

Animism, Syncretism, and Christianity in Thailand

Introduction

With the publication of *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Philip Jenkins gave notice to the church in Europe and North America that they were no longer the majority voice in world Christianity.¹ Missiologist Timothy Tennent has noted that “for the first time since the Reformation, the majority of Christians (approximately 67 percent) are now located outside the Western world.”² The face of global Christianity is changing. But in what ways is it changing? In *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, Philip Jenkins has chronicled the vast differences that exist between Christians in the Northern Hemisphere (i.e. the West) and the Global South.

Southern churches tend to take a more literal approach to the Bible and “are quite at home with Biblical notions of the supernatural, with ideas like dreams and prophecy.”³ Those same themes, however, are received with great scorn and criticism in mainline churches in the North and the Western media.⁴ Jenkins suggests that a major reason for this difference is the animistic background of Christians in the global South. In Africa, “the physical object of the Bible itself becomes a locus of spiritual power, which in some circumstances can become superstitious or

¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 8.

³ Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), ix.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

near-magical.”⁵ “In traditional Korean thought, people attributed much evil to *han* spirits, the angry and bitter ghosts of those who had died unjustly” and this type of animistic belief “has a direct bearing on the Asian Christian's religious experiences and our interpretation of them.”⁶ Therefore, in assessing the nature of Christianity in the global south, it must be remembered that Christianity is a relatively recent phenomenon in these areas.⁷

To gain a better understanding of the forces at work in shaping Christianity in the global South, the following study will look at the nature of animism and syncretism in general, and then focus in upon Christianity in Thailand as a case study of the effect of animism upon Christian belief and practice in the global South.⁸ We will then look at examples of efforts being made by both missionaries and Thai Christians to move beyond syncretism. Our study will conclude with some recommendations for further work. The situation in Thailand is not unique and readers familiar with other animistic cultures in Asia and Africa will likely find the present study to be largely relevant for their contexts as well.

Syncretism

What is syncretism? Missiologist Charles Kraft of Fuller Theological Seminary has summarized it as “the mixing of Christian assumptions with those world view assumptions that

⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁸ Our study will focus exclusively on Thai Christians and Thai churches in Thailand, in contrast to those outside of Thailand. An examination of additional cultural and religious influences upon expatriate Thai Christians in other countries lies beyond the scope of the present study.

are incompatible with Christianity so that the result is not biblical Christianity.”⁹ Wheaton College sociologist Edwin Zehner adds that it has traditionally included “unacceptable mixing or borrowing of non-Christian elements into Christianity.”¹⁰

More difficult than defining syncretism is identifying it. In the early days of Christian mission in Thailand, the discontinuity between Christianity and Buddhism was so stressed that even neutral items like traditional Thai musical instruments were forbidden to converts. It was feared that their previous association with Buddhist religious rituals would produce syncretism.¹¹ In his Ph.D dissertation on “String Tying Rituals as Christian Communication in Northeast Thailand”, Paul De Neui cites the testimony of a Thai Christian who was excommunicated from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) church denomination in Thailand for going to a movie theater to watch *Ben Hur*.

The CMA said that all cultural forms were wrong. They did not divide between what was cultural and what was religious. They strongly felt as a theological position that such [former] practices were sinning against God.¹²

While certain practices are sometimes incorrectly labeled as syncretism, there are many times when practices that should be labeled as syncretism are not. In “Culture, Worldview, and

⁹ Charles Kraft, “Worldview, Culture, and Contextualization.” In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader, 3rd ed.*, edited by Ralph D. Winter, 384-391. (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library Pub, 1999), 390.

¹⁰ Edwin Zehner, “Orthodox Hybridities: Anti-Syncretism and Localization in the Evangelical Christianity of Thailand.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 585-617. SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost: <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.biola.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=18311599&site=ehost-live> (accessed April 25, 2011), 591.

¹¹ Erik Cohen “Christianization and Indigenization: Contrasting Processes of Religious Adaptation in Thailand.” In *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity*, edited by Steve Kaplan, 38. New York: NYU Press, 1995.

¹² *Ibid.*, 98.

Contextualization”, Charles Kraft identifies two ways in which syncretism develops such that it goes largely undetected.

One is by importing foreign expressions of the faith and allowing the receiving people to attach their own worldview assumptions to these practices with little or no guidance from the missionaries... The other way to syncretism is to so dominate a receiving people's practice of Christianity that both the surface-level practices and the deep-level assumptions are imported. The result is a totally foreign, unadapted kind of Christianity that requires people to worship and practice their faith according to foreign patterns and to develop a special set of worldview assumptions for church situations that are largely ignored in the rest of their lives.”¹³

In efforts to combat syncretism and promote Biblical Christianity, contemporary mission practitioners have sought to move away from the direct importation of foreign forms and towards local contextualized expressions of the Christian faith.

Contextualization

Whereas syncretism may be seen as inappropriate mixing of Christian and non-Christian belief and practice, contextualization represents appropriate adoption of indigenous forms and practices. Kraft defines contextualization as the “process by means of which the church becomes "inculturated" in the life of a people.”¹⁴ In the New Testament, we see contextualization modeled by the apostles as they use (and transform) indigenous Greek words and concepts to communicate “such topics as God, church, sin, conversion, repentance, initiation, "word" (logos) and most other areas of Christian life and practice.”¹⁵ However, the appropriation of local forms always runs the risk of syncretism and it is not always clear whether a particular practice is contextualization or syncretism.

¹³ Kraft, “Worldview, Culture, and Contextualization”, 390.

¹⁴ Ibid., 389.

¹⁵ Ibid., 389.

In the traditional Thai celebration of “Loy Krathong”, people construct small boats out of banana leaves and other readily available materials and float them down local waterways in order to ask forgiveness of the spirit of the water for polluting the water during the past year. While many missionaries and Thai Christians view participation in this ceremony as unbiblical compromise, others view it as merely a cultural celebration where one is free to attach whatever meaning one likes to the making and floating of such boats.¹⁶

Whether a certain practice represents good contextualization or inappropriate syncretism also depends upon one’s theological convictions and experience. In *Spiritual Power and Missions*, a 1995 monograph published by the Evangelical Missiological Society, Robert Priest, Thomas Campbell, and Bradford Mullen debate with Charles Kraft over the legitimacy of breaking curses, binding territorial demons, and other activities related to spiritual warfare.¹⁷ Priest and associates assert that “many missionaries and missiologists unwittingly have internalized and are propagating animistic and magical notions of spirit power which are at odds with biblical teaching.”¹⁸ Kraft counters that Priest and associates are “enlightenment rationalists” who fail to understand the believer’s authority in Christ “to convey his power” in spiritual warfare against the demonic.¹⁹

¹⁶ Cohen “Christianization and Indigenization”, 41. For a Thai Christian perspective on why one should not participate in Loy Krathong, see Seht Jansong, *ประเพณีไทยกับความเชื่อคริสเตียน* [Thai Customs and Christian Beliefs.] (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan (OMF Publishers Thailand), 2008), 48.

¹⁷ Edward Rommen, ed., *Spiritual Power and Missions: Raising the Issues* (Evangelical Missiological Society Series) (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1995).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88, 95, 107.

Contextualization is easier said than done and a deep understanding of both the Scriptures and the local context is necessary in order to do it right. In the following section we will look at animism in the Thai context as a means to recognizing syncretism, and working towards contextualization.

Animism

Following E.B Tylor (1871), respected missiologist Alan Tippett defines animism as "the deep-lying doctrine of spiritual beings, which embodies the very essence of spiritualistic as opposed to Materialistic philosophy."²⁰ In its particular local expressions, animism formulates "concrete beliefs in such notions as the soul(s), the future state, controlling deities and subordinate spirits, especially when these beliefs result in 'some kind of active worship.'"²¹ In his classic work, *Inside Thai Society: Religion, Everyday Life, Change*, Niels Mulder explains the steps by which an animist performs a transaction with a given spirit.

In order to invoke the benevolent attention of *saksit* forces, the worshipper must initiate the transaction by paying respect and making a small offering. The supplicant then offers his terms of contract: if the concerned entity will fulfill his wishes, he will return and offer a feast, a pig's head, flowers, or perhaps even a theatrical performance... The ritual of the invocation is always the same: one first pays respect and makes a small offering of burning incense in order to attract attention, then one states one's wish and makes a vow, and finally, after being granted one's wishes, redeems the vow. According to Phraya Anuman Rajadon, 'If a *thewada* does not want to give what has been asked for, but the ceremonial way in which it has been supplicated was correct, then it must without reservation fulfil that wish.' The contract between a supplicant and a protective spirit or *thewada*, or any other thing classified as *singsaksit*, is largely mechanical, for a specific purpose, and of relatively short duration. The *saksit* forces respond to

²⁰ Alan R. Tippett, "The Evangelization of Animists." In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 3rd ed., edited by Ralph D. Winter, 623-31. (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library Pub, 1999), 623-4.

²¹ Ibid., 623-4.

presentation, such as right ceremony, proper words, appropriate movements and formulae, and people generally know how to perform their side of the contract.”²²

The essence of animism is the using of religious rituals and ceremonies to manipulate the spirit world into doing what the animist wants it to do, whether that be warding off evil or giving blessing. Animism does not require internal or ethical change.²³ Animism at its core is pragmatic and utilitarian. It is transactional, not relational. Animism is by far the oldest and most established influence in the spiritual lives of Thai people, predating not only Christianity but Buddhism as well. With this in mind, we now turn our attention to Buddhism and Christianity in Thailand and the influence that animism has upon them.

Buddhism and Syncretism in Thailand

Buddhism is the dominant religion in Thailand, claiming the allegiance of 94.6% of a total population of sixty-six million people.²⁴ Thailand enjoys freedom of religion yet Buddhism has a privileged position and is closely tied to national identity. Ideas of karma and merit are heavily influential in the belief and practice of Thai Buddhists.²⁵ The majority of Thai practice a popular form of Buddhism which represents a mixture of pure Buddhism and local animistic

²² Niels Mulder, *Inside Thai Society: Religion, Everyday Life, Change* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2001), 27-28. The transliterated Thai terms in the excerpt from Mulder translate as follows: *saksit* (sacred), *thewada* (angel, spirit), *singsaksit* (sacred object).

²³ Cf. Taylor’s comments under the heading “God is “a-moral” power” in Steve Taylor, “Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians.” *EMQ* 37, no. 1 (January 2001): 72-81. <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-123/395> (accessed April 25, 2011).

²⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, *Thailand - CIA - The World Factbook*, ISSN 1553-8133. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html> (accessed May 2, 2011).

²⁵ Hughes, 28-30.

beliefs in spirits, omens, relics, sacred objects, fortune telling, astrology, and sorcery.²⁶ Although Buddhist doctrine formally denies the existence of spirits and deities, such beliefs remain prevalent. In Central Thailand, a Buddhist monk explained to researcher Stephen Piker that the knowledge and power that he gained by being part of the monastic order “rendered him immune to victimization by predatory ghosts.” Yet, his fear of ghosts made him extremely hesitant to leave the temple premises after dark.²⁷ In a publication of the National Culture Institute in Bangkok, Thai scholar P.A. Rajahon has explained the development of syncretism in his country:

Animism, with ancestor worship, is the primitive belief of the Thai . . . and this formed the first layer of the Thai religion. Later on came Buddhism and the Thai adopted it as their national religion . . . Whatever cults and beliefs are adopted by the Thai, they are readily modified to suit their temperance and surroundings. When they adopted Buddhism, they greatly modified their basic belief of animism into the field of Buddhism.²⁸

The inconsistencies between pure Buddhism and local animistic beliefs are largely unrecognized by most Thai Buddhists.²⁹ However, some Buddhists “denounce syncretism as a distortion of their own particular religious truth.”³⁰

²⁶ Cohen, 32.

²⁷ Steven Piker, "Problem of consistency in Thai religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 11, no. 3 (1972): 211-229. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost: <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.biola.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000734471&site=ehost-live> (accessed April 26, 2011), 1.

²⁸ P. A. Rajahon, Thai Culture Series No. 1 (Bangkok: Natural Culture Institute, 1956), 8. Quoted in Charles Corwin, “Why Syncretism Won’t Work.” *EMQ* (October 1967). <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-158/784> (accessed April 27, 2011).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁰ De Neui, 150.

Christianity in Thailand

Compared to Buddhism, Christianity in Thailand is a drop in the ocean. The evangelical Protestant population of Thailand stands at 0.54% and the figure for all Christians is 0.7%.³¹ The major Christian groups recognized by the Thai government are the Catholic Church, the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), the Thailand Baptist Convention, the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT), and the Seventh Day Adventists. In recent years, Pentecostalism has had a growing presence within Thai Protestantism and exerts an influence well beyond churches that would identify themselves as Pentecostal. Despite recent growth, Christianity is still perceived as a foreign religion by the majority of Thais and there are many areas of the nation which still do not have a single church.³² The Thai church has traditionally been very strong on evangelism yet some Thai Christian leaders are becoming increasingly concerned with the lack of mature disciples among Thai Christians.³³ The presence of animistic ways of thinking among Christians is an important contributing factor to the discipleship problem, as can be seen in the following examples.

³¹ Dwight Martin, *Status of the Protestant Church in Thailand - 2009*. (Chiang Mai: THAI Christian Resource Center, 2010). <http://www.thaicrc.com/gsdll/collect/MIS/index/assoc/D7570.dir/7570.ppt> (Accessed May, 3, 2011); Central Intelligence Agency, *Thailand - CIA - The World Factbook*, ISSN 1553-8133. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html> (accessed May 2, 2011).

³² Alex G. Smith, *Siamese Gold: The Church in Thailand 1816-1982* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan (OMF Publishers), 1982); Cohen, 34-36; Zehner, 594-5.

³³ Daniel D. Kim, "An Urgent Plea Concerning Undisciplined People Groups: A Thai Perspective." *EMQ* 47, no. 1 (January 2011): 70-75. <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-314/2499> (accessed May 3, 2011).

Syncretism: God Can Be Manipulated

It is not uncommon for Thai Christians to relate to God in ways similar to how Thai Buddhists relate to other spiritual powers.³⁴ In other words, it is thought that there is a direct correspondence between their degree of faithfulness to God and the amount of blessings received. Although “ideas of *karma* and merit are generally regarded by Thai Christians as distinctively Buddhist ideas”, Philip Hughes found that when Thai Buddhist and Thai Christian students were surveyed, “eighty-one percent of the Christian students affirmed that they thought merit-making was important.”³⁵ This merit-making among Christians was not conceived of as religious acts but as doing good deeds according to the will of God. Out of thirty six sermons by northern Thai Christians recorded by Hughes, ninety-three percent spoke about doing God’s will. Hughes noted that following God’s will was a major motif in Thai sermons and that “congregations are reminded that they will reap the consequent blessings.”³⁶ This emphasis upon doing God’s will to receive desired benefits bears great resemblance to both the Buddhist doctrine of karma, and to animistic notions of spirits giving the requested blessings in response to proper behavior.

When particular blessings are not forthcoming, it is not uncommon for Thai Christians, especially new ones, to leave the church. Even though it is formally acknowledged that God is Lord and can not be manipulated, some Thai Christians struggle with the temptation to seek

³⁴ Philip Hughes, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand." *Journal of the Siam Society* 73 (January - July 1985), 30, 41; Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians." <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-123/395>.

³⁵ Hughes, 29.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

desired blessings from other powers who can be manipulated.³⁷ In animistic belief, there is “little commitment to benefactors” and worshippers have no qualm about seeking a new spiritual benefactor when the current one does not perform as hoped for. In a series of lectures on Buddhism and Christianity, Thai pastor Wan Petchsongkram cites the animistic expectations of many new Christians as the cause of their subsequent abandonment of the faith.

Out of all the people who become Christians in one year, about eighty percent of those disappear... We need to understand why this is so. I feel like this is a real problem for Christians in Thailand. When Thai people become Christians, they do so with certain reasons and because of certain factors and they remain Christians because of those reasons and factors so long as those reasons and factors still apply. But when those reasons are no longer there, they stop being Christians. Because of this, when they are still Christians and we know they are Christians because these reasons are still in effect, you should jump on the opportunity to teach them, no holds barred. If you don't hurry up and teach them while these other reasons are still in play, then when those reasons are gone, they will stop being Christians.”³⁸

While Petchsongkram does not fault new Christians for their animistic expectations of God when they prayed to receive Christ, he insists that we must acknowledge the problem as a first step to solving it.

A significant component of animistic manipulation of spirits is correct form and presentation. The belief that certain forms obligate spiritual powers to deliver certain blessings sometimes carries over into Christian belief and practice. In a conversation with the author, a founding member and leader of a large church in Bangkok described “The Salvation Room” at his church. During the Sunday worship service, visitors are encouraged to come to a special room on the side of the sanctuary and over the course of a few weeks, church members explain the Gospel to them and urge them to say the sinner’s prayer. Queried as to the effectiveness of

³⁷ Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians." <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-123/395>.

³⁸ Wan Petchsongkram. *Lectures on Buddhism* (Lopburi, Thailand: Lopburi Learning Centre, 2009).

this method, he claimed that everyone who prayed the sinner's prayer eventually became a Christian. "We know" he explained, "that not everyone who prays is converted yet, but if we can get them to say the prayer, then that is the foot in the door... Saying the sinner's prayer is what breaks Satan's power and guarantees that they will eventually be saved." In his mind, the power of the sinner's prayer lay in the actual saying of the words, apparently based on the assumption that the saying of this prayer obligated God to save the person. Although the view of this church leader may not be common in its particulars, it is very common to find Thai Christians who are convinced that the act of saying the sinner's prayer is what makes one into a Christian. Whether this belief is primarily influenced by their animistic background or by missionary precedent, it is difficult to determine.

The belief that God can be manipulated is further evidenced in the idea that God can be repaid.³⁹ Hughes notes that on weddings and birthdays, Thai Christians bring special offerings to the church. "For some of them, this is a similar act to merit making."⁴⁰ The author has on several occasions observed Thai Christians who have been long absent from church arrive with a special contribution for the weekly fellowship meal after the worship service. During the testimony time, which is a regular part of many Thai church services, the person tells the congregation about a particular problem that they had and how God fixed it. It would seem that the worshipper's unexpected return to church, coupled with testimony and food offering, form a type of repayment to God for benefits rendered. Among Thai Buddhists, it is not uncommon for people to bring a thank offering to a particular shrine to repay the spirit believed to have given

³⁹ Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians." <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-123/395>.

⁴⁰ Hughes, 31.

the blessing. Regular worship of said spirit is neither expected nor required. However, a failure to bring appropriate compensation to the spirit might invoke its displeasure.

Syncretism: God as a Source of Power

The spirits of animism are seen as powers that can be induced to give blessing or prevent calamity, and God is often seen as one power among many. The demonstration of God's power in meeting a personal need is a significant factor in the conversion of many Thai Christians. Taylor asserts that the "process leading many Thais to a belief in God is basically the same process that leads other Thais to a belief in other spiritual beings. The point of seeing or experiencing the power is the "conversion" point or the time at which they become "convinced."⁴¹ In his research on conversion growth in Thai Protestant churches, Marten Visser found that "miracles were the most important experience for 21% of all people who became Christians."⁴²

The desire to experience power among both Thai Buddhists and Thai Christians may account, at least in part, for the rapid growth of Pentecostal churches in Thailand. Pentecostal and charismatic churches are often characterized by an emphasis on miracles, healing, and the promise of supernatural power. Both Hughes and Taylor make note of the large crowds pulled in

⁴¹ Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians." <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-123/395>.

⁴² Marten Visser, *Conversion growth of Protestant churches in Thailand* (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2008), 137. No significant difference, however, was found between charismatic and non-charismatic churches in the percentage of people who reported that a miracle was the most important factor in convincing them to become a Christian.

by Thai Christian meetings advertising, respectively, “Miracles, Miracles” and “Power.”⁴³ Because of the great interest among Thai people in obtaining power for living, “[m]issionaries and Thai evangelists have often presented God as a greater power than the local spirits. They invite listeners to believe in God and experience his healing power. Explaining the cross becomes a secondary consideration.”⁴⁴

This downplaying of the work of Christ at the cross as the primary attraction of Christianity is reflected in a survey conducted by Hughes among missionaries and Thai Christians. While most missionaries rated ‘forgiveness of sins’ as the major reason for the importance of religion, Thai Christians rated it as seventh in importance out of a possible ten options.⁴⁵ Power, not the atonement, is at the heart of the Gospel for many Thai Christians. Hughes has noted that “a belief in the power of God, a power similar in kind, but greater in extent and beneficence, than that of spirits, or magical techniques or objects, continues to be a major theme in Thai Christian soteriology.” According to Cohen, this perception of Christianity primarily in terms of power “turns it into magic, more powerful than that of local magicians, but of the same character.”⁴⁶

Many more examples of syncretism in Christianity in Thailand could be given, but the above accounts should provide sufficient illustration for the purposes of this study. For those

⁴³ Hughes, 32; Taylor, <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-123/395>.

⁴⁴ Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians." <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-123/395>.

⁴⁵ Hughes, 34.

⁴⁶ Cohen, 48.

who want to become better acquainted with specific manifestations of syncretism in Thailand, the author highly recommends the research done by Philip Hughes and Steven Taylor, both of which may be found in the list of works cited at the end of this study.

Contributing Factors to Syncretism

Since it may be fairly assumed that neither Thai Christians nor foreign missionaries intentionally promote syncretism, we need to ask how it arises. There are several factors involved, none of which work in isolation. We will examine them briefly before looking at some of the work being done by missionaries and Thai Christians to counter syncretism in Thailand.

Lack of Encounter. In some cases, new believers do not make a clean break with the past through secretly keeping amulets or not making a profession of faith through baptism. Making a public break can be psychologically helpful in confirming their allegiance to Christ.⁴⁷

Wrong Motivation for becoming Christians. Some people come into the church seeking power or money but this is not recognized by church leaders.⁴⁸ Sometimes these unbiblical motives go unrecognized because they are well hidden. Other times missionaries or local Christians make the mistake of taking professions of faith at face value due to faulty

⁴⁷ Tippett, 626. The necessity of such a break with the past is rejected by advocates of Insider Movements. It is claimed that one can follow Jesus while remaining in one's socioreligious context and thus avoid unnecessary alienation from family and community. Thus, one could speak of "Buddhist followers of Jesus" who never identify as "Christian" Cf. Rebecca Lewis, "Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 24.2 (2007): 75. Also, Taweeporn Sarun, "Syncretism" *Mission Frontiers* (May-June 2011): 5. <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/syncretism> (accessed May 3, 2011).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 627.

theology (as in the case of those who assume that sinner's prayer is evidence of true faith), or due to an over-eagerness for new converts.

A Problem of Meaning. It is often assumed that because one uses certain words, a particular meaning is being conveyed. Contextualization of the Gospel consists in the creation of new concepts in the minds of listeners, not in discovering particular words that will convey all of the meaning that is intended by the speaker. When Thai Christians or missionaries use words like "sin", "heaven", or "God", Thai Buddhist listeners do not automatically understand the Christian concepts behind those words. Rather they fill those words with the meaning that they normally have in the Buddhist cultural context from which they were originally borrowed.

Cultural Void. When local Christians are required to practice their faith with foreign cultural forms, forbidden local cultural forms often do not disappear but go underground. When adoption of local cultural forms can not be openly discussed, syncretism can result.⁴⁹ The rejection of Thai cultural forms en masse is not currently an issue in Christianity in Thailand although the residual effects of this mindset in early stages of mission work is still felt.

The Excluded Middle. Previous generations of missionaries discounted local beliefs in demons and the occult as mere superstition, thus failing to address the local need to deal with these forces.⁵⁰ Without a Christian alternative to solutions traditionally provided by a trip to the

⁴⁹ Tippett, 630-1.

⁵⁰ Hughes, 38; Jenkins, 103; Smith 277.

spirit medium or local shrine, Christian believers are liable to resort to animistic solutions to both real and perceived curses, witchcraft, demonic oppression.

Unbiblical Theology. When missionaries themselves introduce theology that is unbiblical, syncretism can unintentionally result. The altar call and sinner's prayer often lead to a belief in decisional regeneration, the assumption that an external act is necessarily effective in causing an internal change. This trust in the efficacy of a certain form is very similar to the animistic belief in the efficacy of right ceremony in obtaining desired blessings from spirits. Thus, the words and act of the sinner's prayer can take on a magical quality, producing both nominalism and syncretism.

Moving Beyond Syncretism to Contextualized Biblical Christianity

Sometimes syncretism is nothing to be overly concerned about because it is transitional in nature.⁵¹ However, some syncretism is permanent and is not corrected over time.⁵² Both missionaries and Thai Christians have expressed their concern about this.⁵³ Various solutions have been suggested. Many believe that better contextualization using Thai cultural forms may help reduce syncretism. Paul De Neui has suggested adapting a Northeastern Thailand string-

⁵¹ Zehner, 590.

⁵² Hughes, 41; Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians." <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-123/395>.

⁵³ Smith, 277; Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians." <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-123/395>.

tying ritual for use in Christian churches.⁵⁴ Steve Taylor and Larry Dinkins have recommended the development of an indigenous Thai creed.⁵⁵

In addition to missionaries, an increasing number of Thai Christian leaders are seeking to address the problems of contextualization and communication for a more Biblical Thai Christianity. Pastor Wan Petchsongkram has advocated for missionaries and Thai Christians to gain a greater understanding of Thai Buddhism in order to root out the old beliefs in new Christians instead of merely adding Christianity on top of existing Buddhist beliefs.⁵⁶ Nanthachai and Ubolwan Mejudhon of Muang Thai Church in Bangkok have suggested meekness as an indigenous Thai approach to Gospel communication.⁵⁷ Based on his research on Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Thailand, Bantoon Boon-Itt of Suepsamphantawong Church in Bangkok is urging Thai churches to re-evaluate whether the words they use are meaningfully communicating to Gospel to Thai Buddhists.⁵⁸ Bangkok Bible Seminary professor Natee Tanchanpongs is developing ways to work towards a more contextualized theology for the Thai church.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Paul Henry De Neui, "String Tying Rituals as Christian Communication in Northeast Thailand" (D.Phil. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2005).

⁵⁵ Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians." <http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/issue-123/395>; Larry Dinkins, "Towards Contextualized Creeds: A Perspective from Buddhist Thailand." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 27:1 (Spring 2010): 5-9.

⁵⁶ Wan Petchsongkram. *Lectures on Buddhism* (Lopburi, Thailand: Lopburi Learning Centre, 2009).

⁵⁷ Nanthachai Mejudhon, "Meekness : a new approach to Christian witness to the Thai people" (D.Miss. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 1997); Ubolwan Mejudhon, "The way of meekness : being Christian and Thai in the Thai way" (D.Miss. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 1997).

⁵⁸ Bantoon Boon-Itt, "A study of the dialogue between Christianity and Theravada Buddhism in Thailand" (D.Phil. diss., The Open University, 2007).

⁵⁹ Natee Tanchanpongs, "Discourse toward scripture : a methodological proposal for evangelical contextual theology" (Ph.D diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2007).

Further Work Needed

The causes of syncretism do not arise from any one source, foreign or local, and the solutions to syncretism will not come from any one source either. In order to correctly identify and reduce syncretism in Christianity in Thailand, a collaborative effort will be needed. The primary and long-term work of faithful contextualization of the Gospel and the discipling of Thai Christians is in the hands of the Thai themselves. However, cooperation between missionaries and Thai Christians will serve to catalyze this process. Although limited in language ability and cultural knowledge when compared to their Thai colleagues, missionaries bring to the table the helpful perspective of an outsider. They ask questions that would not naturally occur to the Thai, and they can bring insight into Thai culture that is difficult to see from the inside. However, Thai Christians have an insider's understanding of their own culture and are therefore the better and more rightful judges of whether a particular expression of the Christian faith is appropriate in the Thai context. Although missionaries may have some good ideas about contextualization, Thai Christians ultimately have greater influence in bringing about change in their own society and must be trusted by missionaries as brothers and sisters in Christ into whose hands God has entrusted the Thai church. With much humility, hard work, and dependance on God, such collaboration between missionaries and Thai Christians can, and must, happen at many levels - as colleagues in the academy, as co-workers in the local church, and as brothers and sisters coming together in fellowship and prayer. The problems are widespread and the solutions will arise from many places as Thai Christians and missionaries labor together in unity as partners in the Gospel ministry.

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