

**Religion and Community Formation in Northern Thailand:  
The Case of Christianity in Nan Province**

**Kummool Chinawong & Herb Swanson**

**Introduction**

Protestant Christianity established itself permanently in northern Thailand in 1867 when the Rev. Daniel and Sophia McGilvary arrived in Chiang Mai to start what became the "Laos Mission" of the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. It was so named because the northern Thai people were then widely known as the "Laos." People first began converting to Christianity in appreciable numbers in the 1870s and 1880s, and from the very beginning northern Thai Protestants exhibited an inclination to establish separate Christian communities and social systems. They attended missionary schools, received medical care from missionary doctors and hospitals, and often found their employment in missionary institutions. This social separation frequently extended to their communal relationships as well. Christians established their own villages or lived in distinct geographical areas of larger villages, in both cases living in separate communities.[1] Conversion to Christianity appears to have marginalized the converts socially, which in turn led Christians to form new, separate communities based on their religious identity.

These observations raise a number of questions. To what degree have northern Thai Protestants actually tended towards communal separatism? Have such tendencies, if they exist, persisted over time? What are their causes and meaning? The historical experience of the eighteen Protestant congregations of the Church of Christ in Thailand's (CCT) Fifth District, Nan Province, suggests that northern Thai Protestants have indeed tended to create and maintain separate communities and that religious identity has comprised a key element in this process.

Nan Province offers a useful "laboratory" for investigating the nature and meaning of Christian communal separatism. Dating back to the fourteenth century, Muang Nan has led a relatively isolated existence, which has slowed the impact of "outside" learning and social trends in comparison with the other regional centers of northern Thailand.[2] Nan, thus, has retained more of traditional northern Thai culture than is found in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, or even in Phrae. It provides a good place, for this reason, to study historical northern Thai Protestantism. The first Presbyterian missionaries to live permanently in the city arrived in Nan in 1895, and to this day there has been no other significant Christian presence among the ethnic northern Thai of the province.[3] Missionary and northern Thai church work is relatively well documented, and the eighteen congregations that comprise the Fifth District offer a diverse but not overly large sample for the study of the formation of Christian communities. Those congregations number 2,213 communicant members belonging to eleven churches and seven other organized groups, termed *muad*, which are considered too small or weak to be churches.

These eighteen congregations tend to live apart from their local societies and to congregate within their own communities. This tendency, as will be seen, varies from Christian community to community. In some, separation is an accomplished fact, while in others separation is an on-going process, gradual and apparent only over time. In a few cases, the tendency towards communal separation is obscured by the decline of the Christian communities themselves, church members who belong to another ethnic group, or other local factors. When viewed together, however, the

historical experience and contemporary situation of the Christian in Nan Province show that over the last nearly one hundred years they have tended to form their own geographically separate communities and that religious issues and identity have been central to that process.

### **Surveying the Churches of District Five, Nan Province**

The eighteen churches and *muad* of the Fifth District, Nan exhibit four communal configurations. First, three groups live almost fully *integrated* with their non-Christian neighbors. No clear pattern of physical separation exists. Second, seven Christian communities demonstrate a *mixed* configuration, meaning that the Christians tend to live together in a part of the village, but a significant number of them still live interspersed among their neighbors. Communal boundaries exist but are indistinct. Third, the Christians in three villages live in a "Christian quarter," a distinct part of the village pointing to *communal separation within a village*. The geographical boundaries between the Christians and the rest of the village are clear, although some mixing does occur across that boundary. Finally, five Christian communities live in *total separation* from non-Christians; they live, that is, in separate villages, in which few or no non-Christians reside.

These four configurations are not static, however, and the Nan Christian communities appear to have passed through three broad stages on their journey from integration to separation. This periodization, it should be understood, is somewhat tentative and works better for some congregations than for others. It is offered here with the realization that some periodization is required for the study of the formation of Christian religious communities, and this one seems to work best (although not perfectly). In the *initial stage*, incipient Christian congregations continued to live among their neighbors much as they did before their members converted, but they no longer participated in the religious life of the community. They were a distinct new group in their village. During the *formative stage*, the Christians ceased to be simply a separate group and began to form their own geographical communities. They tended to move into close physical proximity to each other, and they usually built their own church building, which frequently acted as magnets drawing them together. The *continuing stage* marks a longer historical era leading down to the present during which time Christian communities persisted or failed to persist.

The four configurations of Christian communal life in Nan Province provide a convenient framework for a brief survey of the formation of Christian communities in the province. The following survey is based upon 220 interviews conducted in each congregation by the authors and their colleague, Prasit Pongudom, from September 1990 through November 1992.

**FIRST CATEGORY.** This category includes three *muad*, or organized Christian groups that are not churches, in which the Christians live fully integrated among their neighbors. The first of these is *muad Wang Bao*, located in Ban Sali, Tambon Phutabat, Amphur Chiang Klang. This congregation traces its history back to before 1900, and of all of the ethnic northern Thai churches and *muad* in the Fifth District it alone has shown no tendency at all towards communal separatism. It has never been a large group, has lacked strong leadership, and such evidence as we have from its early history suggests that its members were largely nominal in their adherence to Christianity. The congregation entirely disappeared for some fifteen years after 1941 because of persecution suffered during World War II. This group has never had its own building, which as we will see is one important factor in bringing Christians together geographically. During the 1970s, furthermore, a severe internal feud took place, which is the primary cause for its small size today. The Wang Bao group, in sum, has lacked the "strength of community" in terms the size, leadership, stability, and religious commitment necessary for communal separation to take place.

The Christian group comprising *muad Phornthara*, located at Ban Wang Wa, Tambon Pua, Amphur Chiang Klang, originated in about 1920 from an extended family that resided in the forest where they had fled after being accused of being *phika*. After conversion, the new Christian

group continued to live in a separate village until after World War II when they moved to a nearby site closer to a Buddhist village. The group has since dwindled in size because of migration into Nan City and internal feuding, and today only five households in Ban Wang Wa have Christians living in them. Historically, the Phornthara congregation has moved thus in a reverse course from other Christian groups. It began as a distinct community in its initial stage, went through "de-formation" in what should have been its formative stage, and now lives integrated with its neighbors. The reasons seem clear. This congregation suffered severe persecution during World War II, which reduced its membership and weakened its life markedly. Migration out of the community plus internal dissension has added to the process of congregational decay.

The third congregation in this category is the one a *Nam Mong*, located in Ban Nam Mong, Tambon Phato, Amphur Thawangpha. Although the first Christian in this village, Nai Pun from Wang Bao, moved to Ban Nam Mong some time before 1944, a congregation did not emerge there until the 1950s after a large number of Kamu tribal people migrated to the area. Contacts with evangelists from both the Fifth District and from a Protestant mission not connected with the CCT led to the formation of an almost entirely Kamu congregation. From its beginnings in the 1950s down to the present, this Kamu Christian group has shown no inclination whatsoever to form a geographically separate community of its own.

On the face of it, in sum, the historical experience and present situation of these three congregations contradicts the thesis of this paper, namely that religion plays an important role in the geography of community formation in Nan Province. As has been seen in these brief sketches, however, each of them is an anomaly that does not contradict that thesis. The Wang Bao congregation has simply been too weak throughout its history to function as a separate community. The *muad* at Phornthara, in fact, began its life as a geographically separate community and remained so for several decades until persecution, defections, and migration made it impossible for the dwindling group to remain separate from its neighbors. It can be argued that the history of the Nam Mong congregation tends to substantiate the thesis presented here. It is not ethnically northern Thai, and as will be seen in the second category, below, the Kamu members of another congregation in District Five also show no inclination towards separation. Where Christians now live fully integrated geographically with their larger communities, in sum, they do so because they are too small to maintain a separate life or because they are not ethnically northern Thai.

Table I Summary of Community Formation Among Category One Congregations

Church	Founded	Membrs	Inital Stage	Formtivistage	Continuing Stage
Wang Bao	c. 1909	6	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated
Phornthara	c. 1920	10	Separate	Separate	Integrated
Ban Nam Mong	c. 1944	160	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated

**SECOND CATEGORY.** This category includes seven congregations, whose members tend to live close to other church members without establishing clear boundaries between themselves and their non-Christian neighbors. The first church in this category, the *Phrasithiphorn Church* located in Nan City, is the oldest and still (just barely) the largest church in the Fifth District. It has shown some tendency towards geographical separation historically, primarily because of its close association with the Laos Mission's Nan Station, which was located in the city and

functioned as the institutional center of Christian life in Nan Province during the missionary era. The station's two schools, hospital, and several residences attracted a significant number of Christians seeking employment; they and other Christians built homes in the vicinity of the Nan Station's compounds. This church's urban location, however, allowed other Christians to live at a distance from the Christian "cluster" and to find employment elsewhere. By the same token, non-Christians have taken up residence close to the Christian center so that no pronounced pattern of separation emerged.

In Category I, we saw that when a congregation has a large ethnic Kamu tribal membership there is no tendency towards Christian communal separation. The case of the Phrasithiphorn Church indicates that an urban location also reduces the likelihood that Christians will reside together even though they are ethnically northern Thai. Such tendency towards Christian separation as developed in the city of Nan, furthermore, represented a reaction to the presence of the mission station and its opportunities for employment.

The second church in this category, the *Khunanukhun Church*, is located in Ban Chiang Eun, Tambon Suak, Amphur Muang. From its inception in 1914, the "Ban Som Church," as it is still known, grew gradually partly through further proselytization and partly through natural increase. Its members now live in two closely situated villages. In the larger village, Ban Chiang Eun, the Christians tend to live around the church building but without a sharp separation between Christian and Buddhist households. This tendency seems to have begun after World War II, although the historical record is not clear. In the second village, Ban Don Udom, there is no separation. The Ban Som Church, in terms of community formation, can also be "the exception that proves the rule." First, church members evidently failed to move into the vicinity of their church building in any numbers for some thirty years or more. Second, even though the Ban Som Church experienced persecution in the years immediately after 1914, that persecution did not cause its members to seek communal separation as a response to anti-Christian sentiments. Third, this congregation, unlike the small, peripheral Wang Bao congregation, has been historically the strongest of District Five's rural churches and has provided a number of important Christian leaders at the district level.

The third Christian community in this second grouping is the *Kunthathipkittikhun Church*, located in Ban Mai Sunthisuk, Tambon Nam Kaen, Amphur Muang. It was initially formed as a very small, scattered group sometime before 1919. The first family converted because six of its thirteen children had died of illnesses believed to be caused by spirits, and the family converted to Christianity to escape the power of those spirits. The congregation grew only slowly and remained in the initial stage of community formation, that is integrated with its neighbors, until it built a church building in 1972. At that time, it entered the formative stage as several families moved to the vicinity of the new church building. That area of Ban Mai Sunthisuk was soon identified as the Christian section of the village. The movement to locations near the church building has not led to a separate community, however; six Christian households are today located near the church building, while seven remain scattered throughout the rest of the village.

The Christian community at *muad Pa Phae*, located in Ban Pa Phae, Tambon Maeking, Amphur Wiang Sa, was first established in 1947 when a family from the Ban Som Church moved into this previously entirely Buddhist village. Their reasons for moving were economic, and as a small Christian group formed, they lived mixed with their Buddhist neighbors. The congregation grew not only from natural increase but also from the migration of additional Christian families from Ban Som and Ban Samai. Since this muad built its church building in 1967, however, the Christians have tended to congregate at the end of the village where the church building is located. This tendency has not resulted in sharp boundaries between Christian and Buddhist sections of the village.

The *Silaphet Church*, located in Ban Donchai, Tambon Silaphet, Amphur Pua, originated from two lepers from Tambon Yom, who became Christians in the early 1930s while receiving treatment at the Presbyterian Mission's McKean Leprosarium in Chiang Mai. They subsequently returned to their homes and participated in a leper group, which formed to give injections to each other. In 1948, District Five evangelists visited Tambon Yom, and the families of these two men converted. Within five years, they moved for economic reasons to Ban Donchai, which at that time was still an uninhabited forest said to be infested with spirits. The Christians believed that the spirits, however real, had no power over them, moved in, and built a church building. For some time thereafter, the small congregation lived as a separate community until eventually non-Christians moved to nearby locations. Even then, the congregation lived in a distinct area of Ban Donchai until squabbles and disputes among the Christians themselves led a number of Christian families to disassociate themselves from the church. Today, as a result, the Christians live much more interspersed with their non-Christian neighbors than previously. The Silaphet Church's experience parallels thus that of the Phornthara group in that it too has moved in the reverse direction in terms of community formation compared to other Christian congregations. After a brief initial stage, it did form a separate community, but since that time it has slowly regressed through a period of being a separate community within a larger village to become, finally, a loosely clustered group in that village.

The Christian congregation at *Hatplahaeng* located at Ban Hatplahaeng, Tam bon Bo, Amphur Muang, presents a unique situation. Like the *muad* at Ban Nam Mong, this group began as a Kamu Christian congregation, begun through the agency of local northern Thai evangelists from the nearby Thamaphorn Church. As the number of Kamu Christians at Hatplahaeng increased, the congregation showed no inclination towards separation until 1980, when ten northern Thai Christian families from the Thamaphorn Church and from *muad* Phornthara moved into the village. All ten of these families built homes close to the church building so that while the Kamu members continue to live among their animist neighbors to this day, the northern Thai Christians live separate from the rest of the village. It can be argued that the northern Thais chose to live close to each other for ethnic reasons, irrespective of religion. While that motivation has to be taken into account, it does not explain why the Christians chose to locate themselves close to the congregation's church building. Faced with the choice of several locations in and near the village in which to settle, these northern Thai families deliberately chose to live together near a church building.

The final congregation in this category is the *muad* at *Ban Khon*, located at Ban Khon, Tambon Sriphumi, Amphur Tawangpha, which first emerged in 1972 when Nang Bua Kham Khambun of Ban Sopkap was accused of being *phi kha*.<sup>[4]</sup> She had Christian relatives who returned to Sopkap and conducted evangelism with the result that Nang Bua Kham and another family converted to Christianity. Eventually, a few other families followed suit. These converts originally were located in two villages and lived scattered among their Buddhist neighbors. Since 1974, however, they have all moved into close proximity of their small chapel, partly as a matter of convenience in attending worship services, partly to be together, and partly because they still feel some underlying tensions with their neighbors because of their "history" of being *phi ka*. Since they number only five households, it is not possible for them to further separate themselves from their larger community.

This second category, in sum, includes seven Christian congregations in which Christians show a tendency to live in close proximity to their church building and a historical inclination towards separation. In a sense, however, it is difficult to treat these communities as a group even though they superficially appear as such. As we have seen, the Phrasithiphorn church is unique in two ways, namely as the Fifth District's only urban congregation and because of its close ties with the mission station. The ethnic northern Thai at Hatplahaeng actually fit into the third category of

Christian groups that live separately within a larger village. And the Silaphet church is in this second category only because internal dissension has led to the decay of the community. But for its membership losses, it too would be in the third category. In addition, the Ban Khon Christians moved from living totally integrated with their neighbors to being generally clustered around their chapel, beginning only two years after conversion. They showed an immediate tendency towards separation, which is limited only by their small size. Of these four, the last three have been more inclined towards communal separation than their inclusion in this category might suggest.

The other three Christian congregations in this category, however, have moved towards communal separation only slowly. The Kunthathipkittikhun Church grew slowly over the years with several members migrating to the city for education and never returning. Once it was able to build a church building, however, the congregation did show a tendency towards separation. The community at Ban Pa Phae demonstrates a similar pattern. The Ban Som Church, we note again, stands out as something of an anomaly. It grew relatively rapidly in terms of numbers and for decades was the strongest, most well led of the rural churches in Nan Province. Although it suffered some persecution, it has moved towards separation in only a desultory manner, and its satellite group at Ban Don Udom remains integrated into its larger community. Ban Som poses an important question mark, which serves to remind us that the Christian tendency towards communal separation is exactly that, a tendency. Local conditions, factors, and personalities play important roles, and it is not always clear- given the difficulty in recovering the histories of these Christian communities-how these various factors influenced the emergence of separate Christian communities.

It is clear, in any event, that the presence of a church building is an important factor in the creation of geographically distinct Christian communities. They act as magnets drawing Christians into proximity to each other, and whether stated as explicitly as in the case at Ban Khon or not, the Christians tend to identify with their church building to the extent that they want to live close to it and form a Christian community around it. In five of the seven cases considered under this second category, Christians did not form identifiable geographical communities until after they had a building. There is, in short, a dynamic relationship between these northern Thai Christians and their worship centers that reminds one of the old chicken-and-egg problem in which it is impossible to say whether buildings create distinct, separate communities or the desire to be such a community "causes" the buildings.

Table II, below, which summarizes this second category of churches and *muad*, provides some evidence for the general thesis of this paper that northern Thai Christians tend to establish separate geographical communities based on their religious identity. The members of all seven Christian groups in this category initially lived fully integrated into their larger Buddhist communities. All of them now have some members who live in a "Christian cluster," usually near the church building. This still hesitant tendency to separation will become more pronounced in the third category of congregations.

**Table II Summary of Community Formation Among Category Two Congregations**

Church	Founded	Membrs	Initial Stage	FormtiveStage	Continuing Stage
Phrasithiphorn	1896	355	Integrated	Mixed	Mixed
Khunanukhun	1914	347	Integrated	Integrated	Mixed
Kanthathip	c. 1919	60	Integrated	Integrated	Mixed
Ban Pa Phae	1947	54	Integrated	Integrated	Mixed
Silaphet	1948	73	Integrated	Separate	Mixed
Hatplahaeng	1961	69	Integrated	Integrated	Mixed
Ban Khon	1974	20	Integrated	Mixed	Mixed

**THIRD CATEGORY.** The three churches included in this category take us one step further down the continuum from integration to separation. All three congregations existed in exclusively Christian villages for a long period, but in more recent years, non-Christians have moved into the villages. The Christians, however, continue to live in clearly delineated, separate parts of their community.

The first church in this category is the *Thamaphorn Church*, located in Ban Wang Mo, Tambon Bo, Amphur Muang. The congregation was founded in about 1908 and originally was located in the village of Ban Sopkap. The small Sopkap group had no church building, and as best as can be judged now did not attempt to separate itself from the larger community until 1939 when some members of the congregation moved to what is now Ban Wang Mo. Eventually, most of the Sopkap Christians moved to the new location, and natural increase led to a larger Christian community. The Christians, who had moved for economic reasons, lived apart for some time until Buddhists began to move into the area. Ban Wang Mo is now divided into two distinct geographical sections, the Christians living in the southern, original end and the Buddhists living in the northern section. There is very little overlap between the two portions of the community.

The *Sa Wathanatham Church*, located in Ban Don Thaen, Tambon Klang Wiang, Amphur Wiang Sa, originated in 1909, when the family of Nan Ariya Chareonphong converted to the Christian faith. This family, before their conversion, lived in isolation because they had been accused of being *phi ka*. With the addition of other converts, the group built a church building in 1913 on land acquired by the mission, and most of the families involved moved to the location of the church building. At least one family, however, did not move. Since World War II, Buddhist families have moved into the vicinity of the church building, and nearly all of the Christians living close by have either left Christianity or moved elsewhere. Only two Christian households are now located near the church building. Most of the rest of the membership, significantly, now live close together some two kilometers away in the village of Ban Tondu.

The third congregation in this category is the *Monotham Church*, located at Ban Samai, Tambon Nasao, Amphur Muang, which began in 1911 with the conversion of Nan No, who became the patriarch of this Christian community. The congregation, originally, had no church building. In about 1940, the members moved to a location adjacent to but separate from the original village, which location is now called either *ban mai* (New Village) or *ban bo* (Church Village). The church built its own building at that location. In more recent times, Buddhist families have once

again moved into the same area as the Christians so that the village of Ban Samai is a religiously mixed community. The Christians continue to live in a distinct part of the village, however, and there is almost no inter-mingling of Christian and Buddhist houses.

The experiences of both the Ban Sopkap and the Ban Samai congregations reinforces the argument that religion in and of itself has been an important factor in the formation of Christian community in Nan Province. In both cases, members of these congregations migrated to new land for economic reasons, but the pattern of that migration indicates that religious identity played an important part in the formation of the subsequent villages they established. In the case of the Ban Sopkap migration, elderly members of the Thamaphorn Church remember that a few Christians living in largely non-Christian households did not move with the Christians to their new location. Even the names of those who stayed have passed from the living memory of the church. Non-Christians, meanwhile, who migrated with the Christians to Ban Wang Mo all converted to Christianity. At Ban Samai, Christian families from Ban Som, who were not relatives of the Ban Samai people, migrated to the new Christian village to live with the Ban Samai Christians. Non-Christian relatives of the Ban Samai Christians, however, did not move with the Christians to their new location. In both of these cases, the formation of a new Christian village involved a process of religious communal separation by which those Buddhists who moved with the Christians converted (Ban Samai) and those Christians who chose to stay with their Buddhist neighbors and relatives (Ban Sopkap) failed to sustain a Christian community.

Religious identity also played an important role at Wiang Sa. The Christian community there first emerged because of religious persecution of those accused of being *phi ka*, so that the community existed for religious reasons from the beginning. Later, this congregation relocated to live close to their church building, again acting as an identifiable Christian group. Even the decay of the core Christian community at the church building more lately has not led to the reintegration of the Christians into the larger community. They have for the most part simply moved together to a nearby locale.

Table III Summary of Community Formation Among Category Three Congregations

Church	Founded	Members	Initial Stage	Formative Stage	Continuing Stage
Thamaphorn	1908	218	Integrated	Separate	Quarter
Sa Wathanatham	1910	115	Separate	Separate	Quarter
Manotham	c. 1911	63	Integrated	Separate	Quarter

**FOURTH CATEGORY.** This category includes congregations that originally lived among their Buddhist neighbors but then, in the formative stage, removed themselves to live in separate Christian villages, which have remained separate down to the present. The five churches contained in this category provide the clearest instances of Christian communal separatism in Nan Province.

The Phornsawan Church, located at Ban Mai Huai Yang, Tambon Sathan, Amphur Pua, started in 1919 as a small group of converts living in the village of Ban San, near Muang Pua. A spirit medium (*thi nang phi*) living at Ban San had grown dissatisfied with the burdens her position placed on her, and she and several relatives converted after a visit by Presbyterian missionaries. During the initial stage of congregational formation, they continued to live in their original homes; some of their neighbors, however, expressed strong displeasure and accused these converts of abandoning the religion of their parents and taking up the "Westerners' religion" (*sasana khong farang*). They were subjected to name-calling, and bricks were thrown at their

homes while they were holding Christian worship services. The converts felt unwanted, and when they reported these events to their missionary mentor, the Rev. Dr. Hugh Taylor, he advised them to move out of Ban San. He purchased land for them a short distance away, at a location they named Ban Choko, and by 1924 all of the Ban San converts had moved to this new village. Beginning in the early 1950s, the Christians at Ban Choko began to move to a nearby location where they had better access to water and could obtain larger tracts of land, and by the 1970s, the original site was entirely abandoned. While a few Buddhists now live in Ban Mai Huai Yang, it remains a predominantly Christian community.

The second Christian village in this category is the congregation at *Ban Wang Haen*, located in Tambon Sathan, Amphur Pua. This community also has its origins in the Ban San convert community. At some point just before 1923, yet another family converted at Ban San, and when they also experienced their Buddhist neighbors' disapproval for converting, they removed themselves to their mountain garden plot, located at Wang Haen. Other converts followed, until eventually six Christian families had formed a Christian village at Ban Wang Haen. By the late 1940s, further conversions and natural increase had led to a Christian community numbering over thirty households. Ban Wang Haen, however, is an isolated location with only a limited amount of land, and beginning in 1957 families from Ban Wang Haen began to move to new land located closer to the main northern road in Nan Province. The unrest caused by the communist insurgency in the area also contributed to the desire of the Wang Haen Christians to move to a less isolated location. By 1963, Ban Wang Haen was completely deserted, only to be reoccupied in 1973 by a few of its original inhabitants. It presently contains twelve households, all Christians. [The village was again abandoned in the late 1990s, and has not been reoccupied as of 2002.]

The migration of several families from Ban Wang Haen that begin in 1957 led to the formation of yet another Christian congregation, the *Daen Damrongtham Church*, located at Ban Daen Phana, Tambon Chaiwathana, Amphur Pua. As mentioned above, the Christians left Wang Haen because of its lack of land, isolation, and the Communist insurgency. The new location at Ban Daen Phana was well situated and unoccupied because the local people believed it was spirit-infested. The first Christian "pioneers" who cleared this land tell stories about dreams they had, which they interpret as being threats made against them by the spirits. They relate how they overcame these threats by praying to the greater spirit, Jesus. The village now numbers some eighty households, all Christian, and the local government school has a cross hanging at its front steps in place of the usual Buddha image. All of the students and one of the four teachers are Christians.

In all three of these villages, religion has played a central role in community formation. The Phornsawan church and the group at Ban Wang Haen both resulted from religious pressure put on Christians at Ban San by some of their neighbors. As for the large community at Ban Dan Phana, even though it is a spin-off from Ban Wang Haen and the people migrated for economic and political reasons, once again religion played its role in that those who were not Christians would not move onto the land occupied by the Christians because it was spirit-infested. The village identity at Ban Daen Phana is Christian, and it is understood that anyone marrying into the village will convert to Christianity.

The *Phantasanya Church*, located at Ban Nanikhom, Tambon Yom, Amphur Thawangpha, comprises the fourth Christian village in Nan Province. The church had its beginnings in 1948 from the same group of lepers in Tambon Yom, which led to the founding of the Silaphet Church. That leper group grew out of a group of individuals from several villages who met regularly to give each other shots and to distribute medicine received from the McKean Leprosarium. Some of the group had received treatment at McKean and converted to Christianity there, and when they returned to Nan, they convinced others in the group to also convert. The fact that they were socially ostracized finally caused most of them to migrate as a group to land purchased for them

by McKean, where they formed a leper colony partially supported from the leprosarium. This colony remained entirely Christian as new lepers invariably converted to Christianity after they moved into the colony. The church grew primarily through natural increase, however, and today there are only a few leper members left. The village remains entirely Christian.

The fifth Christian village in Nan Province contains the *Prasattham Church*, located at Ban Faikeo, Tambon Faikeo, Amphur Muang. This community originated as an out-cast leper village containing fewer than twenty inhabitants and was entirely converted to Christianity in about 1937 by a leper evangelist from the McKean Leprosarium. The community eventually became a government leper colony and successfully converted to Christianity all lepers who came to live there. There are now two churches in the community, representing two different Protestant groups. The District Five church is the smaller of the two. Testimony from leper Christians in both the Phantasanya and Prasattham Churches indicates that religion has played an important part in community formation and the maintenance of community identity down to the present. Their home villages and even families rejected them because of their disease and because of the belief that leprosy is caused by a lack of merit. It was their *kam* (karma) that caused them to have leprosy. They felt religiously rejected because they were prevented from even participating in merit-making ceremonies, and in most cases they were exiled from their homes.

Table IV Summary of Community Formation Among Category Four Congregations

Church	Founded	Members	Initial Stage	Formative Stage	Continuing Stage
Phornsawan	1919	86	Integrated	Separate	Separate
Wang Haen	c. 1923	24	Integrated	Separate	Separate
Prasattham	c. 1937	152	Integrated	Separate	Separate
Phantasanya	1948	62	Integrated	Separate	Separate
D. Damrongtham	1957	339	Separate	Separate	Separate

## SUMMARY

Table V summarizes the experience of these eighteen Christian groups and communities over the course of the three periods of the founding, initial movement, and long-term development of each group.

Table V Trends in Christian Communal Separation in Nan Province

Category	Initial Stage	Formative Stage	Continuing Stage
Integrated	15	6	3
Mixed	0	2	7
Separate Quarter	0	0	3
Totally Separate	3	10	5

The figures contained in Table V reflect both the general trend of Christian communities to live

apart and a more recent trend towards more complex relations with the larger society. In the beginning, most Christian converts lived among their neighbors and former co-religionists. Within periods varying from one or two years up to several decades, depending on local factors such as size, land availability, and the presence of a church building, the Christians tended to establish separate communities. If we factor out the city church and the Kamu congregations as being special cases, ten of the remaining Christian communities either remained separate (3 cases) or found Christian villages of their own (7 cases). Another Christian group, the one at Ban Khon, moved rapidly towards separation. Only four of the fifteen congregations did not enter a clearly defined formative stage that involved separation from their Buddhist neighbors.

In later years, the Christians have tended to preserve their separate communities, although "encroachment" by Buddhist neighbors and the decay of Christian communities themselves has, in a number of cases, led to a more complex picture. Even so, the number of Christian groups fully integrated into society has continued to decline and today numbers only three, two having ten or less adult members each and the third being a Kamu congregation. Eight of the remaining fifteen congregations remain sharply separated from their larger society, while the other seven demonstrate a less clear tendency towards separation. Included in these seven is the Silaphet Church, which has moved towards reintegration primarily because of a loss of former members living near the church building. Also included is the large Kamu Hatplahaeng group, where the northern Thai members live clustered together. If we, again, factor out the city church, only the same four rural groups mentioned at the end of the last paragraph remain. They have shown the least tendency towards separation, the strongest inclination to remain at least partially integrated with their Buddhist neighbors. Even in these cases, the general trend, admittedly weak, has been towards communal separatism.

### Commentary

This survey of Christian communal separatism in Nan Province identifies three religious factors that "trigger" the separation of religious groups geographically, as well as socially. *First*, persecution has encouraged separation to take place. That persecution is of three distinct groups, namely persecution of "witches" (phi ka), lepers, and Christian converts and led to the establishment of separate Christian villages at Ban Nongha (*muad* Phornthara), the Wiang Sa Church, the Phornsawan Church, the Ban Wang Haen group, the Ban Faikeo group, and the Phatasanya Church. The Daen Phana Church, yet another separate Christian village, is an offspring of the Phornsawan Church. *Second*, migration by Christians to prime farmland that was available because local people believed the land was infested by evil spirits. The Silaphet and Daen Phana churches both established separate Christian villages because their members' changed belief systems allowed them to occupy land other people were afraid to live on. *Third*, the building of church buildings frequently accompanied or, perhaps, even triggered movement towards communal separation at Ban Khon, Ban Som, the Khanthathip Church, Ban Pa Phae, Ban Hatplahaeng, and the Wiang Sa Church.

Conversion to Christianity, in sum, caused a transformation in social relationships, which in turn generated a change in communal identity. Both Christians and their Buddhist neighbors at various times and in various ways expressed a feeling that conversion destroyed that unity. Christians expressed this feeling in their tendency to live apart, and their neighbors expressed it by putting social pressure on the Christians. The act of conversion to Christianity provoked a reaction on the part of the converts' Buddhist neighbors. It was not the simple act of conversion, however, that in and of itself caused the reaction, but rather the manner in which Christians refused to take part in their village's religious life, which their community took as an affront and a threat. The tensions that arose had to do both with the converts' conceptions of what it meant to be a Christian and their neighbors' conception of what it meant to live together in a community.

The Presbyterian missionaries who worked in Nan Province played an important part in defining for their converts what it meant to be a Christian. They taught a dualistic ideology, which divided all human reality into two distinct, separate spheres of good and evil, God and Satan, and judged northern Thai society to be essentially evil because of its dependence on the "heathen superstition and idolatry" of traditional religion. They demanded that Christian converts divorce themselves from indigenous systems of religious practices. The missionaries, in effect, sought to create a separate Protestant social system, which would be the seed for eventually achieving the total Christianization of Nan Province.[5]

The missionaries functioned as patrons, teachers, and role models for the Christian groups they founded, and one still finds much of their thinking imbedded in northern Thai Christian self-understanding. Older Christians in Nan Province, who grew up in the missionary era, allude to the old "rule" by which they all lived, namely "*laeotae phokhruwa*," meaning, literally, "whatever the Father Teacher says." The phrase reflects the willingness of Christian clients to act and think as their missionary patrons wished them to act and think. Missionary teaching about the converts' relationship to their former religion, thus, defined important elements of what it meant to be a Christian. As one of the Fifth District's oldest members stated it, being a Christian meant being on the Christian "rolls," not going to the temple, not engaging in spirit propitiation, and praying to God. He placed particular emphasis, as did the missionaries, on not having anything to do with phi as central to being a Christian.[6] Christians throughout the province still avow that it is a sin (bap) for Christians to take part in spirit propitiation or merit-making activities, and some will state that it is wrong for them even to enter temple grounds. The tendency towards communal separation lies inherent in these ideas. When asked why his congregation had moved from its original location at Ban San to establish a separate village at Ban Choko, pholuang [Grandfather] Chom, the oldest living member of the Phornsawan Church, averred in his clipped, direct idiom, "*khonkhityukapkhith khonkhityupokhonnok manbamo*," meaning that. "Christians should live with Christians. It is wrong (inappropriate) for Christians to live among "outsiders." [7] Not all Christian groups acted on this explicit demand for separation, but the majority did, and Christians nearly everywhere acted on the impulse behind the words.

It must be said, however, that the converts' tendency towards separation involved much more than merely acting according to the teachings of their missionary patrons. Some of their neighbors reacted in negative ways when the converts ceased attending temple activities, propitiating the spirits, giving proper deference to monks, and paying the respect expected of all members of the community to the religion of their parents and ancestors. Christians tell vivid stories of numerous instances when their neighbors engaged in name-calling, disturbed Christian worship services and evangelistic meetings, taunted Christians with the name of Jesus, and even excluded them from using the village wells or borrowing communal possessions from the temple. Christians in their 30s and 40s remember being teased and socially excluded at school because of their religion, and every Christian community has its stories, usually bracketed with the comment that "these things" do not happen any more. During World War II, in particular, Christians suffered overt, at times harsh persecution. Several were jailed, churches and Christian institutions were closed, public worship was forbidden throughout the province, and missionary property was seized. Christian civil servants had to renounce their religion or lose their positions. Elderly Christians sometimes express bitter feelings about their treatment at the hand of government officials and even their own neighbors during the War. The appearance of Christianity in a village, thus, disrupted social relationships to the point that Buddhists and Christians more often than not found it better to live apart from each other. At times, the pressure towards separation was intense, such as Ban San, which gave rise to three Christian villages. In other cases, particularly at Ban Som, physical separation has taken place only gradually and incompletely.

Pho Chom's injunction that Christians should live with Christians not only expressed missionary

teachings, but it also articulated the northern Thai perception that a village's peace, harmony, and prosperity depended upon religious unity. Villagers believed that one should not leave off from the religion of their parents, and they described their religious faith as being *truihitpohmae*, that is according to father and mother. Those who failed to follow traditional beliefs and practices traditional ceremonies for any reason were condemned as *khud*, meaning they had done something wrong and "ugly" (*singthimaidi maingam*). Those who thus betrayed the faith of their fathers and mothers would necessarily experience decline and failure in their lives.[8]

Animistic beliefs, rites, and practices formed an important element in those traditional beliefs. The *phi* (spirits) gave meaning and order to daily life, both in families and in the villages, whatever the task or context in which people were involved. Thus, for example, villagers held that worshipping the *phi* of their ancestors (*phipuya*) provided a sense of secure peacefulness and happiness in family life. In the event of a marriage, a "house moving," building a new house, or any other event in the life of the family, the family must inform and involve the spirits in order to assure the success of the enterprise in question. The spirits provided a secure context for daily life, which unified both families and villages through shared beliefs and rites, a unity that extended into the past as well as the present. People believed that through the spirits they maintained relationships with those who had died. Village people, indeed, encountered *phi* in every aspect of daily life and in every geographical area of their communities and fields. The spirits inhabited their homes, their fields, and the streams and forests that surrounded the community.[9]

The propitiation of these spirits was not merely a matter of preference. The *phi* could be dangerous if not dealt with according to the proper forms and rituals, and angry spirits had a variety of ways for expressing their displeasure. They often possessed people, so it was said, and "drank their blood," causing the possessed to take on a sallow, yellowish complexion. The *phi* could also disturb people's dreams, cause illnesses, disasters, and death. People especially feared the spirits of those killed in an accident or by murder. The failure, thus, to attend to the propitiation of the spirits could have disastrous consequences, for an individual, his or her family, and the entire village, since the activities of angered spirits affected more than just the person or persons directly involved. In other situations, family and clan spirits punished improper or immoral behavior.[10] The spirit world, in short, enforced village unity by making personal and family relationships with the *phi* a matter of concern for the whole community. The community functioned best when the members of each extended family maintained regular and generally friendly relations with the spirits of their ancestors through the ritual activities of the family. These were largely conducted by older women, although as Davis points out for Nan, men could conduct those rituals as well.[11] Families and villages had a religious unity based on shared family and community spirits, which unity provided meaning in life through rituals and beliefs. Northern Thai animism gave people a clear sense of who they were in relationship to their families and communities, and it provided stability to communal relationships.

Even such seemingly personal matters as merit-making (*kanthambun*) have communal significance. Ingersoll observes that the "beliefs and practices of merit" are important to the formation and identity of Thai village life, and he argues that while making merit is a highly individual matter, people "acquire and possess merit entirely in association with other people." Indeed, they increase their own merit when they acquire it socially and provide others opportunities to join in merit-making activities so that an interdependent relationship exists between those who want to make merit. Merit-making activity also has a reflexive influence on the life of the whole village, making it a better, happier place to live. The prosperity, unity, peace, and happiness of a village also directly depends upon the willingness of its people to make merit. The communal solidarity villagers experience in merit-making, furthermore, extends both backwards and forwards in time because it is tied to one's ancestors and descendants, one's own

previous and future lives, those one has known and will know.[12]

Taken together, the northern Thai villagers' regard for the "faith of their fathers and mothers," concern for spirit propitiation, and valuation of merit making expressed core elements of their communal identity. To break that faith, cease that propitiation, and leave off from that merit making threatened the villagers' shared sense of unity, peace, prosperity, and happiness in living together. Missionary Protestantism, in contrast, taught its converts that as Christians they had to do these very things, acts which were most likely to incur the displeasure of their neighbors. Conversion to Christianity, thus, destroyed the core social bonds of traditional beliefs, spirit propitiation, and merit making and created a new set of relationships between the Christians and their neighbors. It is in this new relationship between the Christians and their neighbors that we see the significance of religion for the formation of community in northern Thailand. Christians no longer looked to the *wat* (temple complex) as the center of the village. They no longer met their neighbors to engage in all of the activities, which the villagers did there together. They treated the temple, instead, as if it was alien and even hostile territory. Christians no longer depended on participation in the village's religious life for their own well being nor were they themselves to be depended upon to participate in the various religious acts deemed necessary to the common good.

Conversion, in consequence, opened the door to the "secularization" of those villages where Christian groups emerged. By introducing religious plurality into community life, Christians attempted to relate to their neighbors in ways that we associate with secularity, that is to divorce their relations with non-Christian relatives and neighbors of any religious significance. Both Buddhist and Christian villagers, as a rule, however, sooner or later rejected the secularization and pluralization of village life and sought to restore the community's traditional religious unity. That northern Thai sense of village unity encouraged both groups to seek communal distance, which frequently assumed geographical as well as social expression as the Christians withdrew to form their own villages. The Protestant Christian experience, then, points to the historical and contemporary persistence of the traditional sense of community in the villages of Nan Province. Even today, the general trend among Protestants is towards communal separation, and while it is true that there have been counter trends, those trends have far more to do with the decay of Christian communities than any movement towards communal integration.

David P. Chandler's *History of Cambodia* proposes a schema for understanding the Cambodian village, which sets forth three concentric levels of community, beginning with "civilized" villages located on waterways, involved in commerce, and incorporating formal social structures. Around these *kompong*, historically, were found rice-growing villages, which centered themselves on a source of water and a temple. They stood at the boundary between civilization and wilderness, occupied lands and the forest. The third type of villages are those found in the forest, widely scattered and isolated from each other. Chandler notes that in times of crisis people from the rice-growing villages were prone to flee into the forest.[13] Without presuming to debate its applicability to village life in Nan generally, Chandler's schema does help us understand the religious dynamic at work in the formation of Christian communities in Nan.

---

Originally presented as a paper at the Fifth International Conference on Thai Studies, London, July 1993. This version has been heavily edited to improve the clarity of the paper.

#### Notes

[1] See Kummol Chinawong, *chang kham* [Chang Kham] (Chiang Mai: Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand, 1992) and Prasit Pongudom, *pokao maedoem: prawattsat chumchon khristian doi saket* [Ancestors: History of the Doi Saket Christian Communities] (Chiang Mai: Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand, 1993).

- [2] See Laurance c. Judd, *Chao Rai Thai: Dry Rice Farmers in Northern Thailand* (Bangkok: Suriyaban, 1977), 32; and Somchai Na Nakon Phanom, "samaikonprawatisat" ["Pre-History"] in *muang nan: boranakhadi, prawatisat, lae sinlapa* [Muang Nan: Archeology, History, and Art] (Bangkok: Amarin Printing Group, 1987), 31-32.
- [3] For the history of Protestantism in northern Thailand, see Daniel McGilvary, *A Half Century Among the Siamese and the Lao* (New York: Revell, 1912); and Herbert R. Swanson, *Krishcak Muang Nua: A Study in Northern Thai Church History* (Bangkok: Chuan Press, 1984).
- [4] *Phi ka* are clan spirits whose rites have been abandoned. They are said to inhabit all the members of the offending family and are deeply feared. The families are thus also known as *phi ka*. See Richard B. Davis, *Muang Metaphysics: A Study of Northern Thai Myth and Ritual* (Bangkok: Pandora, 1984), 58-9.
- [5] Herbert R. Swanson, "This Heathen People: the Cognitive Sources of American Missionary Westernizing Activities in Noathern Siam, 1867-1889" (M.A. thesis, University of maryland, 1987); and Herbert R. Swanson, "muandungkhaminkapbun: khritasansa naibotbotprawatisatthai" ["No Middle Ground: Christianity in the Thai Histgorical Context,"] a paper presented to the Conference on "Christianity in the Thai Historical Context," Chiang Mai, 26-28 March 1992.
- [6] Mok Phromwangkhwa. 90 years' old. nterview with authors. Ban Don Chai, 25 November 1991.
- [7] Chom Chaosan. 88 years old. Interview with the authors. Ban Mai Huai Yang. 15 October 1991.
- [8] Arunrut Wichiankhieo, "*kanwikhrosangkhomchiangmai samairattanakosininton ton tamtonchabapbailannaiphak nua* ["An Analysis of Chiang Mai Society in the Early Bangkok Era According to Northern Thai Palm Leaf Manuscripts] (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1977), 277; and, Mani Phayomyong, "*kwamchualaepraephanikhonglanna*" ["The Beliefs and Customs of Lanna"] in *lannathai: anusornphrarachaphithipoetphraboramarachanusawarisamkasat* [Lanna Thai: On the Occasion of the Dediation of the Three Kings' Statue] (Chiang Mai: Thiphanat Printing, 1984), 134.
- [9] Sommai Pramchit, *rabopkwamchualaesasananailanna*, ["The Belief and Religious System of Lanna"], A paper presented to the Seminar on "The condition of Lanna Studies," Chiang Mai, 22-24 August 1986; Davis, *Muang Metaphysics*, 36; Konrad Kingshill, *et. al.*, *kantittamkanplianplaeng laephatanakarn khongmuban naiphakcua khongpratathai chuangraya 30 pi* ["Tracing the Changes and Development of Northern Thai Villages over a Thirty Year Period (Ku Daeng Village)"] (Chiang Mai: Payap University, 1985, 24; and "*huabaan*," ["Village High Points"], *chumchonphathana* [Community Development] 1, 3 (September-October 1986), 2-3.
- [10] Davis, *Muang Metaphysics*, 257ff.
- [11] Davis, *Muang Metaphysics*, 56.
- [12] Jaspas Ingersoll, "Merit and Identity in Village Thailand," in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society*, ed. G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), 219-251. See also S. J. Tambiah, "The Ideology of Merit and the Social Correlates of Buddhism in a Thai illage," in *Dialectical in Practicial Religion*, ed. E. R. Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 41-121.
- [13] David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (2nd ed., Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1993), 102-104.