

#4 – Truly Christian, Truly Thai

From time to time, I have asked seminary students in classrooms or participants in church seminars to describe a church that is both "truly Christian and truly Thai." So far, there has been no one with a clear answer. This past March, however, the members of the Suwanduangrit Church, Ban Dok Daeng, participated in a Christian "bone gathering ceremony" that embodied in ritual & worship an image of the church that is truly (northern) Thai and truly Christian.

The little cemetery where we bury our dead at Ban Dok Daeng has recently run out of room for more burials, and the church has been forced to begin to cremate its deceased members. The church leadership has had to work out thus a Christian approach to cremation, and the results so far have not been particularly satisfying. It is somehow awkward to have to stand away from the casket & not have a hole to stand around. Unlooked for, however, is the importance of the final "act" of a northern Thai cremation, the bone gathering (or collecting) ceremony that usually takes place two days after the cremation. At that time, relatives and friends return to the cemetery to reclaim the charred remnants of bones. I have not participated in such a ceremony for a Buddhist cremation and am not sure of all that goes on, but the ritual one of our elders at Ban Dok Daeng has devised is partly based on how our neighbors go about the process.

Briefly, our Christian bone gathering ceremony is divided into three parts. First, the relatives and friends use large bamboo "tweezers" to comb the ashes for bones, which are placed on a tray. Once the bones are collected, they are washed. Second, all participants in turn, beginning with the clergyman, place the bones one piece at a time in an earthen pot. Each person raises their hands in an attitude of respect (wai) both before and after they have put bones in the pot and then sprinkles scented water (nam som broi) on the bones. During this part of the ceremony, there is small talk and even joking going on in the background; this is not a distraction nor does it detract from the proceedings but seems almost to symbolize a sense of acceptance of the death of the person and integrating that acceptance into daily life. When everyone has put bones into the pot, the mouth of the pot is then covered with a white cloth and tied shut with thick white twine. Third, the participants then carry the pot to a freshly prepared grave, which has a cement cross above it that is the same size as all the other crosses in the cemetery. The hole, obviously, is very small. There, we engage in a Christian committal service. The pot is respectfully placed in the grave, the clergyman reads Scripture and prays, and then each participant in turn takes a small bag of dirt wrapped in mulberry paper, bends down, raises her or his hands in respect, drops the bag in the hole, and sprinkles more scented water on the mouth of the pot. A benediction is given and the process is complete. The whole ritual, from beginning to end, has a definite air of informality about it. It is done in the late afternoon so that people who work in the city can get back to take part. Some people wear black, others do not. The event also has a feeling of intimacy about it, involving just family and neighbors-roughly 30 some people both times we have done it at Ban Dok Daeng.

The first and second elements of this ceremony are unlike anything one normally encounters in northern Thai Christian funeral practices and, evidently, are very similar to the process used by our Buddhist neighbors. The third "movement" in the ceremony is distinctively Christian and recalls the way we bury caskets, but with important differences. Where caskets suspended above graves are difficult to approach in an attitude of personal respect, the tiny grave for the pot and the smaller number of people involved allows each person an opportunity to approach the remains of the deceased in an intimate attitude of respect. The whole committal ritual, that is, is clearly northern Thai in some of its elements and entirely northern Thai in the manner in which the remains are given the deference the living person once received. The lack of formality is in keeping with a northern Thai approach to such ritual. Yet, it recalls Christian images (dust to dust, ashes to ashes) and practices the northern Thai church inherited from the West so that the total ceremony is different from that of other northern Thais. The ceremony, that is, retains a Christian focus while reclaiming for the church a northern Thai sense of ritual and ceremony.

This form of committal service is more humane and pastoral than the somewhat cold, formal, and distant manner in which we usually lower caskets into holes. There is no trooping and tromping of the masses. The ceremony involves just those who were closest to the deceased. It is deeply respectful yet informal, a combination that allows those involved to take final leave while further integrating the fact of death into the reality of ongoing life. I must confess that I first greeted the prospect of combing through ashes for bones as being somewhat grizzly, but in actual practice, it is not at all. It is, perhaps, the most important part of the whole process. In a typical Western burial scenario, we last see the deceased as a body not unlike the body of the living person. The fact of death is further glossed over by the rich trappings of funeral home, lavish coffin, and the fine dress of the deceased. When you stoop over a large pile of ashes and search the pile for bones ("there's a piece there." "no, no, that's just ash." "see, here's a piece of her jaw.") the fact of death is real. A final leave-taking has to be made.

Over the last five years, the Suwandangrit Church has been making a conscious effort to repair its relations with its neighbors, to live with them peacefully, lovingly, and without animosity or judgment. We have been criticized by some other Christians for "being soft on Buddhism" and warned by a few that we are in peril of losing our faith. In fact, our little church has reaped unlooked for blessings instead of danger. The elder who devised our Christian committal ceremony repeatedly consulted our Buddhist neighbors (in itself an exercise in peace-making), who also sat with us during the actual ceremony and at various points told us how they do things. Yet, what he finally came up with is by no stretch of the imagination Buddhist, whatever the similarity in form at some points. No chanting. No monks. The bone gathering ceremony as practiced by the Suwandangrit Church, rather, blends certain Buddhist forms, northern Thai attitudes, and a Western Christian heritage into something that approaches being truly Christian and truly Thai.