

Resources

Orphaned World, Absent God Notes for Karen Theologies in Northern Thailand

by Herbert Swanson*

In March-April, 1999, the Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) in conjunction with the Musikee Larger Parish of the CCT's 19th District conducted a seven-week research project on the construction of Karen theologies. The project was funded by the Baptist Union of Sweden (BUS), the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA), with supporting assistance from the CCT. Participating in the project were six Karen theological students as well as three members of the office of History staff including a Karen field researcher. The project was located in the village of Ban Nong Ched Nuey, Chiang Mai Province, a community some 4-6 hour's drive from the city of Chiang Mai.

In this article I'd like to share the results of the theological reflection carried on through the Musikee project. It's not intended to be a report on the project but, rather, a guide to potential issues and directions for future Karen theologies in northern Thailand.

Background

The Karen are the largest of Thailand's hill tribal groups and have lived in northern and western Thailand for many centuries.¹ Most of the Karen in northern Thailand, however, are descended from Burmese immigrants, and until recent years there was a great deal of coming and going between the Karen in northern Thailand and the much larger Karen populace in Burma. The first Karen churches in northern Thailand were founded in 1881 in what is now Lamphang Province by Karen Baptist missionaries from Burma.² Karen Christianity in northern Thailand, thus, is nearly as old as northern Thai Chris-

tianity itself, which emerged in meaningful numbers only in the late 1870s.³ In the later 19th century the Karen churches fell on hard times and dwindled in membership. The earlier 20th century, up through the beginning of World War II witnessed modest growth among them, some of that growth coming from the migration of Lamphang Karen Christians further north to Chiang Rai Province. Christianity came to the Musikee region of Chiang Mai Province in the 1930s, primarily through the work of Th'ra (Teacher) Bonney Danpongpee. After World War II, the Karen churches began to grow numerically, and today the CCT has three largely or entirely Karen districts numbering some 18,000 communicant members.⁴

So far as the participants in this theological research project know, there have been no attempts to articulate Karen theologies in northern Thailand.⁵ The Karen church has generally shown antipathy towards traditional Karen religion (moluebala), although many older converts retain some respect for their former beliefs. Karen-language theological education has been limited to the Bible school level, and seminary-trained Karen have received their theological education in Thai seminaries where there is little if any consciousness of the Karen religious environment.

During the seven weeks of the project, the students received two weeks of "basic training" in theological reflection in Asian contexts based on a paper this author prepared for a PTCA Thailand national workshop held in March 1999.⁶ The model for constructing theology that we worked with was based on the idea of bringing Asian (Karen) resources ("Text A") into dialogue with biblical resources ("Text B").⁷ Considerable time was also

*The Reverend Herbert Swanson is the head of the history department of the Church of Christ in Thailand. This article came out of a month-long seminar on Karen theology with Karen students.

devoted to improving the students' reading and writing skills in Karen. The students then spent one week in field research, a week reflecting on what they learned, another week in the field, and then two weeks constructing a general outline for Karen theologies. The project culminated with a one day seminar on Karen theological thought for church leaders conducted entirely by the students themselves.

What follows is a summary description of the general outline for Karen theologies as worked out by the students and project staff. I should emphasize here that I don't speak Karen, and so what appears here has been filtered through Thai into English. It's based, however, on the students' field research, on translations of traditional religious poetry (*ta*) and stories, and on a complex dialogues between the students themselves and with the Karen staff person, conducted largely in Karen, and with the other two staff persons, conducted in Thai. Even when working in Thai, however, all of the participants habitually used Karen for key theological terms.

Literacy: The Jumping Off Point

Theology is an artifact of language. Although this observation seems so obvious as to hardly warrant mention, the Karen situation in northern Thailand forces those who would construct Karen theologies to be painfully conscious of the current state of the Karen language in Thailand. Karen isn't a language used in educational settings. The language of learning among the Karen in Thailand is Thai. Fewer and fewer young people can read or write Karen with even modest facility, and there isn't much motivation for them to learn to do so because the amount of material available in Karen is quite limited. The Karen church, in fact, has been one of the few institutions to promote Karen literacy, but its efforts to do so are fading before the massive onslaught of central Thai. Central Thai is the language that rides the waves of electronic globalization within the bounds of the Thai nation state, and as a result regional dialects and ethnic languages are hard-pressed to maintain their linguist integrity.

It's impossible to see, however, how Karen theologies are going to be constructed apart from the Karen language, written as well as the spoken. Articulate modern theologies house themselves in books and articles, and one of the things the Asian theological movement has striven to do is create an identifiably Asian theological literature. The starting point, thus, for Karen theology is in recovering Karen literacy. Looking into the future, the Karen are going to be able to create a living indigenous theology only to the extent that they're able to preserve and promote Karen literacy in the churches themselves. Future Karen theologians will have to learn to use their native tongue, furthermore, in a new way,

not just as a family, church, and market language but as a tool for theological reflection and analysis. Theologians, furthermore, require readers and auditors. An articulate theology requires an articulate audience, and one of the major tasks facing future Karen theologians is the task of promoting the emergence of just such an audience.

As we look at the following notes for the constructing of Karen theologies, thus, it's important to keep remember that the Karen culture in northern Thailand is a culture under siege. This fact raises hard questions concerning the future and the viability of any Karen theological movement, for one could well argue that it's a waste of time to construct indigenous theologies for a disintegrating culture. On the other hand, the Karen religious universe is a unique one, and Asian Christianity as well as Karen Christians themselves will be the poorer if the Karen churches fail to produce articulate, insightful theologies out of that universe. What follows is a very modest attempt to suggest what Karen theologies might look like when, and if, they are constructed by Karen theologians themselves.

TOWARDS KAREN THEOLOGIES

When the Baptist missionaries first came in contact with the Karen in Burma in the early 19th century, they were immediately fascinated by the parallels between Karen traditional religion and Christianity. The Karen are theists, believing in a Creator God whom they call Yua. The Karen *ta*, or religious poetry, contains a great deal that sounds very much like Christianity, more precisely, like the Old Testament. The rapid growth of Karen Christianity in Burma may in part be accounted for by these similarities and by certain Karen tales that predicted the coming of a "white younger brother" who would bring back to Karen their came to believe that the Karen were actually one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, and many Christians accepted that belief.⁸

The religious and cultural context for Karen theologies, thus, is strikingly different from that of Thai Buddhism. The dialogue between Karen culture and Bible is in some ways much easier to conduct, the two partners being more obviously compatible than is the case with Buddhism. The theologian can bring many biblical passages straight into a Karen religious context with little need for adaptation, and it's quite easy to use the traditional poems, the *ta*, in tandem with biblical passages in preaching. At the same time, however, it soon becomes clear that Karen theism is quite different from Christian theism. Future Karen Christian theologians will find a great number of issues to engage their attention.

Yua, Created Creator God

Traditional Karen *ta* describe the creation of the world

in a number of different ways, but one thing all of the versions agree on is that Yua is a part of the created order of things. Before Yua there existed a fundamental element, variously described as a fine dust, wind, or water, and Yua was himself created from that fundamental element. Yua, in turn, then proceeded to create the rest of the world, some *ta* describing the process of creation as being carried out in partnership with a forest bird and termites. Traditional Karens believe that Yua is eternal and all-powerful, but they still see his power as being within the created order.

The *ta* invariably portray Yua as a loving God who cares for his creation and who is very close to it. The word "yua" itself has a second meaning, namely "to flow." It carries the inherent image of water flowing down through the Karen hills, a potent, meaningful image in the context of a hill culture. It seems likely, then, that future Karen Christian theologies will be essentially incarnational to an even greater extent than those of other Christians because Yua doesn't come to humanity and the world Out of Time and Space. Yua lives, rather, within the created order.¹⁰

Yua, Absent God

In spite of the existence of many *ta* concerning Yua, traditional Karen living in northern Thailand today unanimously insist that they know nothing about him. Their rites and worship are directed, rather, towards secondary sacred agencies that are generally linked to their ancestors, most immediately their deceased parents or grandparents. In this context, it is striking that some *ta* describe Yua as a God who has left the world because he could no longer stand the disorder and discord caused by the forces of evil, variously portrayed as the devil (*mue gaw lee*) or a fierce some giant (*daw saka*). While *mue gaw lee* was originally created by and a companion of Yua, it is supposed in some *ta* to have attempted to seize Yua's power. Before he left the world, however, Yua negotiated with other spiritual agencies to take care of humanity. He is said, in some *ta*, to have first gone to the fierce giant, but the giant demanded a yearly human sacrifice, and Yua rejected that demand out of hand. Then he went to the ancestor "spirits,"¹¹ (*mue ka*) and they demanded only the sacrifice of a chicken and a pig once every three years. Yua agreed to this demand and gave humanity over to the care of the *mue ka*, that is their own ancestors.¹² Traditional Karen religion, thus, is centered on the home and has an elaborately detailed family ritual (*awe kxae*) that involves the sacrifice of chickens and pigs.

The *mue ka* are viewed with mixed feelings by traditional Karen. The *mue ka* look after them, but if a member of the family does something to offend the *mue ka* there can be considerable trouble. The *mue ka* seem to

generally make two demand son the Karen, first that they perform the family rituals properly and, second, that they live moral lives, especially in terms of proper sexual relationships. It should be noted here that each family has its own *mue ka*, which are generally understood to be the deceased parents or grandparents of the family. Traditional Karen can be rather obscure about just who the *mue ka*, but they evidently also don't like to talk about the *mue ka* too openly for fear they will say something that offends them.

Most Christians will find the idea that God has left the world in the hands of other spiritual agencies and gone off to heaven (as some tales claim) more than a little difficult to accept. Yua sounds like a singularly irresponsible God. Within the context of Karen culture, however, Yua's departure from the world is entirely understandable. The Karen themselves have a distinct dislike for open confrontation or for tense inter-personal situations, and one of the primary ways they deal with tense, potentially confrontational situations is by withdrawing from them. In especially tense situations Karen are known to go off to live in distant gardens for months or even years at a time. In not a few cases, the very act of leaving a tense situation forces those causing the tension to change their behavior. Future Karen theologians might well argue that Yua tolerated the situation of tension and turmoil created by the devil (*mue kaw lee*) for as long as possible and then performed the divine equivalent of heading off into the deeper forest after having made provision for the care of humanity. Yua, thus, has left the world in order to create the conditions that will lead to change in to his eventual return.

Although the idea of an absent Yua sounds alien to Christian ears, the Karen religious analysis of the human condition reflects an idea quite similar to the biblical one. In each case God (Yahweh or Yua) is alienated from humanity. Yahweh "dealt" with this alienation by seeking a people who would initiate the process of universal reconciliation between God and humanity. Yahweh, however, is a God of confrontation, a blunt speaking God whose emotions of pleasure or anger are readily, openly expressed. Yua is a gentler God, one who left the world rather than add further fuel to the fires of earthly discord. Yua, however, also desires reconciliation with humanity.

Orphaned Humanity

Karen tales and traditional stories habitually portray the Karen people as an orphan (*pho krae*), albeit a clever orphan who wins through great adversity by wisdom and audacity. It's likely that future Karen Christian theologies are going to interpret the human condition as one o being orphaned, being without Yua. The orphan is left with nothing but half-remembered stories about its long-

lost Parent. The orphan has to fend for itself in a world of many spiritual agencies, some more trustworthy than others, but none of which have the loving, entirely trustworthy characteristics of Yua. The orphan, thus, lives by wits, by carefully staying on the good side of the spiritual forces around it, and by not calling too much attention to itself.

The biblical analysis places blame for the human condition squarely on rebellious humanity, but the Karen analysis is more ambivalent. On the one hand, if Marshall's version of Karen beliefs, based on 19th century missionary sources, is correct, then humanity rebelled against Yua in the same way Adam and Eve rebelled against Yahweh. There's even a garden story with a woman, under the influence of the devil, who eats forbidden fruit and entices her husband to do the same. The consequence is punishment and Yua's leaving abandoning humanity to the care of the *mue ka*.¹³ The stories told by traditional Karen in northern Thailand today, on the other hand, aren't so clear on the issue of whether or not humanity is responsible for Yua's leaving the world. One could conclude from them that humanity is itself innocent of any wrong-doing. Yua left because of the machinations of *mue kaw lee*, the devil and not because of anything humanity did. On the other hand, there is a story that tells how humanity grew weary of *mue kaw lee* and killed it, only to have *mue kaw lee* return unharmed. After killing it a second time with the same result, humanity murdered *mue kaw lee* a third time, cut it up into small pieces, and ate it. Satisfied with its new home, and humanity couldn't do anything more with *mue kaw lee* because it now lived in humanity was responsible for Yua's leaving it's now implicated in contributing to the conditions that make it impossible for Yua to return.

Future Karen theological analysis of the human condition will almost certainly conclude that humanity is responsible for Yua's continued absence from the world. It acts in ways that create discord, tension, and an absence of the peace that would make it possible for Yua to return. Humanity keeps itself orphaned.

Jesus, Agent of Return

Karen theologians are going to have to think long and hard about how to meld Karen and biblical perspectives into coherent theologies that are at once biblical and Karen. Nowhere is this more the case than in the interpretation of Jesus' role in freeing humanity from its orphaned condition. It's an open question whether or not humanity requires an outside agency for its liberation. The reason is that the Karen expected the eventual return of Yua, who according to the *ta* has promised to return. The conditions for that return however, aren't clear, and it could well be that Yua will return in his own time what-

ever humanity does in the meantime. It's not clear just what role Yua's Son might play in that return, since in traditional Karen thinking their isn't a Son.

On the other hand, a number of millenarian sects have arisen among the Karen from time to time. Summarizing the scholarly literature on such sects, Hayami sees them as another reflection of the stateless, orphaned condition of the Karen people.¹⁴ One of the most recent of these sects mushroomed for a brief time in Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son Provinces in about 1946, and the demise of that sect appears to be an important cause of increased Christian evangelistic success in the early and middle 1950s. This point is important. It suggests that the Jesus of future Karen theologies most likely will be a millennial figure linked to the promised return of Yua.

Karen Christian theological analysis, in other words, will likely see Jesus as playing a role in creating the conditions for Yua's return, and it's possible that it will emphasize the importance of the image of the Kingdom of God found in the New Testament (Mark 1:14-15). The Bible insists that humanity has absented itself from the rule of God, and that it will regain wholeness only as it is reconciled to God and places itself under divine rule. The image we have from the Synoptic Gospels seems to be that in Jesus the Kingdom has sprouted in the midst of humanity but it hasn't yet achieved its full growth. Kingdom of God signifies the return of the divine Parent to take up his place in the world, a world of peace and order that is appropriate to his divine presence. Perhaps Jesus will be envisioned as the Son of Yua who has become an orphan for the sake of orphaned humanity. In this scenario, he would be the first human to be liberated from the influence of the devil, *mue kaw lee*. He brings peace, the peace that is necessary to prepare the world for the return of Yua. All of this is still hazy, and other scenarios are possible including one that would see Jesus as being the Perfect Sacrifice to the *mue ka*, thus liberating humanity from having to make further sacrifices and freeing them to the task of preparing for Yua's return.

The Church's Mission

The question of how the Karen churches respond to humanity's orphaned condition is likely to be more easily resolved than many other theological issues. The role of the church is to prepare the world for the return of Yua, to make it a place suitable to be his divine habitation. In this way, it can help restore humanity to its rightful relationship with Yua and heal the wounds of separation caused by Yua's departure from the chaotic world.

Issues in Karen Theology

Those who would construct Karen theologies face a number of serious issues that will have to be worked

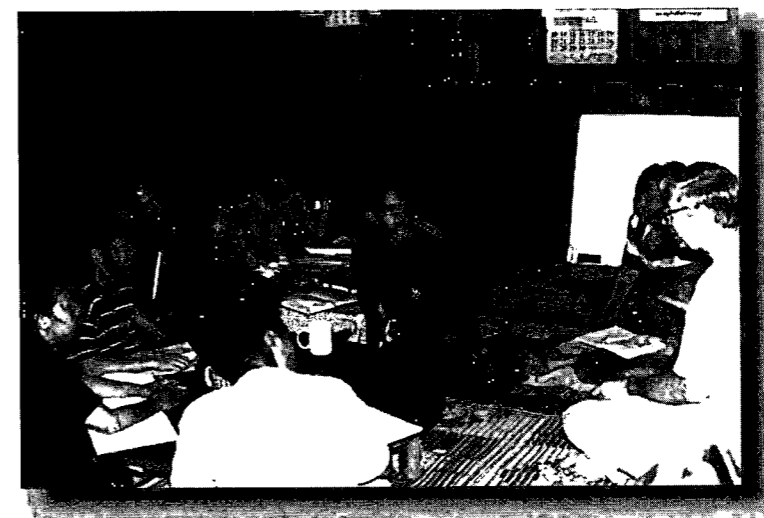
through if a Karen theological movement is to arise in northern Thailand. One of the most serious obstacles to the future development of Karen theological thinking is the degenerate state of traditional Karen religion, already alluded to above. Christianity and Thai state Buddhism have made inroads into traditional Karen religion to such an extent that it's nearly impossible to find a "pure" traditional village. Economic and social realities related to the rapid globalization of Thailand make it extremely difficult to sustain the traditional Karen world and its elaborate, expensive rituals.¹⁵ Christian evangelists report that most of those who still consider themselves traditionalists are simply waiting for the

"right conditions to occur so they can either convert to Christianity or quietly slip into Buddhism. The continuing deterioration of traditional Karen religion means that future Karen Christian theologians will have no living partners to dialogue with as they construct their theologies. Even now, the remaining traditional religious leaders (*heko*), can provide only limited information on traditional religious thinking. They are ritual specialists rather than theologians. Christian theologians, thus, are going to have to devote considerable time to the task of reconstructing the traditional faith and world view from Karen oral traditions. Their task will be made more challenging by the fact that there have never been any religious institutions or structures that could enforce uniformity in Karen religious thinking. Karen traditions are, thus, pluralistic in nature and can even be contradictory. A major task facing Karen theologians will be to identify for themselves the major themes and central ideas of Karen traditional religion.

Even more worrisome is another aspect of globalization's impact on the Karen people in Thailand. It has launched what amounts to a massive attack on Karen culture. We've already seen some of the consequences of this attack, including the slow demise of Karen literacy and the loss of Karen identity among young people. Karen theology is going to have to come to terms with the Global Village and find its place within it, most espe-

cially in its Thai version. The Karen of northern Thailand live in a Thai as well as a Karen cultural context, and it's entirely unrealistic to expect younger Karen to withdraw from the Thai context. Many of them see it as providing a more viable future than does their own cultural context. It seems inevitable that a certain amount of Thai influence will find its way into future Karen theologies, which influence will introduce a certain note of tension into Karen theological thinking as the religious universe of the Thai is strikingly different from that of the traditional Karen.

Karen theologies in northern Thailand will, by necessity, be church-based theologies because there are no other readily available institutions in which to conduct Karen theological reflection. The intellectual base for more systematic theological construction remains slim, as the Karen churches are just now educating their first generation of students



Karen students in training with Rev Herb Swanson and Ms Esther Danpongpee

trained to a bachelors or masters level. As stated above, these students are all studying theology in Thai seminaries that simply don't know the world of the Karen churches. Mechanisms will have to be found that will encourage theological reflection among church leaders, the PTCA consultation model offering one viable possibility. It's not going to be easy, however, to create the mechanisms and theological literature needed to sustain a long-term theological movement among the Karen churches.

In terms of specific issues, future Karen theologians will have to devote a great deal of creative energy to solving a number of them. Their theological reflections, furthermore, are likely to sound heretical when translated into Thai, English, or other languages. We've already seen that the Karen conception of Yua contains at least two important departures from biblical thinking. Yua, unlike Yahweh, is a Created Creator. Yua was originally more involved in and closer to creation than Yahweh. Yua, however, is cultures, like the Karen, where conflict management seeks to avoid direct confrontation. A third is-