If the church, in other words, agrees that a certain Buddhist ceremony is not a religious rite but merely a northern Thai traditional ceremony, then there is no problem with participating in it. Ultimately, just as in traditional Southeast Asia, one does pass into the clear center of a particular prince's territory; for the Suwandumrit Church that clear power center is now defined by actual giving respect to a Buddha image. That act, church members have agreed in an all but official way, is the act that they will not engage in. Previously, however, they refused to light incense sticks in respect of the dead, refused to present robes to monks at funerals on behalf of the deceased, refused to join in string tying ceremonies, and refused to do many other things, which Ban Dok Daeng Christians (and not a few other northern Thai Christians) now accept and do. Some of the church members still do not do some or all of these things, but they are no longer so apt to criticize those who do. The ritual boundary between the church and its neighbors has become more fluid, after the manner of Thai religious consciousness and traditional Southeast Asian political practice.

Finally, Thai local theology at Ban Dok Daeng shares certain theological characteristics in common with the professional, generally seminary-based Asian theological movement such as the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA). The most important of those characteristics is its struggle with its dualistic, Western missionary past just mentioned above. The inescapable starting point of the professional Asian theological movement has been in its reaction against the cultural and spiritual constraints imposed



upon Asian church life by missionary theologies that absolutely rejected Asian religious consciousness and much of Asian culture. C. S. Song states,

In recent years we thinking Christians and theologians in Asia have, at long last, come to realize that we cannot continue to sing somebody else's theological tune. It has dawned on us that we must find our own theological voice. It has become abundantly clear that our own cultures, religions and histories, unrelated historically to Christianity, pose fundamentally theological questions and challenges we can no longer ignore. The stereotyped theological and missiological pronouncements on our cultural, religious and historical realities made by our mentors in the West, if not entirely fallacious, are invalid and misleading.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of Ban Dok Daeng, missionary theology has distorted and disrupted the church's relationship to its neighbors, returning it functionally to an Old Testament understanding of one's neighbor, as being limited to other members of the "covenant of faith" (see Leviticus 19:18). Jesus and the early church extended the concept of neighbor to include virtually the whole of the human race (see Luke 10:25-37, Romans 13:8-10, and James 2:8),<sup>7</sup> but the Suwanduangrit Church found it all but impossible to love its Buddhist neighbors in ways that its neighbors felt were loving. The congregation's revolutionary re-orientation of its relationship to its neighbors, thus, necessarily involved a critique of the theological strictures laid upon it by its Western theological heritage.

At the same time, however, the Suwanduangrit Church's decisions to participate in the religious activities of its Buddhist neighbors more fully and openly represented a positive act of affirmation far more than a negative act of rejection. While the congregation did reject elements of its missionary past, that rejection was largely implicit and unconscious. Consciously and explicitly, it affirmed certain northern Thai communal values and embraced particular traditions that it had previously rejected or ignored. Thus, for example, it redefined the money tree as being a traditional Thai way of making donations rather than as an essentially Buddhist act of merit making. That is to say that the congregation consciously engaged, after the fashion of Asian theologians, in an act of appropriating Asian "resources" for the conduct of its own life while reshaping its thinking and behavior into a more Asian mode. Its behavior in 1996 and 2000-2001 fits well with Piers' redefinition of baptism in the Asian context. Piers writes, "Translated for our times, baptism is not to pour water on somebody and bring him or her into the church—which does not do service to anybody—but to pass through the act of humility by which the church is baptized into the Asian environment."<sup>8</sup> When the Suwanduangrit Church processed to the temple with its money tree and received the blessings of its Buddhist neighbors, these events marked an important baptism into its Thai environment.

Asian professional theology and the theology practiced by the members of the Suwanduangrit Church both begin as critiques of orthodox Western dualistic theology. Both proceed methodologically by appropriating Asian sources, traditions, and patterns for the use of the Christian faith, fitting the faith to Asia as much or more than fitting Asia to the faith. Both also share a similar end, namely liberation. Oracion writes,

Theology is not a tool for constructing an accurate, objective, and true understanding of self and world. What it is interested in is the discernment of the truth of God in history in order that a person of faith might make a faithful approximation of the liberating act of Jesus within his or her sociopolitical context. Theology is supremely interested in asking the question where and why people are hurting, and what possible means are available in removing that hurt.<sup>9</sup>

The village of Ban Dok Daeng had long suffered a serious communal division along religious lines, a division originally caused by Christian theological prejudices against peoples of other faiths. Over the decades, however, both sides occasionally treated the other in ways gauged to increase friction and show

disdain. The Christians acted and spoke abusively, while the Buddhist majority acted oppressively—not always or even frequently, to be sure, but the prospect of intra-communal friction has long smoldered, always ready to leap into flames. In 1996, the Buddhist majority called on the Christians to behave in new ways, and the church responded in a peaceable manner quite out of keeping with the historical experience of the village. By 2001, that and subsequent peacemaking acts by both sides have substantially reduced tensions within the village; the seeds of greater trust seem to be quietly sprouting.

The members of the Suwanguangrit Church, Ban Dok Daeng, in sum, are practicing Thai theology, a theology that we have styled here as being "communal". That theology is church based, necessarily in dialogue with popular, village Buddhism, and sensitive to the authoritative opinions of its theologically trained leaders. It is biblical. It takes a more traditionally southeast Asian attitude towards theologically defined religious boundaries. It shares important traits with the professional, seminary-based Asian theology that has emerged over the last three decades. Ban Dok Daeng Christian theology, however, expresses itself through a different medium than the professional theologians. The professionals generally write their theologies down on paper and share them in conferences and seminars. The members of the Suwanguangrit Church dance their theologies in their community's streets and alleys, the church compound, and the temple grounds.

## Conclusion

Not long ago, as I sat working on this paper at home, I heard the sound of the drums, the gongs, and the ululation of yet another festive procession wending through the quiet alleyways of Ban Dok Daeng. A young man, on his way to becoming a novice at the temple, was being processed through the village by his dancing relatives, friends, and neighbors. Before 1996, the Christians of Ban Dok Daeng never danced through the streets of our community. To be sure, some individual Christians attached themselves to Buddhist processions, but only as individuals and not as Christians. Christians had no drums, no gongs. In late 2000 and the early months of 2001, in contrast, they had become dancers, dancing and processing in the presence of their neighbors and with their neighbors. They had forged a more peaceful relationship with those neighbors in a theological process strikingly similar to what Koyama terms "neighborology," which may be defined as responding in a Christ like manner to the needs and questions of one's neighbor.<sup>10</sup> Koyama and the members of the Suwanguangrit Church both make it clear that in a northern Thai context, theology *is* neighborology.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kosuke Koyama, *Water buffalo Theology: A Thailand Theological Notebook* (Singapore: n.p., 1970), 78. Goosen points to the potential contribution northern Thai theologies might make to international theological thought by citing *Water buffalo Theology* as outstanding example of the possibilities involved in "doing theology" contextually. Gideon Goosen, *Australian Theologies: Themes and methodologies into the third millennium* (Strathfield, New South Wales: St. Pauls, 2000), 24

<sup>2</sup> See Prasit Pongudom, *pdkao maeduem prawatisatchumchon doi saket* [Ancestors: History of the Doi Saket Christian Community] (Chiang Mai: Office of History, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See Prasit Pongudom, "'tianphansa' lae 'phapasamakki' kap khrischaksuwanguangrit," ("Tianphansa' and 'Phapasamakki' with the Suwanguangrit Church") *khaokhrischak* (Church News) 69, 606 (December 2000), 45.

<sup>4</sup> See Herbert R. Swanson, "This Heathen People: The Cognitive Sources of American Missionary Westernizing Activities in Northern Siam, 1867-1889," (M.A. thesis, University of Maryland, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> See Tongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geobody of a Nation* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm

Books, 1994), esp. 20ff.

<sup>6</sup> Song, Choan Seng. "Christian Theology—An Asian Way." in Association for Theological Education in South East Asia, *ATESEA Occasional Papers: No. 10, Doing Theology with God's Purpose in Asia*, ed. Yeow ChooLak (Singapore: ATESEA, 1990), 27.

<sup>7</sup> See *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Neighbor."

<sup>8</sup> Aloysius Piers, "Two Encounters in My Theological Journey," in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 143.

<sup>9</sup> Levi V. Oracion, "Asian Theology in the Nineties: A Discussion Paper," *CTC Bulletin* 9, 2 & 3 (May-December 1990): 5.

<sup>10</sup> Koyama, *Water buffalo Theology*, 8488.