

The challenge to the church in Burma in the field of theological construction lies in three crucial directions and each is a huge field in itself: the communication of the message (kerygma), the expression of the church's service (diakonia), and the reorganization of its fellowship (koinonia). All require sustained and prayerful efforts as well as spirit-filled insights. Can the church successfully undertake these? The promise of the Lord of the church remains:

"My grace is sufficient for thee, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

### NOTES

1. Adoniram Judson's journal entry of June 6, 1819.
2. *Ibid.*
3. An English translation was given as an appendix to Volume II of Francis Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of the Rev. Adoniram Judson, D.D.* (New York: Sheldon, 1866).
4. English translations of both are reproduced in F. Wayland's study of Judson.
5. Adoniram Judson's journal entries of February 20 and 24, 1820.
6. For examples, "Toward an Understanding" (in Burmese), and a brief summary of the commission's activities in Dr. Pe Maung Tin, "The Study of Buddhism in Burma" *South East Asia Journal of Theology* I, 3 (1960) 60-62.

## IV: THAILAND

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### Points of Theological Friction

The particular historical and religious background of Thailand necessitates a study of the encounter between Thailand's interpretation of history and Israel's theology of history. This primary encounter between Thailand and Israel "the troubler" (1 Kings 18:17), prepares Thailand for the decisive encounter between Thailand and Christ, "the stumbling block."

#### THE LORD'S CONTROVERSY

Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing and committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder follows murder. Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish. (Hos. 4:1-3)

Israel is accused. The indictment of the Lord is forcefully presented. This is the Lord's court controversy with Israel, "the fewest of all peoples" (Deut. 7:7). He who initiated the Covenant relationship with Israel and remained faithful to it, now—on the basis of that very Covenant relationship—embarks on a controversy.<sup>1</sup> The controversy is of a particular kind. It is a revelational, or perhaps we should say, an "antionocratic" controversy.<sup>2</sup> The Prosecutor, in his person and word, rejects man's stubborn efforts (Deut. 9:6) to confine him in an ontocratic cage framed by man's own understanding of the cosmos and of his existence. From the "incomparably high" *beyond*, the Lord stages an assault upon man's ontocratic complacency with his piercing "Therefore."<sup>3</sup>

The Covenant is historical. So is the controversy. The Lord's antionocratic controversy vibrates in the heart of salvation history, and from there the waves of its vibration reach out to the broad

horizon of mission history, which is a charismatic history within the great and confused world history.

The Asian world has been invaded by the antionocratic controversy of the Lord. Whenever and wherever it is caught and entangled in the controversy it is not free to evade an experience of radical discontinuity from its own traditional valuations, and thus the controversy has become the new leaven for revolutionary social change in Asia. M. M. Thomas writes: "The Asian revolution cannot be understood apart from the impact of the West on Asia. Therefore interpreting the Asian revolution means interpreting also the Western impact on Asia."<sup>4</sup>

#### THE ASIAN REVOLUTION

I understand this to mean that behind the Asian revolution lies the Western revolution, and behind the Western revolution lies the Lord's controversy staged in the life of Israel.

In what ways has this controversy inaugurated by the Lord reached Southeast Asia? Unless the extremely rare visitors from the Christian West had more of an impact than we are aware of, it would seem that the Lord's controversy had not arrived before 1511 when the Portuguese Alphonso d'Albuquerque, conqueror of Goa, arrived at Malacca from Cochin with a fleet of eighteen vessels. Albuquerque's conquest of Malacca, on August 10, 1511, came only thirteen years after the arrival of Vasco da Gama at Calicut in the Portuguese flagship *San Gabriel*, and when Francis Xavier was five years old. The fleet of Albuquerque was propelled by the power of greed for the wealth of spices and carried the cross of Christ and cannon as did the *San Gabriel*. The breath and contents of the Lord's controversy came contained in the ugly vessels of colonial rapacity! Through the period of immense suffering under the militarily superior colonial West, the East was brought closer to the revolutionary controversy which the Lord had initiated. God's providence and human confusion! Theologically speaking, this is perhaps the most crucial event to touch the depth of Asian existence and history, introducing the ferment of disturbing theological discontinuity into the continuous ontocratic culture of the East. God's saving presence ("the right hand of God") worked upon Asia through the violent storm of man's exploitation of his neighbors ("the left hand of God")! Was the colonial penetration

into Southeast Asia the "Nebuchadnezzar" whom the Lord hired to bring his controversy into Asia?<sup>5</sup> One must not, however, overlook the sacrifices made by both the Catholic and Protestant missionaries during this period. Whenever Christ was preached, the Lord's controversy challenged spiritual self-satisfaction and social slothfulness of the Southeast Asian nations with unavoidable persistence.

Thailand is a land of Theravada Buddhism. The Thailand Official Yearbook lists five religions (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism) and four doctrines (Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, and Animism). Of the population, 93.4 percent profess Theravada Buddhism, 3.9 percent Islam, and 0.5 percent Christianity. Religious freedom, however, has been fully recognized by every constitution since the 1932 revolution.

Portuguese Dominican priests first brought Christianity to Thailand in the sixteenth century. This history of the Catholic mission in Thailand is a combination of stormy persecution and relatively precarious peace, at least in its earlier stages. By 1949 there were 52,557 baptized Catholics in the kingdom. One of the earliest Protestant missionaries to Thailand was Karl Gützlaff (1828-31), but the missionary who represented the presence of Christian witness with far wider influence and penetration after the brief stay of Gützlaff was Dr. Dan Beach Bradley (1835-93). In North Thailand, the amazing figure of Dr. Daniel McGilvary, an American Presbyterian missionary, dominated the scene (1867-1911). His imprint of energetic evangelism over half a century is still vividly felt throughout the north. Since 1840, the main force of the Protestant mission has been sent by the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Today the Church of Christ in Thailand is a body of 24,000 Christians.

The Thai people are relative latecomers to the Indo-Chinese peninsula. Long before Thailand, as we know it today, was formed, the region came under the cultural influence of India. Indian influence was already waning when, in the thirteenth century, the Mongol invasions in Asia made it possible for the Thai, who were entering the peninsula in ever-increasing numbers, to become powerful and to develop a national identity.

Coming from China into an area which was already rich in Indianized cultures, the Thai borrowed freely from their neighbors as

they developed their own distinctive culture. Before coming into a position of power, the Thai were under the domination of the Khmers and living among the Mons. These two peoples were a fertile source of influence for the assimilating Thai. Through them the Thai inherited the cultural values of far-off India. The Mons and their Burmese neighbors passed on to the Thai Sinhalese Buddhism, which was to become the spiritual pillar of the Thai nation. The once-powerful maritime state of Srivijaya was already in decline in the thirteenth century, and the Thai shared responsibility with Majapahit for the dismemberment of its empire. Certainly, Thailand tasted the influence of its civilization.

But the influence of India and Ceylon on Thailand was not entirely secondhand. In the fourteenth century a prince of the Thai made a pilgrimage to Ceylon and India in search of relics. This prince was the grandson of the Thai chief who freed the Thai of Sukothai from Khmer domination by driving out the Khmer underlord and making his friend, Bang Klang Thao, the first Thai king of Sukothai. This king, who took the name Indraditya when he assumed his reign, was the father of Rama Khamhaeng, who brought Sukothai to its glory. The prince's pilgrimage to Ceylon and India took place during the reign of Rama Khamhaeng's devout son, Loe Thai, and on his return Loe Thai conferred upon him the title of Mahathera Sri Sradharajachulamuni Sri Ratanalankadipa Mahasami. Thus the cultural history of Thailand is a rich process of encounters and assimilation.

#### THE EUROPEAN IMPACT

The critical phase of Thailand's encounter with European powers took place during the reigns of the three Chakkri kings: Rama IV, (Mongkut, 1851-1868), Rama V, (Chulalongkorn, 1868-1910), and Rama VI, (Wachirawut, 1910-1925). Throughout the stormy Vasco da Gama era, Thailand had had to go through a series of difficult negotiations and make unwilling concessions; nevertheless it had achieved the singular distinction of maintaining its independence,<sup>6</sup> and it is the only country in Southeast Asia not colonized by the West. However, between 1851 and 1925 numerous contacts with the West, both desirable and undesirable, superficial and substantial, facilitated the advent of Western scientific ethos, political philosophy, and the "religion of Christianity" into an awakening Thailand. The

impact of these Western influences upon Thailand's traditional continuity-culture set the country on the rapid course of modernization even though, by maintaining its political independence, it "missed" a heavy dose of the "unintended gifts of Western colonialism." It is a significant historic fact that the 1932 revolution from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy was masterminded by Nai Pridi, a doctor of law from the University of Paris, and under his initiative Thailand acquired its first constitution (June 27, 1932).<sup>7</sup>

#### THE TWO THAILANDS

Thailand had managed to run her own destiny at some distance from the full force of the violent storm stirred up by Vasco da Gama. Thus one finds a "milder" mode of transition from the traditional to the revolutionary. The two mighty pillars of classic Thailand, the monarchy and Theravada Buddhism, continue to command profound respect from her people. At the same time, however, the process of modernization inspired and propelled by the "unintended gifts of Western colonialism" is actively at work. The crucial point in this connection is that this conflict between the two foci of historical forces is growing more turbulent under the shadow of the irritating presence of the autocratic controversy of the Lord. When "thus saith the Lord" came to Thailand, it was automatically given the status of a guest who is supposed to be sitting on a given seat in a house dominated by the sound of the "drum of immortality" beaten by the Enlightened One. The drum, however, has not been able to drown out the Lord's controversy. The Lord's controversy persists, therefore our missionary controversy continues. Theologically speaking, Thailand is caught in the cacophony of the two resounding messages. A theological understanding of this momentarily significant cacophony is urgently needed in order to guide the church from its crippling minority complex to the prophetic privilege of being the minority in this land.

A closer examination of the spiritual and historical forces at work suggests that there are two Thailand within one Thailand. It is an undeniable fact that the impact of the West on Thailand has created a new Thailand. Thailand One is a Thailand of traditional values, while Thailand Two is Thailand on the way to modernization-as it constantly preaches its gospel of modernization ideals.<sup>8</sup> The Lord's

controversy is reaching Thailand One through Thailand Two, but it must be pointed out that Thailand Two is not necessarily aware of its far-reaching mission, since it is too absorbed in the process of modernization to ponder the historical process which brought it into being. On the other hand, Thailand One, the upholder of the patient eschatology, is beginning to be aware of the invasion of Israel into Thai spirituality and religiosity, and it is interested in the message of Israel even though it feels ill at ease with this strange visitor.

#### ENTER: A THEOLOGY OF HISTORY

Israel is at once a stumbling block and a fascination to Thailand One.<sup>9</sup> Why? On two accounts. First, Israel has an entirely different appreciation and interpretation of history, and this attracts the healthy curiosity of Thailand One. Second, Israel's theology of history is an intensified theology of history indeed; yet when it is compared with the theology of history which revolves around the fulfilment point of Jesus Christ, it may be called a preintensified theology of history. In this preintensified theology of history, without the name of Jesus Christ, Thailand One finds herself more relaxed and ready to participate in discussions of grave religious importance. One of the reasons why theological history in Thailand shows a state of undernourishment is that the significance of this preintensified zone was missiologically ignored and judged to be profitless. But when one tries to conceive a theology of mission in the context of the dynamic convergence of Thailand One and Thailand Two, it becomes obvious that theology in the preintensified zone leads us into the exciting ground of preparation for the Gospel. A study of Israel's relation to Thailand is a necessary step to the discussion on Christ and Thailand.<sup>10</sup>

#### HISTORY AS GOD'S EXPERIENCE

What is the decisive feature of Israel's theology of history? Israel experienced history profoundly and inimitably. The profundity and originality are, however, not due to Israel's own mental or spiritual faculty of perception and penetration into the structure and meaning of history, but derive from the profundity and originality of God's unique presence and work in the historical life of Israel. Israel was not able to speak of history without speaking of God, nor of God without

speaking of history. At the critical moment of the birth of the people of Israel in the event of Exodus, Israel confessed her faith in God's presence in history as follows:

The Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I have sympathy for, I am effected by, their sufferings." (Exod. 3:7)<sup>11</sup>

God was affected by the harsh life that Israel was subjected to under the cruel yoke of Egypt. "What concerns the prophet," writes Rabbi Heschel, "is the human event as a divine experience. History to us is the record of human experience; to the prophet it is a record of God's experience."<sup>12</sup> History is the arena where God's "ultimate concern" is worked out in the entanglement with human destiny. God, who sends despair upon his people because of their stubbornness and disobedience, is the very one who most responsibly and acutely "experiences" the pain of history for his people and all humanity (Jer. 18:5-11; 31:2-3; Isa. 43:4-7; 49:15; 54:7-10). History, boldly confessed to be God's experience, is neither absurd nor blind. History is neither orphaned nor divorced from God. History, as participated in by Israel, runs on an agitated path. The possibilities of neutrality, tranquility, and apathy are denied to history, since the Lord is the creator of the events which bring about the "shaking of the foundations" of history. The mission of Israel to the world is to transmit this striking theology of history to the nations through her own historical existence.

#### *Friction Between Thailand and Israel*

In this section we shall seek to describe the current encounter of Thailand One with Israel and the theological repercussions of this encounter for Thailand Two. The gradual invasion of Israel's "history as God's experience" into Thailand One through the medium of Thailand Two awakened Thailand One to a renewed self-understanding and a zeal for its mission.

How to determine precisely the nature of Thailand One? Gunnar Myrdal writes of Southeast Asia:

Although a few intellectuals are, or feel that they are, completely Westernized and secularized, most observe the prescribed rites of their inherited religion and are cognizant of the broad lines of its theology. They have a

Thai apatheia-anthropology. The natural is apathetic.<sup>16</sup> The history-anthropology—an understanding of man which seeks to understand human existence in terms of man's deep involvement in history—cannot espouse, without causing much domestic turbulence, the apatheia-anthropology and form a new family life, and vice versa. Yet an irritating historical fact is that for the last two-hundred years the history-anthropology has lived in proximity to the apatheia-anthropology (always within her sight!) and occasionally succeeded in carrying on an uneasy and perplexing courtship. The perplexity of this situation is caused by what is happening in the present-day Thai understanding of man. Its apatheia-anthropology is no longer enjoying its traditional tranquility. The courting of history-anthropology is forcing apatheia-anthropology to reexamine the separation of the natural from the historical and personal.

History-anthropology is derived from Israel's theology of history. Israel lives in the continuous surprise of discovering God who accompanies Israel on its journey through history and who makes history purposeful for it. Israel's experience was, mysteriously, God's experience in history. Because God is present in history, history cannot become apatheia-history.

For a long time I have held my peace,  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in travail,  
I will gasp and pant. (Isa. 42:14. Also see  
Isa. 1:2-3; Jer. 4:1)

The opposite of apatheia-history is obviously patheia-history. Israel's patheia-history is, however, *sui generis*. It does not come under the general category of pathos. It draws its lifeblood from the theological category of pathos, the pathos of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>17</sup> To reject God's patheia-history is to alienate oneself from the grace of God historically surrounding us. Rabbi Heschel says that "sin is repudiation of history."<sup>18</sup>

Thrown into God's patheia-history, Israel began to speak the language of *this* history. The historical pathos of God invokes the historical pathos of his people.

Answer me, O Lord, for thy steadfast love is good;  
according to thy abundant mercy, turn to me.

Hide not thy face from thy servant; for I am in  
distress, make haste to answer me. (Ps. 69:16-17)

This prayer is meaningful only in the context of God's patheia-history. The psalmist wants God to turn to him in a concrete historical way, since he is historically in distress. An extraordinary existential interest in history began with Israel.

Theological friction exists between apatheia-anthropology and patheia-anthropology, and between apatheia-history and patheia-history. We must now try to place the modernizing Thailand Two within the framework of this theological friction caused at the intersection of Thailand and Israel.

Theologically speaking, Thailand One is making a significant contribution by magnifying the "point of friction" and thus providing a proper theological framework in which the issue of modernization should be discussed. In this sense, Thailand One is inadvertently prophetic. Thailand Two, by showing an interest in the shaping of history inspired by the "teleology" of the modernization ideals, is also inadvertently acting theologically. Modernization implies more than change and development. It involves transformation—"the transformation of all systems by which man organizes his society, that is, his political, social, economic, intellectual, religious, and psychological systems."<sup>19</sup>

Both Thailand One and Two, are irreversibly entangled in the great "Asian drama" of modernization. The people of Thailand are caught up in the conflicts "between their high-pitched aspirations and the bitter experience of a harsh reality; between the desire for change and improvement, and mental reservations and inhibitions about accepting the consequences and paying the price." Living in these conflicts they are now beginning to be convinced that history "is not taken to be predetermined, but within the power of man to shape."<sup>20</sup> This new interpretation and awareness of history is, indeed, a "shaking of the foundations" of life in Thailand.

History is "within the power of man to shape." Christian theologians may hasten to condemn this as an unpardonable sin of human *superbia*, but when this *superbia* is studied in the context of history and culture in Thailand, one is led to appreciate the positive—not negative—theological implications contained in it. It indicates the emergence of an involved interest in history. Moderniza-