

This issue of *JTCA* seeks to create a space for discussion and exchange of perspectives about the diverse theological and critical approaches to the practice and discourse of religious fundamentalism in Asian context. The aim of it is to go deep into the analysis of the manifestations and effects of religious fundamentalism.

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RECONSTRUCTING FUNDAMENTALISM: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF PROTESTANT STRATEGIES FOR RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL ACCOMMODATION IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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Introduction

Attempts to define the term "fundamentalism" can be endless and largely fruitless, but it can hardly be denied that fundamentalist movements do exist within most of the world's great religions. They are characterized by what the *American Heritage Electronic Dictionary* (1992) broadly defines as a "rigid adherence to fundamental or basic principles." More refined definitions depend obviously on their contexts, and what may be considered fundamentalist in one society is less obviously so in another. Thus, even Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism, which of all of the world's major religious traditions seems least prone to fundamentalism, does encompass such movements. Swearer typifies Thai Theravada fundamentalism as being movements that have an "aggressive, critical, negative, and absolutist character" that includes a radical rejection of mainstream culture, a one-dimensional approach to social ills, and a "dualistic and absolutistic worldview." Such movements, in particular, make a "stark" distinction between insiders and outsiders (1991, 628-651).

Perhaps no religious movement in Thailand today has better fit these local criteria for fundamentalism over the years than missionary Protestantism, a movement that continues to exist, to a degree, down to the present. Historically, Protestantism has been religiously aggressive, critical, negative, and absolutist. In their heyday, Western, primarily American, Protestant missionaries stood in radical opposition to much of Thai culture, adhered to a rigid one-dimensional approach to social ills, and affirmed an absolutist dualism that separated Christians from heathens (see Pongudom; Hughes 1982; Swanson 1987 and 2003). Evangelical Protestant missionaries working in Thailand even today are more frequently than not

religious fundamentalists by the measure of Thai society, in spite of their more restrained religious rhetoric.

Thai religious temperament presents a striking contrast to Protestant missionary fundamentalism. That temperament is, within limits, generally accepting of other religions, and it is not aggressive, absolutist, or rigidly dualistic in a fundamentalist sense. The popular Thai religious consciousness is also highly syncretistic, blending both animism and Brahmanism into its Buddhist systems of beliefs and praxis. As Jackson notes, "...the existence of non-Buddhist spirit worship, magical rites, and the honouring of Hindu deities has not traditionally been seen as conflicting with the canonical message of the [Buddhist] religion (38)." Thai popular religious consciousness, thus, stands in virtual opposition to the Western fundamentalist exclusivism of the evangelical Protestant missionary movement in Thailand.

Viewed from the perspective of contemporary Thai Protestantism, this contrast between the syncretistic Thai religious and fundamentalist Protestant mentalities is much more than a mere curiosity. It constitutes a central fact of religious life for Thai Protestants. Since the 1980s, a number of scholars have argued that they have accommodated their Protestantism to the Thai religious context in various ways, be it in terms of their understanding of salvation, of grace, of conversion, or their relationship to the Buddhist community. (see especially Hughes 1983; Suwanbubha; McLean; Zehner). These studies make a strong case for such accommodation, but that case is limited by the fact that all of them deal either with small, select groups of individuals, such as pastors, or with special categories, such as university students. They have not focused on the beliefs and attitudes of local church members.

This paper revisits the question of how Thai Protestants mix and match their dual fundamentalist Protestant Christian and syncretistic Theravada Buddhist heritages. It draws on research data collected in January and February 2004 by eight students of the McGilvary Faculty of Theology, Payap University, who were enrolled in the M.Div. course (TS 571) on Research Methods for Ministry.¹ The students and the author jointly prepared a questionnaire containing 15 questions plus 7 background questions (see the Appendix). Each student then collected at least 50

questionnaires for a total of 447 forms returned. (one student gathered 97 responses). Nearly all of those surveyed are members of churches belonging to the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), an ecumenical denomination founded in 1934 largely out of American Presbyterian missionary work. Forms were collected in Districts 1, 4, 5, and 15 of the CCT, including churches in the provinces of Chiang Mai (200 forms), Nan (50 forms), Phrae (97 forms), Phayao (50 forms), and Uttaradit (50 forms).

The particular subject I will examine in this paper is northern Thai Protestant beliefs about and attitudes towards their Buddhist neighbors. The two facets of the northern Thai Protestant heritage, that is Protestant fundamentalism and Buddhist syncretism, differ significantly in their views of people of other faiths. The ways in which local church members reconcile these two views, thus, provides a key measure of the relative degrees of fundamentalist or syncretistic thinking they display.

As will be seen in what follows, the data collected by these students suggests that northern Thai Protestants are engaging in an ongoing process of accommodating their Thai and Protestant heritages to each other. Drawing on the work of Tongchai Winichakul and David Lehmann, we will use the term "localization" to describe that process. Lehmann argues for a dynamic view of local and global cultures whereby meanings and practices are constantly being renegotiated and redefined. Tongchai contends that no easy separation can be made between "globalization" and "localization." They have a dynamic relationship, and in many ways globalization actually fosters the reinterpretation of global themes, practices, and values in local terms (Lehman, 607-634; Winichakul). In this paper, I will argue that northern Thai Protestants have inherited both a global fundamentalist faith and a local syncretistic religious consciousness; and that they are engaging in an ongoing process of accommodating their faith and their consciousness to each other. The result is a meaningful Thai Protestant system of religious beliefs, values, and practices. As the samples collected by the Payap students are all from northern Thailand, this paper will focus on situation of northern Thai Protestants.

Summary of the Findings

The data collected from the 447 respondents to the questionnaire "About Christians and People of Other Faiths" suggests that they are employing a number of strategies to accommodate their syncretistic Northern Thai and fundamentalist Protestant religious heritages to each other. First, the process of accommodation includes the *compartmentalization* of apparently inconsistent sets of beliefs and attitudes. Second, it sometimes involves a *shift* away from exclusivist rejection of people of other faiths and towards syncretistic acceptance of them. Third, the process also involves the *redefinition* of certain exclusivist beliefs and activities in more syncretistic terms. Fourth, the process of accommodation involves an attitude of having to "make allowances" for situations in which Christians are socially constrained to behave in ways they ordinarily would not. Fifth, the process generally involves the preservation of a distinctive Protestant *allegiance to God*, which does not seem to be inherently a rejection of people of other faiths. A shift towards syncretization is evident in all but one of the samples the students collected although the degree of the shift varies greatly from sample to sample.

The Data

The questionnaire is divided into four sections. Questions 1-5 have to do with the respondent's theological understanding of Christian attitudes towards people of other faiths. Questions 6-10 deal with Christian-Buddhist social relationships. Questions 11-15 look specifically at Christian thinking about participation in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. Finally, Questions 16-22 provide background information on the respondents. The goal of the form is to discern whether the respondents hold more of a syncretistic or exclusivist understanding of their relationship to their Buddhist neighbors. The assumption is that the more syncretistic their views the greater the influence of local religious consciousness.

The Findings

Questions 1-5: Theological Views

The responses to the first three items on the questionnaire, displayed in Table 1, suggest that both syncretistic northern Thai cultural and exclusivist Protestant thinking influence northern Thai Protestants. Question 1 is syncretistic in intent, while Question 2 assumes a fundamentalist, exclusivist orientation. Question 1 asks if the respondents agree, "Every religion is able to teach people to be good;" a belief almost universally held in northern Thai Buddhist culture. Over four in five (84.7%) of the respondents agreed. Question 2 asks if they agree, "Christian teachings are the only correct religious teachings." Nearly the same number (83.6%) agreed to this proposition as agreed that all religions can teach people to be good.

Table 1

Frequency Distributions for Questions 1, 2, and 3 as Percentages

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure	Discards
1. All Religions same	2.0%	5.6%	2.5%	11.2%	53.2%	21.3%	2.2%	2.0%
2. Christianity Right	4.0%	10.1%	6.5%	7.6%	35.6%	30.4%	4.0%	1.8%
3. God pro-Believers	21.5%	30.4%	7.2%	5.8%	17.9%	11.9%	3.6%	1.8%

N = 447

We should note that 77.3% of those who responded positively to Question 1, also responded positively to Question 2; they are 65.5% of the total sample. Of those who answered Question 1 negatively, 59.2% affirmed Question 2; they are 6.5% of the total sample. A solid majority of the respondents, that is, affirm the patently syncretistic statement in Question

1 and the exclusivist statement in Question 2. At the same time, less than one respondent in ten denied the syncretistic statement and affirmed the exclusivist one.

While the two statements in Questions 1 and 2 may or may not contradict each other logically, the attitudes reflected in each of them are quite different. One is open to other faiths, and the other is closed. Which is to say, the respondents evidently affirm syncretistic and exclusivist propositions whether or not they perceive any contradiction. The majority appears to compartmentalize basic beliefs from each of their faith streams and sees little or no problem in holding both at the same time.

Question 3 seeks to test the degree of theological prejudice, northern Thai Christians have against people of other faiths. It asks if the respondents agree that God loves believers more than God loves non-believers. Only about one in three (35.6%) agreed to that proposition, while well over half (59.1%) disagreed. Since the "correct" theological answer is that God loves all people irrespective of their religion, these results indicate that the majority of the respondents do not believe that God takes sides against unbelievers. A strong minority, however, thought that God does favor Christians, in spite of general Christian teachings to the contrary.

Taken together, in sum, the responses to these three questions suggest that the localization of northern Thai Protestant fundamentalism is not necessarily an either-or process. Nor is it a logical process of deciding to reject cultural beliefs for religious ones or vice versa. Northern Thai Protestants can accommodate both, maintaining them apparently in separate compartments.

Question 4 asks respondents to describe what their churches teach about the salvation of people of other faiths. Question 5 asks them to express their personal opinion on the same issue. The responses show that less than two in five (36.5%) think their churches teach that non-Christians are damned, and somewhat less still (32.2%) agree personally that non-Christians are damned. Another one in five personally leave open a slight possibility for the salvation of non-Christians while nearly three in ten (28.0%) personally think that good people, whether or not they are Christians, will be saved. There is a slight shift away from exclusivism in personal beliefs on this question when compared to what churches are held

to teach: The shift, however, seems to be towards being unsure rather than to thinking people of other faith can be saved.

Table 2
Frequency Distributions for Questions 4 and 5 as Percentages

Question	Damned	A Few Maybe not Damned	Good are Saved	Unsure	Discards
4. Church teaches us other faiths are	36.5%	21.9%	26.2%	13.9%	1.6%
5. You think they are	32.2%	21.3%	28.0%	17.0%	1.6%

N = 447

The responses in Table 2 indicate that, first, the respondents show a strong tendency towards exclusivism, but also that a more syncretistic perspective dilutes their exclusivism. Nearly thirty percent of these northern Thai Christian respondents, as we have seen, may be classified as syncretists on this question, while many of them (21.3%) leave some hope for non-Christians to be saved and nearly one in five (17.0%) are unsure.

These figures may be read in several different ways. Strictly speaking more respondents are exclusivists than syncretists. A middle group leans heavily towards syncretism but allows for the possibility of salvation for only a few non-Christians. Quite a few, finally, do not know how to decide. Northern Thai Protestants, if this sample is any indication, are divided among themselves regarding the eternal fate of their neighbors of other faiths. Some are clearly syncretist (32.2%), some are just as clearly exclusivist (28.0%), some are somehow both (21.3%), and some just do not know what to think (17.0%).

When viewed separately in Tables 3 and 4 and Charts 1 and 2, two churches are distinctive in their responses to Questions 4 and 5 concerning the salvation of people of other faiths, as well as other questions. The 50 respondents from the Chiang Mai Chinese Church, located on Fa Ham Road and generally known as the Fa Ham Church, are clearly exclusivist in their attitudes towards people of other faiths. Some 84.0% of them stated, as can be seen in Table 3, that their church teaches that non-Christians are

damned for their unbelief, far higher than the over all response of 36.5%. The respondents who belong to the Phrasitiphorn Church, Nan, gave a strikingly different response to this question. Only 4.0% of them agreed that their church teaches that non-Christians are damned for their unbelief while over half (54.0%) agreed that their church teaches that good people are saved whether or not they are Christians.

Table 3
Frequency Distributions for Question 4
Comparing the Nan and Fa Ham Churches with the Total Sample

	Damned	A Few Maybe not Damned	Good are Saved	Unsure	Discards	N
Nan	4.0%	20.0%	54.0%	22.0%	0.0%	50
Fa Ham	84.0%	12.0%	0.0%	2.0%	2.0%	50
T. Sample	36.5%	21.9%	26.2%	13.9%	1.60%	447

Chart 1 reproduces the data in Table 3, dropping only the small number of discards. It provides a graphic demonstration of the wide range in local church members' perception of what their churches teach. This data, unfortunately, does not allow us to ascertain whether there is a historical, progressive shift away from fundamentalist views to a more syncretistic position or not. Both charts do show that the general sample tends to show a moderate tendency highlighted by the extreme positions of the Fa Ham and Nan samples.

Chart 1
Frequency Distributions for Question 4
Comparing the Nan and Fa Ham Churches with the Total Sample

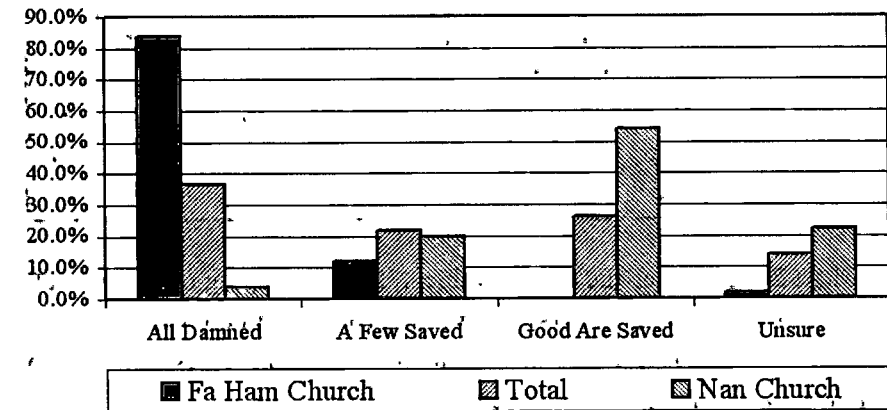


Table 4 contains the responses to the question of what the respondents themselves believe about the salvation of people of other faiths, and it reveals an important trend when compared to Table 3. Where the figures generally hold for the Phrasitiphorn Church and the total sample of respondents, the Fa Ham Church members show a definite shift away from the exclusivist teachings of their church towards a somewhat more syncretistic view. Most of the shift is either to the choice that admits that at least some people of other faiths will be saved or to the choice "unsure." Only one member of the Fa Ham Church agreed that good people are saved irrespective of their religion. While we should not make too much of this shift between what the respondents believe the Fa Ham Church teaches and what they think themselves, it does suggest the possibility northern Thai Protestants revise their view by stages. They, perhaps, do not believe that non-Christians are damned on one day and then the next day change their minds to think that people of other faiths have as good a chance at salvation as Christians. They become unsure or seek out a compromise position.