

CHAPTER 8

A Contextualized Presentation of the Gospel in Thai Society

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Introduction

Protestant missionaries first came to Thailand in 1828 and have worked without interruption to the present. However, the response to the message of the Gospel has been disturbingly slow when contrasted to the amount of time missionaries have been in the country and to the amount of effort expended in bringing the Gospel to the Thai people. There is no doubt that the Church in Thailand is growing. The latest edition of *Operation World* by Patrick Johnstone estimates adherents to Christianity to be 1.62% of the population now.¹ This breaks down to .42% Catholic and 1.18% Protestant. This is a significant community of almost 1 million people in a total population of just over 61 million. However, a large number of the Christian population is found among tribal peoples meaning that the actual percentage among Thai people is still quite low. Alex Smith

found the following comment from a missionary to Thailand nearly one hundred years ago to be expressive of the feelings of many who have struggled to make Christ known in this land, "I believe there is no country more open to unrestrained missionary effort than Siam, but I believe that there can hardly be a country in which it is harder to make an impression."²

Reasons for this difficulty in gaining a response to the Gospel have been discussed in detail by Smith in his book *Siamese Gold*, which focuses on the history of the Christian movement in Thailand to the end of the 1970s through a church growth lens.³ Smith points out that the obstacles include not only problems related to the Thai religion and culture but also to missionary methods and practices. Tom Wisely, in his doctoral dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary, reviews the work of a number of the researchers on the growth of the church in Thailand and concludes that Protestant Christianity is a struggling religious minority and that "one of the major factors for its slow growth and its continuing struggle is its westernity"⁴ Inevitably, however, discussion regarding the resistance of the Thai to the Gospel returns to the fact that Thailand presents unique difficulties since it is

one of the few countries where Theravada Buddhism has traditionally been all but *de rigueur* and Buddhist concepts inform the speech and thought-forms and feelings of the great majority, if not all of Thai society.⁵

Although there are a number of factors involved in creating the feeling among the Thai that Christianity is foreign and the religion of the white man, the tremendous influence of Theravada Buddhism undoubtedly carries a great deal of weight in the matter. It becomes obvious that if we are to avoid, as Frances Hudgins calls it, "reciting conundrums" to our Thai listeners, then we must endeavor to contextualize our message so that the mind steeped in Buddhist thought and culture can begin to understand.⁶

The Need for Message Contextualization

I came to Thailand in 1986 excited to learn the Thai language so that I could begin to share the Good News with my newfound Thai friends. It did not take long for me to realize that even though I was speaking Thai, and people for the most part were polite and respectful as we talked, creating understanding involved a great deal more than simply encoding words in the local language. Even when we know intellectually that people think differently, the temptation to assume that our listeners are making the same meaning of our words as we intend exists.

Although there were a number of experiences over time that helped to bring the reality of the complexity of communication home to me, one stands out in particular. I was conducting an English lesson with a couple of Thai high school students and we were working through Luke 5 in the English text. We came to the point where I wanted to discuss the meaning of the passage and some of its implications, and since they were unable to converse easily in English, I said that we would switch into Thai. I asked the question, why did Peter fall on his knees and say that he was a sinful man? Without a moment's hesitation the young man said, "Because he killed all of those fish!"

I have to admit that his response caught me totally off guard. He was reading the text through his "Buddhist eyes" of the principle of not taking life. It made me realize in a much clearer fashion that the worldview, beliefs, values, and assumptions of my listeners were causing them to make different meanings than what I was intending, even when those understandings did not surface in conversation.

This started me on the process of trying to understand the meanings that people would be making in their minds from the terms and concepts that we use when we share the Gospel. It became clear to me that Thais were not simply rejecting the Gospel or Christianity; in reality, the situation was much more complicated. At

least part of their lack of response is a rejection of the linguistic and stylistic wrapping in which missionaries and local Christians have presented the message. When the "wrapping" makes no sense, it keeps them from ever getting to the gift of the Good News inside.

Learning to wrap the message in a way that makes sense to local people is a part of the broader task known as contextualization. Hesselgrave and Rommen define contextualization as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revelation and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.⁷ This is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing, Bible translation, interpretation and application, incarnational lifestyle, evangelism, Christian instruction, church planting and growth, church organization, worship style, and all the elements of what it means to be a community of faith in this world. This contextualization model takes seriously the message of the Bible as well as that of culture, and attempts to communicate the supra-cultural message in a way that is relevant to the hearer. Stephen Bevans calls this the "translation" model, which is an application of the principles of dynamic equivalence translation theory to the doing of theology.⁸

Endeavoring to do this kind of dynamic equivalence theologizing is an arduous task, which must be undertaken by a wide variety of workers both local and expatriate over an extended period of time. The purpose of this paper is to make a small contribution to this broader task in the specific area of contextualizing the communication of the Gospel message.

The material developed here grows out of hundreds of conversations with Thai people for over 16 years and reflects my interest in training Thai Christians in sharing their faith with their Buddhist neighbors. There are two assumptions that guide me in the development of this project. The first is that in sharing the Gospel, we need an approach where dialogue can take place, questions can

be asked, and answers attempted. This is because, in my experience, a large part of the sharing of our faith is first the correcting of misunderstandings before one can move to the heart of the message. A canned approach that consists of a monologue may be politely listened to, but it does not create room for building true understanding. Second, it is my conviction that local Christians need to have a flexible track to run on when sharing the Gospel. This track provides a coherent sequence whereby a person can present and illustrate key points of the Gospel in a single conversation or over many meetings. The track allows for multiple entry points, the chance to ask questions and yet provides a way to share the message in a way that makes sense and has logical consistency.

I will begin with an examination of the religious context of Thai society consisting of a brief overview of classical Buddhism, a look at the broad religious context of Thailand, and a discussion of how Buddhism is integrated into Thai life. I then illustrate what the Gospel message sounds like to the ears of a Thai Buddhist listener. The final section develops some starting points to share the Gospel and the looks in some detail at each of the major points of the Gospel message.

The Religious Context of Thai Society

This section will begin with an examination of the major tenets of Theravada Buddhism, and then look in overview fashion at the belief systems present in the country and some of common conceptions people have about religion. The final part will study the actual practice of Buddhism in Thailand.

The Basic Tenets of Theravada Buddhism

The essence of Buddhism is found in the four Noble Truths, which Siddhartha Guatama discovered when he received

enlightenment.⁹ The term "Buddha" is a title and means one who is enlightened. Following the three principal transmission routes as Buddhism expanded out of India, there are today three major streams of Buddhism. The form of Buddhism followed in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia is known as Hinayana (The Smaller Vehicle) or Theravada (The Way of the Elders). It is considered to be the stricter version that aligns itself most closely with the teaching and practice of the Buddha during his lifetime.

The First Noble Truth

The first of these truths concerns suffering or *dukkha*. All existence is marked by suffering, the cycle of birth, death, and decay. All unpleasantness, sorrow, pain, and being separated from the pleasant is *dukkha*.¹⁰ In order to better understand the nature of suffering, we must look at the nature of reality as explained by the Buddha. There are three characteristics of all existence: *anicca*, which speaks of impermanence, *dukkha*, and *anatta*, which means no soul or no self.¹¹ Thus in Buddhist thinking, all sentient beings are merely bundles of aggregates, *khandas*,¹² that are impermanent and constantly changing. "To the Buddhists, separate individual existence is really a fiction."¹³

The Second Noble Truth

This background then leads to the Second Noble Truth concerning the cause of suffering, which is desire or *tanha*. *Tanha* is the desire for existence, the desire to preserve self (which really does not exist), and the desire for things.¹⁴ This desire is caused by *avijja*, or ignorance. When people are ignorant of the nature of reality as expressed in the three characteristics of existence and ignorant of the First Noble Truth, then a desire for existence arises, and this desire creates karma (Thai-*kam*).¹⁵

Karma is a rather complicated concept that is variously understood within the framework of Buddhism. However, in its most basic sense, karma means action, which can be good or bad or neutral, but which produces a reaction.¹⁶ Wan Petchsongkram notes that karma causes one to be born, it reinforces by making good deeds better and evil worse, it acts as a barrier by standing in the way either positively or negatively of the apparent course of one's life, and it can cause reversal of one's circumstances.¹⁷ Thus it is karma that causes one to be caught in an endless cycle of rebirths and the consequent suffering. As an unchanging law of cause and effect, karma cannot be escaped; one will always be paid back, for both good deeds and bad, at some point in this life or in future lives.

The Third Noble Truth

The Third Noble Truth has to do with the cessation of suffering. When one is freed from the cycle of rebirths and of suffering by extinguishing desire, one enters Nirvana (Pali: *nibbana*; Thai: *nippaan*). "Nirvana is cessation, extinction, and detachment, but not only that, it is unconditioned and uncompounded, and it is stopping or eliminating causation."¹⁸

The Fourth Noble Truth

The Fourth Noble Truth deals with the path to salvation, the cessation of suffering. Known as the Noble Eightfold Path, this consists of right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, mindfulness, and concentration.¹⁹ This state is attainable by one's own efforts through renouncing the world and following this path. Meditation plays an important role in following the path and in renouncing the world. As it is practiced, there are two stages: *kammatthana* and *vipassana*.²⁰ The first form helps in creating detachment and understanding the impermanence of everything, while

From *vipassana* arises wisdom...and when this wisdom comes we are able to relinquish our grasp on everything. We can cut ourselves off from the world for we are not any longer intoxicated with it.²¹

In this state, ignorance and desire have been destroyed and attachment has been broken so that one can enter *nibbana*.²²

Overview of Religion in Thailand

A. Thomas Kirsch points out that there are three basic subsystems that make up what he calls Thai religion.²³ This consists of Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanism, and animism.²⁴ Kirsch notes that these three subsystems are, "functionally specialized so that they mutually support each other and rarely conflict."²⁵ John Davis says that Asian Theravardians

see no inconsistency between an organic Animistic world view with its multitudinous gods and spirits, and a mechanistic Buddhist world view; they marry conveniently and live harmoniously together.²⁶

In addition to these three subsystems, there is a continuum of practice within Buddhism itself.²⁷ There are intellectual Buddhists who emphasize the philosophical aspects, liberal Buddhists who try to conform Buddhism to modern life, folk Buddhists who practice traditional Buddhism in its modified animistic form, and nominal Buddhists, who consider themselves Buddhist by virtue of being Thai but do not participate in Buddhist practices or ceremonies.

For those who practice Buddhism at least to some degree, it is useful to think in terms of a continuum with *nippanistic* Buddhists on one end and karmatic Buddhists on the other. *Nippan* is the Thai term for Nirvana, the state that one enters upon breaking out of the cycle of rebirth. There are relatively few *nippanistic* Buddhists who are seriously endeavoring to follow the Eightfold Path of classical Buddhism. The majority of the practitioners can be considered

karmatic Buddhists for whom the essence of their religious practice is the collecting of good merit in order to be reborn into a better state in the future. Here the focus is not so much upon the actual practice of Buddhism as on the ritual elements of making merit. For these people, the goal of liberation from their karma to reach Nirvana is too difficult and impractical, given the demands of daily life. The goal of bettering their karma through making merit via a variety of means becomes the core of their practice. This is the orientation of the folk Buddhist, mixing both Buddhist and animistic practice without any sense of incompatibility.

In discussing with a Thai Buddhist monk this issue of the compatibility of animistic shrine behavior with classical Buddhist doctrine, the explanation was couched in terms of the "strength" of a person's belief and understanding of truth. A strong person can walk up steps without any help, but a weaker person needs to use a railing. For those who can see the truth of the *dhamma* there is no need for animistic practices, but for other people who are not yet at that point to be able to understand the truth, the "railing" of spirit shrines and such beliefs is helpful.

There are two final points that are important to consider when looking at the religious context of Thai society. First, the Thai equate being Thai with being a Buddhist. They make a connection between nationality and religion. This is a major factor in their view that Christianity is a foreign religion and a stumbling-block in their understanding of the Christian religion. Their assumption is that all "white" people, like Europeans and Americans, are Christian and that everything they see in tourists and through media represent Christian values and behavior.

A second point is that Thais maintain the view that all religions are equally good because they teach us to be good people (*thuk sasana di muan gan sawn hai rao ben khon di*). Nearly every witnessing conversation I have ever been involved in has begun and ended with this saying. What is interesting is that although this is

verbalized frequently when Thais come into contact with people of other religions, they do not mean by it that they completely believe in the true relativity of all religion. First, this saying seems to be a way for them to politely respond to the encounter with those of another religion in a face-saving and calm manner that avoids any tension of opposing beliefs. The reality is that they do not want their children or a relative or their own people to change their religion to another supposedly equally good option. Equality of religion is espoused, but it does not mean people feel that they should be able to choose freely among the different options. To be Thai is to be a Buddhist. Second, I have both read things written by monks and spoken with people who will use this saying and at the same time show their belief that Buddhism is the "real" truth by reinterpreting Christianity in Buddhist terms.

The Practice of Buddhism in Thailand

As can be seen from the discussion in the previous section, there is a wide range of belief and practice among those who call themselves Buddhists. In this section I want to examine how Thais in general approach their Buddhist faith.²⁸ These remarks are of necessity an oversimplification and generalization, but they are indicative of broad patterns found in Thai society.

The first point that must be made is that Thais on the whole have a limited knowledge of philosophical Buddhism.²⁹ I have seen a government study that came out some years ago indicating that 75% of the people in Bangkok have never been to a temple. Suntaree Komin's research on Thai values showed that people in the city showed increased activity at spirit shrines and less of a connection to temple activities.³⁰ Secondly, as mentioned above, there is a strong animistic influence in Thai religion. In a practical sense, this means that the chief concern of many is not how to follow in detail the tenets of philosophical Buddhism, but rather how to properly relate

to the spirit world so as to gain help, peace, power, and other tangible benefits in the present life. Third, a survey has shown that for Thai farmers, their main concern was about money and personal security and not religious perfection.³¹ Another survey done among converts in central Thailand showed that for 53% the love of God was a significant factor in their conversion (with 25% making it the primary cause).³² This shows that for a large number of people, the deep human needs of love, acceptance, and security take precedence over the doctrinal considerations, which make the love of God a stumbling block for the strict Buddhist.³³ Finally, the hope of Nirvana is for most people very far off and not a practical reality.³⁴

What then precisely are the "core" beliefs that Thais in general understand from their Buddhist background? Most would probably agree that playing a central role are the concepts of karma, merit (*bun*), and particularly the making of merit (*tam bun*) in order to improve one's lot both in this life and in following existences.³⁵ Kirsch also argues that reincarnation is a key concept as it relates to the concept of karma with its accumulation of rewards and punishments that are worked out over many lifetimes.³⁶ If many people do not completely understand the Four Noble Truths, they do probably understand (from their own personal experience) that life has suffering and that there is a cause and effect relationship in all of this. The common man also has some concept of the necessity to keep the moral precepts, which are a part of the Buddha's teaching. In the lower level of the *dhamma*,³⁷ these precepts are embodied in the five prohibitions (*sil ha*).³⁸ These prohibitions are certainly not always kept, but at the least they provide a common moral framework, which everyone understands, and give people an understanding of wrongdoing that centers on the actual committing of an evil deed or act.³⁹

In a practical sense, people are interested in bettering their present lives or succeeding ones by the collection of merit and the avoidance of demerit (*baab*). The other-worldly aspects of true