

THE "WRATH OF GOD" AND THE
THAI THEOLOGIA GLORIAE

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I

PROBLEM:
THE WRATH OF GOD OBSCURED BY
THE APATHEIA IDEAL

Lactantius, the Christian apologist active in the early fourth century, wrote a treatise called *De ira Dei*. In this remarkable book he attacked the Epicureans and the Stoics who held the view that God is *without passion (apatheia)* and cannot be moved to wrath. Lactantius insisted that *God can be moved to wrath*. He said that God is righteous and acts juridically, rewarding the good and punishing the evil. God's wrath is the act by which God punishes wrong doers. Here Lactantius rendered a great apologetic contribution in distinguishing the image of the biblical God from the predominant philosophico-religious piety of his day. The God of the Bible is not the *summum bonum*, the tranquil absolute *apatheia*. It is possible for God to have wrath, the radically perturbed mind (*perturbationes animi*). The righteous God is *perturbed* by the unrighteousness of man.

This insight of Lactantius, voiced against the ancient Stoic ideal of life, needs to be spoken once again against the popular Christian piety in Thailand today. Prevalent religious sentiment in Thailand, including that of Christians, is unwittingly under the influence of the doctrine that *perturbationes animi* are an obnoxious hindrance to the realization of the higher quality of religious life. The call to *apatheia* is not a monopoly of Stoicism. It had been issued by the Gautama Buddha before the time of Stoicism and is a cardinal teaching of Thai Theravada Buddhism. The biblical message of the wrath of God is, as it was to the Stoics, a stumbling-block to

the spiritual and intellectual climate of this "Asokan" Stoic country. *Perturbationes animi* are to be eschewed. So the Christian doctrine of the wrath of God, the divine *perturbationes animi*, has been soft-pedalled or avoided.

When the wrath of God was branded as *perturbationes animi* and ignored, some vital message, specifically for Thailand, contained in the doctrine of the wrath of God was lost. What is that message?

In his work, *The Theology of the Pain of God*, Kazo Kitamori, the Japanese theologian, has contributed the penetrating insight that the love of God is distorted and made superficial when it is divorced from the wrath of God. Kitamori's warning that the wrath of God precludes an easy "love monism" sheds light upon the Thai theological situation today. It is true that "love monism" is widely preached in the Thai Church. But Kitamori's insight into the sickness of "love monism", though an extremely important one, cannot be directly applied to the problem in which we are involved in Thailand.

Luther, the giant proponent of the theology of "Triumph of Grace", restored the critical reality of the wrath of God to Christian life and theology. The wrath of God reinterpreted by Luther (for instance, *opus alienum dei* or man's agonizing experience of *opus alienum dei*, i.e., "Anfechtung") by refusing to come under the control of the natural *intellectus* of Aristotelianism, shook the foundation of the "Scholastic Captivity of God". This great Reformational discernment that the wrath of God contradicts man's domestication of God supplies us with a helpful hint for the examination of the Thai theological situation.

The Thai mind tends to identify God with an absolutistic idea beyond history (timeless "apathetic" God). But the wrath of God has an unique power to "historicize" God. In short, if God can truly be moved to wrath, he cannot be a timeless "apathetic" God beyond history, but he must be "God in history" ("Thou" in history), in the sense of the drama described in the Bible. The "God in history" who can be meaningfully moved to wrath cannot be domesticated. The God who is severed from history cannot be meaningfully moved to wrath but can be domesticated. The "wrath of God" is the critical expression of "God in history". This is the message which was thrown out from the Thai Christian life with the despised *perturbationes animi*.

It is the contention of the writer that Thai theology, bolstered by an indigenous *apatheia* ideal, tends inadvertently to neglect

"God in history" by reducing the wrath of God to a matter of minor significance.

II

TWO LEIMOTIFS OF
THAI APATHEIA RESPONSIBLE FOR
"NEGLECT OF HISTORY"

More specifically, how is it that when the wrath of God is underrated by the *apatheia* ideal, the sense of history also loses seriousness? To deal with this question we must examine the structure of Thai *apatheia*.

The Thai version of the *apatheia* derives from, at least, two dominant sources: 1. influence from Buddhism, and 2. influence from Nature.

1. *Influence from Buddhism:*

According to *Udana*,¹ as in any other document of Pali Buddhism, the life of spiritual imperturbability (*passaddhi, santi*) is the ideal for every monk. "The one who has crossed over (the swamp of desire)", *Udana* reads, "crushed down the thorn of lust, and destroyed delusion, will not tremble again (if touched) by joy or pain". (22) "The monk who has subdued the thorn of lust, remains unmoved like a mountain peak (in a storm) by insult, punishment, and imprisonment". (23) These passages indicate an *apatheia* piety similar to that of the Stoic Wise. But Buddhism and Stoicism differ decisively in the way in which this envied state of the imperturbable soul is to be reached.

Udana urges man, if he wants to possess the sacred land of imperturbability of soul, to *step out* of all *karmic* chains once for all. So far as man is bound by the inexorable law of causality, that is to say, so far as man is within time and existence (history), he is inevitably and inescapably bound by the power of perturbation. The 30th Word of *Udana* reads: "Mankind is attached to existence, is afflicted with existence, and even more over rejoices in existence. Of what one rejoices in, that leads to fear. Of what one is afraid, that is miserable. Indeed one leads this holy life in order to escape completely from existence. . . . Truly, this suffering arises in dependence on (karmatic) accumulations. If all attachment (by means of wisdom) is destroyed, (no further) suffering grows up. . . . The complete destruction of thirst and the

complete cessation of lust mean the realisation of extinguishment (i.e., Nibbana)". This final *stepping out* of all which is historical is accomplished by the realization of the radical "No-self" (*anatta*). *Anatta* is the perfect state of *apatheia*. How, indeed, can "No-Self" be perturbed?

The Buddhist *apatheia* which is based on the doctrine of *anatta* goes one decisive step further than that of Stoicism. Stoicism teaches man to keep "the six sense spheres of contact under control" (*Udana* 25), but it does not teach to forsake "the organizing forces of existences" (*Udana* 51). The Stoic doctrine of *apatheia* is guided by the same principle which governs the cosmos, namely, that the rule of *logos (ratio)* within man leads him to the imperturbable life. An inner "orderliness" is the state free from *perturbationes animi*. *Udana* advocates the ultimate annulment of order itself by *stepping out* of it once for all, which amounts to *anatta*. Buddhism promises the transcendental metaphysical solution while Stoicism offers a psychological immanent solution. The former finds the final solution *outside* of history (*logos* and time), the latter, *within* history (*logos* and time). This difference may illustrate one of the most critical points of difference between the Buddhist (anti-historical) East and Christian ("God in history") West. Generally speaking, Christianity, which proclaims the Incarnate Logos, can go with the Stoic ethos but it finds difficulty in getting along with the "will to devaluate history" of Buddhism.

The Buddhist *apatheia* fosters "neglect of history" because it teaches that only through the ultimate flight from history (*anatta*) can man achieve the desired state of *apatheia*.

2. *Influence from Nature:*

How does nature influence the Thai mind towards the "neglect of history"?

From time immemorial nature has impressed man with the view that the flow of time is cyclical. This is nature's interpretation of "history" which is human and universal. Bishop Newbigin writes:

The dominant patterns of our own experience are cyclical, not linear. The cycles of days and weeks and years, of vegetable and animal life, of human birth, growth, old age and death, all naturally suggest an interpretation of history in cyclical terms. Indeed human institutions and civilizations apparently go through the same cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death.²

The cyclical flow of time is strongly felt in agrarian Thailand where the people live in close contact with nature. There are cyclical "biocosmic rhythms"³ which govern Thai spiritual and cultural life. In Thailand, benevolent nature circles without disruption *ad infinitum* with a cosmic regularity. Thailand has scarcely experienced tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tornadoes, storms, severe cold, drought or avalanches. Nature is not "perturbed". It is seldom moved to wrath. Time walks on the "road from Jerusalem to Jericho" without encountering serious moments of crisis or decision. Nature, in Thailand, is an efficient teacher of "optimism" of life.⁴ It allows man to live a crisis-free mode of life. Even when a crisis occurs, nature persuades man not to be disturbed. Thus the benevolent nature of Thailand has an anti-historical intent. That is to say, nature, represented in the image of a perpetual flow of time in a circle, neglects history, the "road from Jerusalem to Jericho", where the kind of situations which cause *perturbationes animi* are certain to arise. In spite of critical political changes, the advent of giant technology, and rapid westernization of metropolitan suburban life. The Thai mind is basically more "cosmos oriented" than "history oriented". The "cosmos oriented" man does not grasp the seriousness of crises. Crises, when interpreted in the framework of nature's cyclical time, lose their seriousness. "Cyclical time" is the image of *apatheia* translated into the language of time.

Nature influences man to the "neglect of history" because the sense of history is too serious for her and it disrupts her essential message that "all is cyclical and reversible, therefore do not be perturbed! Stay on the side of *apatheia*".

These two dominant sources of the Thai *apatheia*, the desire for the ultimate flight from history to the realm of *anatta*, and the inclination towards undisrupted cyclical outlook of life, join hands in inducing man to adopt a habit of thought which *neglects history*.

III

THE WRATH OF GOD AND THE THEOLOGY OF "NEGLECT OF HISTORY" THEOLOGIA GLORIAE

Theology of "neglect of history" is the theology of God who *stepped out* of history (God of oriental deism) and who therefore

cannot be meaningfully moved to wrath. It is also the theology of God who is held captive in the "continual" cyclical flow of cosmic time (God of Nature's Pelagianism) and cannot be meaningfully moved to wrath. It is obvious that theological thinking cannot be put into crisis by the God of oriental deism and nature's Pelagianism. Thus the theology of the "neglect of history" is basically an unperturbed theology. It expresses the essential character of the Thai *theologia gloriæ*.

The theology of "neglect of history" at work can be demonstrated by three distinct points in theological thinking.

First, the theology of "neglect of history" is not fully aware of the problems relating to "Revelation and Reason". The perennial headache of Western theology, the tension between revelation and reason, is scarcely a trouble in a culture where the will to devaluate history rules, consciously or unconsciously, through the *apatheia* ideal. How can one be disturbed by the problem of revelation and reason when history, the *locus* of revelation and reason, is under the pressure of the anti-history forces of "*anatta*" and "cyclical" piety, and is thus deprived of its seriousness? Theology of the "neglect of history" is a "stratospheric flight" over the mountains of revelation and reason to a final answer! It wants to be "enlightened" without being entangled in history, the *locus* of revelation and reason. In this sense, the Thai theology of "neglect of history" is *fides otiosa*, a lazy faith.

Second, the theology of "neglect of history" is little capable of perceiving the deep existential meaning of the "strange work of God" (*opus alienum dei*—Isa. 28.21), Christian life and theology. Christian faith is, in its depth, inevitably confronted by the tormenting question of the "strange work of God". The "strange work of God" is neither super-historical nor super-natural work, but the work which is experienced *within history*, as the forsaking of Christ by God took place in the historical crucifixion. When the "strange work of God" is approached by the mind of "anti-history flight" and "cyclical continuity" it loses its grave significance.

The theology of "neglect of history" does not want to give serious consideration to history as the *locus* of the *overcoming* of "Anfechtung". Quickly passing over the "strange work of God" it comes to the God of "proper work" (*opus proprium*). In this speedy transition, the moralism dominant in Thai Christian life finds its encouraging support. God who is severed from the critical sense of the "strange work of God" is the reasonable God

of moralism characterized by the motif of continuity. In fact, however, God without "strange work" is, as Luther tirelessly testifies, God without "proper work". The theology of "neglect of history" dissolves the existential tension between the "strange work" and "proper work" of God and at the same time makes God understandable to man. It teaches an oriental version of *Christianity not Mysterious*.

Third, the theology of "neglect of history" fails to see the "qualitative difference" between God and man. How can one come to know this crucial "difference" if he is not consciously involved in history, the *locus* of the particular encounter which takes place between "I and Thou"? This fault is reflected in the use of analogy in Thai theological thinking. In the theology of "neglect of history", the analogy works in the framework of circular continuity. That is to say, there is no disruption between finite and infinite. Man must resort to analogy when he speaks of God, but in doing so he is confronted by the God who constantly perturbs his use of analogy. This paradoxical burden in theological thinking is not sufficiently understood by the theology of "neglect of history".

The above three observations exemplify the theology "neglect of history" in operation. The contention of this study is that the wrath of God (not a "timeless" doctrine of the wrath of God) attacks the root of this theology of "neglect of history" which sprang chiefly from the two sources of the dislike of *perturbationes animi*. How is this attack possible? How can the wrath of God "historicize" God in the midst of the subtle influence of the "apathetic" *theologia gloriae* characterized, for instance, by "stratospheric flight", "*Christianity not Mysterious*" and "God who is continuous with man"? But why the wrath of God? Does not the love of God also "historicize" God and stand as a charge against the theology of "neglect of history"? And perhaps more creatively?

The answer is that in Thailand where the Gospel of Christ is encircled by the spirit of *theologia gloriae*, of *non perturbationes animi*, it requires the openly contradicting force of God's *perturbationes animi*, the wrath of God, in order to break through the front line of the anti-historical *theologia gloriae*. The love of God, very often lost in "love monism" ("cheap love"), lacks the *disturbing and critical imagery* which the wrath of God carries. It also lacks the impact which is needed to awaken the mind captivated by the theology of "neglect of history".

A head-on collision between Thai *theologia gloriae* and the wrath of God presents opportunity for a fresh and more relevant study of the doctrine of the wrath of God. Granted that there is a danger of falling into naive anthropopathism, it is essential to preach on the wrath of God boldly to the Thai audience, specifically in order to "historicize" God in the way the Bible does.

According to Dahlberg, the wrath of God is "the Deity's threatening with annihilation the existence of whatever opposes his will and purpose or violates his holiness and love".⁵

It must be made clear that the wrath of God is provoked by the *historical* violation of God's "holiness and love" as for example:

Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day you came out of the land of Egypt, until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord. (Deut. 9.7).

The biblical passages of the divine *perturbationes animi* must be read with the insight that the God who *stepped out* of history or the God who is captive to *cyclical* motion cannot be meaningfully moved to wrath. To quote only a few out of innumerable places referring to the wrath of God, such as:

They have stirred me to jealousy with what is no god;
they have provoked me with their idols.
So I will stir them to jealousy with those who are no people;
I will provoke them with a foolish nation. (Deut. 32.21)

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger,
the staff of my fury!
Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath
I command him,
to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire
of the streets. (Isaiah 10:5.6).

You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities. (Amos 3.2.).

These passages speak emphatically of the fact that God's wrath has *historical* and *covenantal* reasons. That is to say, history is

the *locus* of God's *perturbationes animi*. God can be the *summum bonum*, the tranquil *apatheia* if he is not involved in "Heilsgeschichte" (History of Salvation—Covenant). This "God in history" perturbs the theology of "neglect of history" with its three distinctive offsprings, "stratospheric flight", "Christianity not *Mysterious*", and "God who is continuous with man". It does so by making history seriously *real*. The "stratospheric flight" is grounded because history has forced it to realize the vanity and irresponsibility of such flight over revelation and reason. Christianity becomes "mysterious" once more by the historical interpretation of the "strange work of God" and God is no more continuous with man because of the unique quality of encounter which takes place in history between "I and Thou".

CONCLUSION

The wrath of God contradicts the theology of "neglect of history", the theology under the influence of the Thai *apatheia* ideal (the "*anatta*-istic" flight from history and the naturalistic aversion for the seriousness in history) by insisting upon the fundamental relationship between the wrath of God and history. *God can be moved to wrath because he is "God in history":* or, only "God in history" can be meaningfully moved to wrath.

The breaking through of the front line of the "apathetic" *theologia gloriae* made by the assertion of the historicity of the wrath of God needs to be deepened and substantiated by the "sense of the presence of God" who came into history in person, Christ, the *deus incarnatus* who was not *Christos apathes*.

4

SOME AFRICAN CONCEPTS OF CHRISTOLOGY¹

JOHN S. MBITI

The title of this paper is misleading because African concepts of Christology do not exist. About 25-30% of African people are Christian. The Church exists in our continent, she is growing and continues to exert great influence upon the life of our peoples. But it is a Church without a theology, without theologians, and without theological concern. My comments do not refer to the ancient Church in Egypt and Ethiopia in which the picture is certainly different. Missionaries who, with the help of African converts, established the Church in the rest of the continent, were not practising theologians, even though they were devout, sincere, and dedicated men and women. This is the state of affairs that we have inherited: current missionaries are not theologians, and the few who claim to be theologians have not yet made much academic contribution; our pastors have little education, and only a few have studied at universities. In the whole of Africa there are (in 1967) not more than about half-a-dozen to ten African theologians engaged in active theological activities. It is in vain therefore, that we try to search for theological reflection from the Church in Africa, at present.

But theological reflection must be started. The task will have to take into account four rich sources of material. These are: the Bible, the theology of the older Churches, the traditional African concepts, and the living experience of the Church in Africa. These are the four pillars on which theological systems of the Church in Africa could be erected. The Bible is the Church's book and the final authority on religious matters. The older Churches, especially in Europe, have a rich inheritance of theological thought, scholarship, tradition, *instrumenta studiorum*, all of

elements
of
theology