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Lead Essay

Predicting the Past



Some months ago, I came across the neologism "retrodict," used in the sense of describing the causes and nature of past events for which there is insufficient direct evidence. The word stuck with me because it aptly captures something of the situation facing historians as they seek to understand and explain the past. The term, obviously, draws on the word "predict" and suggests that the relation of historians to the past is analogous to that of those who predict the future. The analogy may not be exact given the difference in our relationship to past and future, but the concept is still a useful one. Predicting the future is chancy because of our lack of data about it. We have to infer what we think is going to happen on the basis of what is happening. The future hasn't happened yet, so there is no evidence that comes to us out of the future. The past, on the other hand, has happened, and while we do not have direct access to the past (it being, after all, past), we do have a plentitude of records produced in the past.

The differences between our knowledge of past and future, however, may not be as great as we think they are. First, we do actually have some "evidence" about the future. Experience and common sense teach us that certain present actions will more or less certainly lead to future consequences. When we see those actions taking place, we have a good idea what will happen. We worry, for example, about the consequences hard drinking or smoking will have for a friend. We know when the seasons will change. We know what to expect when we fly overseas. Second, we also have contemporary records of the future, strange as it seems when put that way. We schedule the future, sometimes down to the second, and generally what we actually do next Monday resembles the record we already have of next Monday in our appointments dairy.

If we stop to think about it, the past is not all that different from the future. Nearly all of it is as shadowy and unknown as the future because it has passed from living memory. If we are asked what we had for breakfast yesterday, we can generally give an answer, which will almost certainly be correct. But, if we are asked what we had for breakfast on 17 April 1979, we are at a complete loss-normally. We might be able to answer the question, however, if we have some reason to remember that particular breakfast or if, for some reason, we have a record of what we ate that morning. Suppose we stopped and thought hard about the question. We might be able to "retrodict" what we probably ate by remembering where we lived in April '79, what our schedule was like, and what our eating habits were like then. We might be able to answer, "I almost certainly had breakfast cereal that morning. I always ate cornflakes for breakfast back then." That is what is meant by "retrodicting" the past.

Past and future share one essential quality. They no not exist in the present. We must, therefore, use existing records to infer their nature. Futurologists predict what will happen, and historians retrodict what did happen. It may be that the historians have a somewhat easier time of it, if only because the past is unchangeable while the future has yet to exist at all. Still, as the above breakfast example suggests, the study of the past is largely a study of what probably or

possibility happened. We do know something of what happened in the past, but our knowing is always incomplete to the point that calling the past "unchangeable" is somewhat misleading. Our understanding of the past certainly changes. Historians, in sum, must necessarily "retrodict" the past.

What does this mean for our knowledge of the past? Does it mean that we don't know much more about the past than about the future? No, that's not the case. We have libraries full of books telling us what happened in the past. Does it mean that our knowledge of the past is no more certain than our knowledge of the future? The answer to this question is more difficult. For one thing, much of what we think we know about the past is faulty for several reasons. Many influential actions taken in the past went unrecorded. We can only infer their taking place because of their consequences. The records we do have tell only a part of the story, give only incomplete details. Sometimes those records are misleading, intentionally or otherwise. We know a lot more about the past than we do the future, but it is not clear that our knowledge of the past is all that much more secure than our knowledge of the future.

Is, then, our retrodictive knowledge of the past trustworthy? The answer to this pressing question is, I think, "Yes, No, and Maybe." The prior question that the critics of the historian's craft invariably fail to ask is, "Is human knowledge of even the present trustworthy?" How much trust, that is, can we put in our ability to know the world around us in all of its dimensions, past, present, and future? Is it not true that largely our knowledge of what is happening around us in the present is as sketchy as our knowledge of the past and future? We have to guess at what people are thinking. We have to try to make sense out of other peoples' actions, even when they don't seem to make much sense. Important decisions are made in shadowy places and even though we are affected we don't know who made those decisions or why. It is one of our most common experiences that we have to make important decisions on the basis of insufficient information. It is a fact that we have to intradict the present nearly as much (or just as much?) as historians retrodict the past and futurologists predict the future.

Thus, we have to "dict" our way through all three time dimensions, past, present, and future. Of the three dimensions, the only one that is not in and of itself fluid is the past. It was what it was. In some cases, then, what we retrodict about the past is actually more trustworthy than what we predict about the future or intradict regarding the present. Our understanding of the past changes, certainly, as we gain new data and discover new perspectives. But, when one considers all of the difficulties we face in knowing what is "really going on" in the present, retrodiction seems easier and maybe as trustworthy.


Herb Swanson
Ban Dok Daeng
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Articles

Dancing to the Temple, Dancing in the Church: Reflections on Thai Local Theology

Herb Swanson

Introduction

 Asian Christian theology, as a self-conscious international movement among Asian theologians and church leaders, is a recent phenomenon, one that some Asian churches have contributed to more than others. Few Asian nations, however, have been as "silent" theologically as Thailand, and from an international perspective, it would seem fair to wonder if "Thai theology" even exists, particularly among Thai Protestants. There are no "name" Thai theologians or regionally discussed Thai theologies. In recent decades, the Thai Protestant church has produced several scholar-teachers in Biblical Studies, Ethics, Church History, and Practical Theology. One can point to a number of Thai and English language theses, articles, and books in each of these fields, written by Thai authors themselves. Noticeably absent from this list of theological fields is Systematic Theology. There are no courses in Thai theology, as such, and Thai seminarians confront the seldom-used term "Thai theology" with an air of perplexity, occasionally even asking, "What do you mean by 'Thai'?" One can scan the tables of contents, bibliographies, and indexes of monographs, anthologies, and journals in the field of Asian theology and only rarely come across a Thai name or contribution. The situation within the Thai church itself seems strikingly similar. Thai churches have developed no self-conscious theological tradition of their own and generally seem content to repeat the theological truisms they learned from their missionary founders and benefactors.

If one listens gently, however, it eventually becomes clear that Thai Protestants have a theology profoundly grounded in Thai social conceptions, one that takes God to be the church's Spiritual/Heavenly Patron. It has a Christology equally grounded in the Thai language and the institution of the monarchy, a "processional" understanding of Christ as the Royal King of Power who rules over creation and the church compassionately. These and other theological themes remain largely hidden from view, still awaiting scholarly investigation-still waiting for Thai theologians to voice them in a more reflective, systematic manner. The church in Thailand, that is, continues to wait for its own theological successor(s) to Koyama's *Waterbuffalo Theology*, the only widely known professional theology produced in the (northern) Thai context.¹

Although most of Thai Protestant theology, like the theologies of all churches and nations, is largely repetitive, conservative, uncritical (of itself), and very ordinary, it has its creative moments-moments when churches and individuals accomplish something more than merely repeat the commonly held theological truisms of their denomination. Such moments reveal the context of Thai theological reflection and point to the key themes, which covert Thai theologians explore as they unconsciously "do" theology. The author witnessed and participated in such a

moment, which took place in a Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) congregation near Chiang Mai and presents it here as a story that lifts the veil on covert Thai theology-if not fully, at least in part.

The Suwandangrit Church is located some 20 kilometers east of Chiang Mai in the community of Ban Dok Daeng (literally, "Red Flower Village"), a relatively prosperous rural-suburban village similar to many other older communities that ring this rapidly growing urban center. The only thing that distinguishes Ban Dok Daeng from most of those other villages is that it has a Christian church. It is a mark of distinction that some of the village's residents would just as soon do without. There has long been a deep undercurrent of tension between the Buddhist majority and the Christian minority, which is largely clumped together in its own "quarter" in the south end of the village. Why that tension has existed and what the Suwandangrit Church has done in recent years to overcome it is the focus of this story.

The Church

American Presbyterian missionaries founded the Suwandangrit Church on Christmas Day 1880 in the village of Mae Dok Daeng (meaning "Red Flower Creek"; the name has since been modified). For a time during the 1890s, the missionaries called it the "Diamond of the North," a preciously faithful church that set the standard for other congregations. Through good times and bad, it remained a large church by Thai Protestant standards, usually numbering over 200 communicant members. In 1933, the church officially renamed itself the Suwandangrit Church, the name being a combination of the names of two of its founding fathers. After 1950, however, the congregation experienced hard times, caused by a combination of events including the withdrawal of a large part of its membership to form a separate church, internal squabbles that saw some members leave the Christian faith entirely, and the sheep-stealing depredations of sectarian missionaries. By the early 1970s, only a small handful of people still gathered for worship in Ban Dok Daeng, but in the late '70s the congregation began to show some signs of renewal; and over the course of the next twenty years, it quietly, modestly grew in numbers and activities under the leadership of two key elders. In 1990, it built a new church building, and the congregation could no longer be typified as weak, although it remained a modest sized church. Since the mid-1980s, the church has drawn further strength from the presence of two families that include three theologically trained individuals, including the author's family, which moved to Ban Dok Daeng in 1993 after a long association with the church going back to 1981.

Like other Thai Protestant churches, the Suwandangrit Church has generally stood apart from the communal life of its village in spite of the fact that there were several interfaith nuclear families and that most of the Christians have Buddhist relatives. Christians took no part in *wat* (Buddhist temple) activities other than to help with cooking at temple festivities when called upon to do so. Christians would attend those festivals and other events, such as funerals, but strictly as visitors. In this atmosphere of mutual distrust, the church lived largely for itself and took no thought as to how it might act as a witness to the love of God in Christ or carry out peacemaking activities. Its neighbors, in any event, would have treated any form of community involvement with suspicion, based on their general perception of Christians as being soul winning "head hunters."²

The Revolution of 1996

In 1990, the Suwanduangrit Church dedicated its new church building. Not long thereafter Wat Ban Dok Daeng, the local temple, began to construct a new *phraviharn*, the main building and ritual center of any Thai Buddhist *wat*. By early 1996, the building was nearly complete, and the temple committee made plans for a *poy luang*, a major three-day celebration. The committee informally communicated with the church's leaders, wanting to know how the church would participate in the festivities. They made it clear that the usual policy of silence by the church was unacceptable to the larger community. Representatives of the *wat* suggested, unofficially, that the church join the rest of the community in donating a *tonkuatan*, a "money tree," to the *wat*. These "trees" are made of bamboo frames shaped into different forms, most frequently resembling a tree. Money and other offerings such as packets of soap, spoons, candies, and other small items are hung on the trees. Some are quite artistic and show time, effort, and creative thought. They can stand as tall as two meters in height and require from two to four persons to carry them on their shoulders to the *wat*.

This request sparked a crisis in the life of the church. During the early months of 1996, it held a series of council and congregational meetings that discussed the temple's overtures at worried length. Although some members expressed irritation at the *wat* for being pushy, the major issues that emerged were theological ones. What is the extent to which the church can participate in the activities of another religion without violating the First Commandment? Does official participation in *wat* activities constitute idolatry? Underlying these precise questions was the deeper feeling that it is "wrong" for Christians in Ban Dok Daeng to mix religiously with Buddhists. The issues, then, had to do with theological boundaries and ecclesiastical identity, and, not surprisingly, the church split into two groups over them. One side wanted to limit any participation as much as possible, some even wondering if donating money to the temple in and of itself violated the biblical commandments. The other side desired better relations with their Buddhist neighbors. Northern Thai rural values place heavy emphasis on unity and generosity, values the church had long transgressed in its quest for ecclesiastical purity. Both groups in the dispute looked to their own leading elder. The church had no pastor, and the lay moderator at that time was the leading voice urging participation in the temple's festival to as full an extent as possible.

Inevitably, the congregation turned to its three theologically trained members for advice. All three observed that the church had great freedom in deciding what to do. They urged that the Bible enjoins Christians to love their neighbors and to be peacemakers, but all three also reminded both sides regarding the Pauline injunction to preserve the unity of the church. While helpful, this advice did not resolve the issues or differences. It happened, however, that the then Moderator of the CCT, the Rev. Samran Kuangwaen, appeared in worship one Sunday morning; the Suwanduangrit Church is his home church, and he comes to worship with the church whenever he has the opportunity. The moderator of the church, after worship, asked him to speak about the issue of the church's participation in the temple's celebration. Ach. Samran encouraged the church to participate as fully as possible-just so long as it did not actually join in formal

Buddhist ritual. There had already been some movement toward responding positively to the temple's overtures, and now that movement gained momentum. The question was no longer whether the church would join in the temple's celebration of its new building, but only the extent of its participation.

That momentum was confirmed at the church council's meeting in February 1996 when the leading voice of the "separatist" side agreed that the church should involve itself in the temple's celebration. He spoke, he said, in light of the assurances of the theologically trained members and the opinions of the CCT's Moderator. His assent did not resolve all of the tensions involved, and throughout the church's discussions and subsequent actions some members remained silently hesitant and uneasy. In further discussions and meetings, however, the membership progressively decided that the church could donate money to the *wat*. It could put its donation on a money tree. It could join the other villagers in an evening procession in which the temple faithful carried their family money trees to the *wat*. Finally, the members decided that the Christians could actually enter the new *phraviharn* and receive the traditional blessing given to those who brought their offerings to the *wat*. The congregation decided, on the advice of its lay moderator, that receiving such blessings did not constitute an act of worship even though it was done in the presence of Buddha images, Buddhist monks, and with hands held up and together in an attitude of respect. The Suwanduangrit Church, thus, on the evening of 1 March 1996, joined its neighbors in a procession to the *wat*, its own money tree in tow.

In an email to family and friends at the time, the author related the following (edited) description of the event: "As befits the season, the day started out cool and then quietly heated up as the morning passed. By midmorning, various families were assembling their offerings to carry to the *wat* in the evening. These frequently consisted of foldaway chairs and tables, all of an agreed upon brand and style. Folded out, they were lashed to long bamboo carrying poles. Flowers and other decorations were added to give color and festive highlights to the offerings. Other homes were assembling the more traditional 'money trees' that go with *wat* (temple) festivities.

"At the church, we began to gather just before 10:00 am to work on our money tree. It was a simple frame, more than a meter in height. To this frame, we attached 'branches' of split bamboo into which were inserted bills of various denominations 20s, 50s, and 100s. The church itself donated 2,000 baht and members added to it another 3,000 plus baht. As some members sat on mats attaching the bills to the branches, others made paper flowers, and still others came and went bringing with them their gifts for attachment. Buddhist neighbors and relatives had some part in all of this, but church members themselves did most of the work.

"As the day wore on, the village was inordinately busy and alive as people were busily engaged in the preparation of food, of offerings for the *wat*, and in socializing on a village wide scale. About 7:15 pm, the church's bell began to ring, perhaps a little more rapidly and insistently than is usual. We quickly made our way down the street to the church building. It was all lit up and a fair crowd was gathered there, including some 30 or more church members plus assorted neighbors and relatives. In the midst of the crowd was the church's money tree with the church's name, "Khrischak Suwanduangrit," featured prominently on it. Around the church, we could hear the rhythmic beat of the drums and gongs that accompany processions in Thailand-and now and

again the trilling ululation that goes along with them. Candles were passed out for the Christians to carry, we grouped together for a couple of pictures, and then the moderator formed us up to process to the *wat*. As we went, we merged with groups coming out of their homes with their offerings of tables and money trees. The narrow streets were quickly filled with bouncing, swaying money trees. Drums and gongs led us. Here and there, "well oiled" dancers clapped and jiggled to the rhythm of the drums. Again, the trilling wove its way through the sounds of chatter, of drums, and of shouting children. None of this is new in Ban Dok Daeng. What was new was the Christians, straggling along at the back-but in the procession. Several times, Buddhist villagers, standing on the sides of the street, expressed their pleasure at our presence ("*yindee, yindee*").

"The whole procession took less than 30 minutes to complete. The *wat* grounds were lit up with bright neon lights everywhere. Pennants and flags decked it out, and a crowd had assembled to watch the parade of offerings and gifts. We entered the grounds behind the others and joined them in processing once around the *viharn* before entering it. The interior of the Viharn was crowded with offerings and gifts and the assembled faithful, men to the front, women to the back. At the very front sat the beaming abbot, microphone in hand. As we pressed into the cramped space inside, one of the *wat* faithful talked at us continually on the PA system. Welcoming, informing, cajoling us to crowd in. He kept up a constant patter as we worked our way towards the culminating ceremony of the evening.

"Eventually, the crowd quieted down, and the brief ceremonies began. This was the moment of truth for the Christians. One of the objections voiced among us from the beginning was that we would have to participate in Buddhist ritual. Christians have long been taught that we are not allowed to do so. The moderator quickly found a solution to our dilemma. In this particular case, the heart of the ceremony was a "nonreligious" blessing given by a lay leader rather than the abbot. The moderator instructed us that we could raise our hands in the Thai prayer like gesture of respect (*wai*) during this blessing. He was careful also to remind the *wat* folks in advance that the Christians should not be put in an awkward situation about religious ceremony. They know this already, having lived with Christians for about twelve decades now. And we were blessed, and we joined our neighbors in showing respect for the moment. It was surely the first time in the history of the community that the Christians joined the Buddhists in such a moment in the Buddhist context. During the brief period of religious chants that followed, we reverted quietly to our style of unobtrusively waiting with our hands folded in our laps.

"There followed remarks by the abbot in which he profusely thanked the Christians for their participation. He used our Christian words entirely correctly. He knew how we style ourselves and think of ourselves. It was clear from his words that our presence was deeply meaningful for him, something he surely never expected to witness. At this point, we all dispersed, the whole event, from beginning to end, lasted only slightly longer than an hour. After all the discussion, worry, and preparation the actual event was almost anticlimactic."

Life for the Suwanduangrit Church then returned to its normal routine, apparently little changed by its "revolutionary moment" in March 1996. During the next five years, however, it sponsored two special worship services in memory of church members who had died. In a somewhat

unusual gesture, it invited non-Christian descendants/relatives to participate in both services. The ritual was purely Christian, but time was given for all participants to place flowers before pictures of their departed parents, grandparents, spouses, and other honored relatives-an act that again cut across religious boundaries, this time in a Christian context. It must be admitted, however, that many members retained their separatist attitudes and, at times, openly resisted suggestions that Buddhist villagers be included in Christian events. Resentment lingered over past acts of petty persecution, supposed and actual, by the Buddhist majority.

The Revolution Comes Home

The revolutionary moment of 1996, then, seemed to be nothing more than a moment. The fundamental shift in the church's relationship with its neighbors remained largely hidden-until November 2000 when the Suwanduangrit Church was close to completing its new multipurpose hall. The village head man and others approached the new moderator, the elder who had been identified with the separatist faction of the church in 1996, and asked if the *wat* could hold a procession and bring a money tree for the church in anticipation of the dedication of the new hall. These representatives said they wanted to repay the church's generosity of 1996 and show their community unity. The congregation readily agreed to the temple's request and, for good measure, did up its own money tree. One family in the church decided to prepare a separate money tree, and on 8 October 2000, three money trees were brought as offerings given during a brief Christian worship service.³

The precedent had been set, and as the church neared completion of its new hall, both it and the community began to discuss plans for the dedication. In the past, the church would have simply held a major worship service, inviting Chiang Mai area churches to attend; on this occasion, however, it also had to make provision for a community celebration. The committee in charge decided to hold a festive evening approximating a temple festival. It invited a Christian music group that emphasizes using traditional northern and popular northeastern Thai music in worship to provide the music for the evening. A group of women prepared traditional dances. Games and food stalls were added to the arrangements and the committee worked out a program for the evening. Central to these preparations was a special blessing service at which money trees from the *wat*, the church, and several families were to be presented; the church even received word that a neighboring church planned to bring a money tree as well. The contrast between all of these plans and 1996 could hardly have been greater. The "separatist group" had all but disappeared; members of families that in the past tended to stay aloof from the Buddhist community now happily worked on money trees for the church.

On the evening of 29 December 2000, the church held its own festival, decidedly along the lines of a northern Thai temple festival. Important things happened. Eight money trees were presented and blessed. A large crowd of the church's Buddhist neighbors attended, processing to the church just as they would to the *wat*. The Christian men prone to drink stayed sober (or at home). There was no Christian worship service, as such, but during the blessing ceremony a group of members led the assembled crowd in singing a hymn set to the northern Thai dialect; most of our Buddhist neighbors could not sing it very well, but they were so taken with the hymn that they asked the leaders to please lead them in it a second time. The blessing itself, delivered by a Christian

clergyman, incorporated Christian as well as traditional formulas and the assembled crowd, Buddhist and Christian, received it with inordinate attention and silence. After a meal, the evening's festivities began. The music was very good, the churchwomen's dancing pleasing and fun, and the games and other activities were all well received. Being a Christian or with Christians, for once, was fun.

The final episode of this story takes place at Wat Ban Dok Daeng. In mid-March 2001, the temple dedicated its own multipurpose building and cremated the former abbot in an elaborate and expensive ceremony that attracted a huge crowd. The temple festival that preceded the cremation attracted even larger crowds. By this time, precedent had become tradition. The Suwanduangrit Church now had its own money tree, and the discussions concerning the church participation in the temple's celebration had to do strictly with matters of procedure. What night would we process to the temple? How much should we give? In the end, a large group of Christians joined with a number of individual Buddhist families in a mini-procession that the Christians led, dancing to the rhythms of Christian gongs and drums (in 1996, the Christians walked at the back and did not dance). The congregation gave the temple a generous donation, no one in the church questioning the propriety of the gift or raising objections to its size. On the day of the abbot's cremation, individual families as well as neighboring temples set up food stalls, giving away free eats of a wide variety. Among those stalls was one that carried the name, "Khrischak Suwanduangrit."

While it is still too early to judge, it appears that the Suwanduangrit Church has established a new, more open relationship with its Buddhist neighbors in Ban Dok Daeng. The members speak openly and happily of a new sense of unity in the village. A wedding held in the church's new multipurpose hall between a young member and his Buddhist bride included pieces of traditional northern Thai ritual seldom seen in a Christian wedding, if ever. Faced with the problem of a cemetery with little room left, members of the church seem willing to consider the possibility of cremation with less fearful reserve than would once have been the case. The church has conducted its first cremations, again mixing in more traditional aspects associated with Buddhist cremations. In light of these hints and indications, it is not an overstatement to term the events of 1996 and 2000-2001 as "revolutionary".

Reflections

While the events in the life of the Suwanduangrit Church over the last five years are not representative of local Thai Protestant theology and in fact, are decisively atypical of the behavior of all but a very few Thai Protestant churches, they still reveal important themes in local Thai theological reflection. They instruct us, that is, in how Thai churches go about the task of behaving theologically. First, the congregation's theology was church based, the "work" of the whole church rather than particular individuals. It was a "negotiated theology" and a "political theology" that, perhaps unintentionally, adhered to the Pauline injunctions to not engage in activities that will destroy the unity of the church or cause weaker members to stumble. In 1996, the members of the Suwanduangrit Church intensively negotiated among themselves the congregation's theological response to its neighbors' demands for greater village unity. The church preserved a semblance of unity that smoothed the way for the events of 2000

and 2001 with members who remained aloof from the church's initial venture into the *wat* participating enthusiastically five years later. At the very least, it seems evident that Thai local theology as conducted in Ban Dok Daeng demonstrates a deep concern for community.

Second, Thai local theology, in this case, emerged in the immediate, even dominating presence of the church's Buddhist neighbors. Buddhism and Buddhists are an inescapable reality for Thai local theology. It should be remembered, however, that the Suwanduangrit Church's Buddhist context is not that of classical Buddhism, the Buddha, or even the most creative Thai Buddhist teachers such as Buddhadasa. The Buddhism the church encounters in Ban Dok Daeng is village, culture Buddhism, a religious suasion that has its weaknesses as well as its strengths. During the debates of 1996, for example, one of the congregation's elders forcefully argued that Buddha images are idols if one considers the way in which our flesh and blood neighbors actually treat them. He worried over the question of whether the church was not implicitly condoning idolatry by participating in the dedication of a *phraviharn* filled with gleaming images of the Buddha. In this village context, then, Thai communal theology necessarily looks on the religion of its neighbors with a certain ambivalence as it seeks to discern its duty to God and neighbor.

At the same time, the relationship between the religious thought of the temple and the theology of the church in Ban Dok Daeng also exhibits a more complex relationship than members of the congregation might admit or even realize. The church shares a great deal with the temple in terms of attitudes about worship (merit making), stewardship, and living according to a religious law that regulates communal and personal behavior. Its active worship life almost exactly parallels the temple's ceremonial life as to occasion (such as funerals, weddings, and housewarmings) and religious meaning (seeking cosmic/divine protection and benevolence). The case is the same in terms of financial giving. Both temple and church emphasize building up a large, well-developed physical plant. The church, furthermore, shares its Buddhist neighbors' concern to live proper lives according to a defined dharma (teaching), the Christian dharma being taken from the Bible. Apart from the lyrics of translated Western hymns, the sense and experience of God's grace in Christ is seldom mentioned. The Suwanduangrit Church's theology, thus, is communal in yet another way, namely in the fact that the church unconsciously draws on religious themes taken from its larger community.

Third, the story of the Suwanduangrit Church's all but revolutionary reorientation of its relationship to its community reveals that Thai local theology looks to respected, trustworthy authorities to validate its theological views. During the debates of 1996, the congregation turned repeatedly to the three theologically trained members of the church for reassurance that it could actually donate a money tree to the *wat* and take part in the temple's blessings ceremony. If, at any time, any of the three had objected to these acts, the process would have come to a halt. The role of the CCT's Moderator was even more important as he spoke with the authority of the whole church. He was doubly respected as a "local boy" who had risen to the highest elective office in the national church. His assurances were crucial. He spoke with some feeling about the tensions between Christians and Buddhists in Ban Dok Daeng, tensions he had experienced personally. He urged the church to change its relationship with the village, virtually saying that the more it felt it could do (up to a point) the better it would be for the church and the

community. Thai communal theology, thus, requires the sanction of respected authorities. One could hardly expect it to be otherwise, given the nature of Thai society itself, which tends to be conservative and dependent on the voices of strong patrons even in this age of budding democracy. The Suwandumrit Church found itself in the unusual position of being urged to change by its authority figures, and the Revolution of 1996 could not have taken place if those figures had not given the church permission to carry it out.

Fourth, Thai communal theology pays attention to the Bible. The current moderator of the Suwandumrit Church, who was very hesitant in 1996 about the church's actions, has publicly justified the congregation's (and his own) changed attitude about the *waton* a number of occasions, citing the Bible in each case. At one point, he argued that the congregation had done nothing more than what Jesus himself did when Jesus sat with tax collectors and other sinners and when he attended community festivities, even turning water into wine. The comparison of our Buddhist neighbors with the biblical tax collectors may not be the happiest parallel possible, but it does indicate a changed perception of how the church should relate to those it formerly held in disdain. At another time, he insisted that the church was merely fulfilling its role as a peacemaker, in accordance with biblical injunctions. As we have already seen, the theological "authorities" of the congregation laid considerable emphasis on the biblical mandate to love one's neighbor. To be sure, most of the members of the congregation have only a rudimentary grasp of biblical teachings, but they are sufficiently Christian and Protestant to worry over whether or not their actions might conflict with those teachings.

Fifth, Thai local theology concerns itself with boundaries, particularly in ritual and worship. Once it was resolved in 1996 that the congregation could finance its own money tree and march in procession with the rest of the village, the focus of the most anxious discussions fixed on the ritual the Christians would have to participate in inside the *phraviharn*. Was it religious? Would it involve paying religious respect to the monks or the images? The church crossed the final hurdle in its encounter with its neighbors when the then moderator assured the members that nothing more was involved than the giving of a traditional northern Thai blessing that was not essentially religious. That claim requires careful consideration, for it reveals a key tension in contemporary Thai theological thought. If one attempts to take a strictly "objective," Western Enlightenment view of the matter, the moderator's claim that the temple's blessings ceremony is not "religious" seems questionable. A Buddhist "lay reader" led the ceremony in the temple in a merit-making context. Yet, the church, including even the leading elder of the "separatist" group, accepted the moderator's assertion the ceremony was "really" only a traditional Thai one and not essentially religious.

It must be understood that the Suwandumrit Church was actually engaged in a redefinition of religious boundaries, a key issue for Thai local theology. Missionary Christianity planted within the Thai church a Western style dualism deeply concerned with protecting Christian purity from any defilement by "heathen" practices.⁴

The Thai church has especially emphasized refraining from participation in Buddhist-animist ritual and ceremony as a key way of protecting its purity, and one finds Thai Protestant Christians constantly worrying over the question of idolatrous behavior in situations in which

they are faced with having to join in Buddhist rituals-such as at funerals, opening exercises in schools, and community events. The general rule has been to take a hard line approach, one that adheres to as strict a definition of the boundaries between Christianity and Buddhism as possible. This is, admittedly, a very Western way of looking at religious boundaries, and contemporary Thai theology is profoundly marked by this foreign approach to interreligious engagement (or, disengagement).

Tongchai Winichakul's excellent study of the impact of Western conception of the maps and mapping on Thailand provides an instructive parallel to the role of sharply drawn boundaries in Thai Protestant Christianity. Tongchai observes that before the advent of Western mapping, shifting allegiances among the rulers of Southeast Asia's empires and petty states left political boundaries fluid, diffuse, and ill defined. Smaller states frequently gave allegiance to two power centers, so that travelers only gradually moved across the "boundary" between those centers. The European colonial powers, however, could not tolerate this hazy attitude toward boundaries and insisted upon carefully surveying and marking out the lines between each state and territory.⁵ Asia's rulers, today, accept the Western concept of political boundaries, and, by the same token, the Thai church has accepted a Western conception of how Christians draw boundaries between themselves and the world. It is a conception that is not "natural" to the Thai religious consciousness, which generally holds to the principle that "all religions teach the same thing, namely that people should do good instead of evil." Our neighbors in Ban Dok Daeng have no trouble joining the church in its worship or in praying with its members when they pray, but Christians have absented themselves from as much of Buddhist ceremonial life as possible.

The congregation's moderator in 1996 was, unconsciously, resorting to a more Thai-like attitude about religious boundaries when he claimed that the temple ceremony was "traditional" rather than "religious". Such an attitude allows the church to redefine its neighbors' religious life in new ways, ones that do not threaten the purity of the church. If the church, in other words, agrees that a certain Buddhist ceremony is not a religious rite but merely a northern Thai traditional ceremony, then there is no problem with participating in it. Ultimately, just as in traditional Southeast Asia, one does pass into the clear center of a particular prince's territory; for the Suwanduangrit Church that clear power center is now defined by actual giving respect to a Buddha image. That act, church members have agreed in an all but official way, is the act that they will not engage in. Previously, however, they refused to light incense sticks in respect of the dead, refused to present robes to monks at funerals on behalf of the deceased, refused to join in string tying ceremonies, and refused to do many other things, which Ban Dok Daeng Christians (and not a few other northern Thai Christians) now accept and do. Some of the church members still do not do some or all of these things, but they are no longer so apt to criticize those who do. The ritual boundary between the church and its neighbors has become more fluid, after the manner of Thai religious consciousness and traditional Southeast Asian political practice.

Finally, Thai local theology at Ban Dok Daeng shares certain theological characteristics in common with the professional, generally seminary-based Asian theological movement such as the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA). The most important of those characteristics is its struggle with its dualistic, Western missionary past just mentioned above.

The inescapable starting point of the professional Asian theological movement has been in its reaction against the cultural and spiritual constraints imposed upon Asian church life by missionary theologies that absolutely rejected Asian religious consciousness and much of Asian culture. C. S. Song states,

In recent years we thinking Christians and theologians in Asia have, at long last, come to realize that we cannot continue to sing somebody else's theological tune. It has dawned on us that we must find our own theological voice. It has become abundantly clear that our own cultures, religions and histories, unrelated historically to Christianity, pose fundamentally theological questions and challenges we can no longer ignore. The stereotyped theological and missiological pronouncements on our cultural, religious and historical realities made by our mentors in the West, if not entirely fallacious, are invalid and misleading.⁶

In the context of Ban Dok Daeng, missionary theology has distorted and disrupted the church's relationship to its neighbors, returning it functionally to an Old Testament understanding of one's neighbor, as being limited to other members of the "covenant of faith" (see Leviticus 19:18). Jesus and the early church extended the concept of neighbor to include virtually the whole of the human race (see Luke 10:25-37, Romans 13:8-10, and James 2:8),⁷ but the Suwanduangrit Church found it all but impossible to love its Buddhist neighbors in ways that its neighbors felt were loving. The congregation's revolutionary re-orientation of its relationship to its neighbors, thus, necessarily involved a critique of the theological strictures laid upon it by its Western theological heritage.

At the same time, however, the Suwanduangrit Church's decisions to participate in the religious activities of its Buddhist neighbors more fully and openly represented a positive act of affirmation far more than a negative act of rejection. While the congregation did reject elements of its missionary past, that rejection was largely implicit and unconscious. Consciously and explicitly, it affirmed certain northern Thai communal values and embraced particular traditions that it had previously rejected or ignored. Thus, for example, it redefined the money tree as being a traditional Thai way of making donations rather than as an essentially Buddhist act of merit making. That is to say that the congregation consciously engaged, after the fashion of Asian theologians, in an act of appropriating Asian "resources" for the conduct of its own life while reshaping its thinking and behavior into a more Asian mode. Its behavior in 1996 and 2000-2001 fits well with Piers' redefinition of baptism in the Asian context. Piers writes, "Translated for our times, baptism is not to pour water on somebody and bring him or her into the church-which does not do service to anybody-but to pass through the act of humility by which the church is baptized into the Asian environment."⁸ When the Suwanduangrit Church processed to the temple with its money tree and received the blessings of its Buddhist neighbors, these events marked an important baptism into its Thai environment.

Asian professional theology and the theology practiced by the members of the Suwanduangrit Church both begin as critiques of orthodox Western dualistic theology. Both proceed methodologically by appropriating Asian sources, traditions, and patterns for the use of the Christian faith, fitting the faith to Asia as much or more than fitting Asia to the faith. Both also share a similar end, namely liberation. Oracion writes,

Theology is not a tool for constructing an accurate, objective, and true understanding of self and world. What it is interested in is the discernment of the truth of God in history in order that a person of faith might make a faithful approximation of the liberating act of Jesus within his or her sociopolitical context. Theology is supremely interested in asking the question where and why people are hurting, and what possible means are available in removing that hurt.⁹²

The village of Ban Dok Daeng had long suffered a serious communal division along religious lines, a division originally caused by Christian theological prejudices against peoples of other faiths. Over the decades, however, both sides occasionally treated the other in ways gauged to increase friction and show disdain. The Christians acted and spoke abusively, while the Buddhist majority acted oppressively-not always or even frequently, to be sure, but the prospect of intra-communal friction has long smoldered, always ready to leap into flames. In 1996, the Buddhist majority called on the Christians to behave in new ways, and the church responded in a peaceable manner quite out of keeping with the historical experience of the village. By 2001, that and subsequent peacemaking acts by both sides have substantially reduced tensions within the village; the seeds of greater trust seem to be quietly sprouting.

The members of the Suwanduangrit Church, Ban Dok Daeng, in sum, are practicing Thai theology, a theology that we have styled here as being "communal". That theology is church based, necessarily in dialogue with popular, village Buddhism, and sensitive to the authoritative opinions of its theologically trained leaders. It is biblical. It takes a more traditionally southeast Asian attitude towards theologically defined religious boundaries. It shares important traits with the professional, seminary-based Asian theology that has emerged over the last three decades. Ban Dok Daeng Christian theology, however, expresses itself through a different medium than the professional theologians. The professionals generally write their theologies down on paper and share them in conferences and seminars. The members of the Suwanduangrit Church dance their theologies in their community's streets and alleys, the church compound, and the temple grounds.

Conclusion

Not long ago, as I sat working on this paper at home, I heard the sound of the drums, the gongs, and the ululation of yet another festive procession wending through the quiet alleyways of Ban Dok Daeng. A young man, on his way to becoming a novice at the temple, was being processed through the village by his dancing relatives, friends, and neighbors. Before 1996, the Christians of Ban Dok Daeng never danced through the streets of our community. To be sure, some individual Christians attached themselves to Buddhist processions, but only as individuals and not as Christians. Christians had no drums, no gongs. In late 2000 and the early months of 2001, in contrast, they had become dancers, dancing and processing in the presence of their neighbors and with their neighbors. They had forged a more peaceful relationship with those neighbors in a theological process strikingly similar to what Koyama terms "neighborology," which may be defined as responding in a Christ like manner to the needs and questions of one's neighbor.¹⁰ Koyama and the members of the Suwanduangrit Church both make it clear that in a northern Thai context, theology *is* neighborology.

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- ¹ See Kosuke Koyama, *Water buffalo Theology: A Thailand Theological Notebook* (Singapore: n.p., 1970), 78. Goosen points to the potential contribution northern Thai theologies might make to international theological thought by citing *Water buffalo Theology* as outstanding example of the possibilities involved in "doing theology" contextually. Gideon Goosen, *Australian Theologies: Themes and methodologies into the third millennium* (Strathfield, New South Wales: St. Pauls, 2000), 24
- ² See Prasit Pongudom, *pdkao maeduem prawatisatchumchon doi saket* [Ancestors: History of the Doi Saket Christian Community](Chiang Mai: Office of History, 1993).
- ³ See Prasit Pongudom, "'tianphansa' lae 'phapasamakki' kap khrischaksuwanduangrit," ("Tianphansa' and 'Phapasamakki' with the Suwanduangrit Church") *khaokhrischak* (Church News) 69, 606 (December 2000), 45.
- ⁴ See Herbert R. Swanson, "This Heathen People: The Cognitive Sources of American Missionary Westernizing Activities in Northern Siam, 1867-1889," (M.A.thesis, University of Maryland, 1987).
- ⁵ See Tongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geobody of a Nation* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994), esp. 20ff.
- ⁶ Song, Choan Seng. "Christian Theology-An Asian Way. "in Association for Theological Education in South East Asia, *ATESEA Occasional Papers: No. 10, Doing Theology with God's Purpose in Asia*, ed. Yeow ChooLak (Singapore: ATESEA, 1990), 27.
- ⁷ See *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Neighbor."
- ⁸ Aloysius Piers, "Two Encounters in My Theological Journey," in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 143.
- ⁹ Levi V. Oracion, "Asian Theology in the Nineties: A Discussion Paper," *CTC Bulletin* 9, 2 & 3 (May-December 1990): 5.
- ¹⁰ Koyama, *Water buffalo Theology*, 8488.
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Remaking the Sapha: Demographic Change and the Church of Christ in Thailand 1982-2001

Herb Swanson

Introduction



The future of the "mainline" churches in the West looks problematic, perhaps even grim. Philip Hughes' article in [HeRB 2](#) and the review of Andrew Walls' article on global Christian demographic change in [HeRB 1](#) are but a small taste of the growing body of data all pointing in the same direction. The Church in the West is facing a serious time of testing; Christianity is declining in its most recent homeland.

Statistics kept by the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) over the last two decades, including two special projects aimed at collecting accurate and reliable data (in 1997 and 2001), paint a startlingly different picture compared to what is happening in the West. Between 1982 and 2001, the CCT grew from a small body of 33,390 total members to a much larger denomination encompassing 128,793 baptized members (communicant and non-communicant). That is a growth rate of 285.7% in just twenty years. Cynics will immediately point out that in that period the CCT incorporated two large Baptist tribal bodies, the Lahu Baptist Convention (LBC) in 1992 and the Karen Baptist Convention (KBC) in 1995, totaling nearly 40,000 members between them at the time of admission. Still, between 1997 and 2001, after those two bodies had joined, the CCT increased its membership by some 20.1% in just four years; District 19 (the former KBC) grew somewhat faster than that rate, at 25.5%, while District 18 (the old LBC) grew at a rate of 18.7% or slightly less than the overall CCT rate. Which is to say, the addition of these two groups of churches increased the overall size of the CCT perceptibly, but has not added much, if anything, to its rate of growth. See Table One, below.

A closer look at the CCT's growth in membership since 1982 offers some important insights into the near past, present, and near future of the CCT. More than anything else, those figures reveal that the CCT is going through an important period of internal cultural change unlike anything that it has experienced since it was founded in 1934. Originally a church dominated numerically by ethnic northern Thais whose churches had been founded under the aegis of American Presbyterian missionary work dating from the 1840s, by 2001 ethnic tribal churches and churches of a multi-national Baptist heritage had established themselves as the largest groups within the CCT.

Beneath all of these cheerful statistics of growth, however, there lurks one other quiet statistic. Between 1997 and 2001, the CCT increased its numbers of members in every age category except one, the exception being children ages 1 to 15. Although in absolute numbers that age bracket did increase, as a percentage of the whole it fell by nearly 4%. The CCT represents "mainline" Protestantism in Thailand, and perhaps a mainline fate awaits it down the line.

Table One
CCT Membership Statistics 1982-2001

District	1982	1992	1997	2001	% Change	% Change	% Change
					1982-2001	1992-2001	1997-2001
1	6,931	8,062	10,003	10,288	48.43%	27.61%	2.85%
2	8,715	10,725	14,735	17,765	103.84%	65.64%	20.56%
3	1,798	2,185	2,095	2,209	22.86%	1.10%	5.44%
4	2,032	2,326	2,202	2,690	32.38%	15.65%	22.16%
5	1,750	1,938	2,903	2,845	62.57%	46.80%	-2.00%
6	2,019	3,180	3,098	3,328	64.83%	4.65%	7.42%
7	2,775	4,825	7,803	8,058	190.38%	67.01%	3.27%
8	504	550	690	747	48.21%	35.82%	8.26%
9	530	600	826	916	72.83%	52.67%	10.90%
10	1,728	2,319	4,553	5,067	193.23%	118.50%	11.29%
11	534	910	798	853	59.74%	-6.26%	6.89%
12	1,524	3,829	7,006	11,562	658.66%	201.69%	65.03%
13	1,065	1,160	1,732	2,165	103.29%	86.64%	25.00%
14	1,485	1,579	1,325	1,385	-6.73%	-12.29%	4.53%
15		1,950	2,349	2,593		32.97%	10.39%
16		641	2,149	3,433		435.57%	59.75%
17		891	1,187	1,398		56.90%	17.78%
18			13,631	16,185			18.74%
19			28,133	35,306			25.50%
Total	33,390	47,670	107,218	128,793	285.72%	170.18%	20.12%

An Overview of the Data

While the numerical growth of the CCT's nineteen districts obviously varies widely, it is striking that since 1982 only one district has dropped in its numbers, that being District 14 (-6.73%). District 14, comprising former leper churches, split off from District 1 in the 1970s. All but two of the fourteen districts in 1982 experienced at least 40% growth by 2001. It should also be noted that the "champion of CCT church growth statistics," District 12 (Chinese Baptist) is one of the CCT's "old" districts, yet another indication that CCT growth has not come simply through the incorporation of the KBC and LBC in the mid-1990s. In general, it is striking how few negative percentages appear in Table One. District 14, as noted, is the only district to show a general decline over the past twenty years; District 5 (Nan) has seen a recent drop in its total membership but shows substantial growth over the longer run. Still, it cannot be denied that by-and-large it is the high numbered districts, the ones most recently added to the CCT, that are enjoying the largest percentages of growth.

The significance of the CCT's demographic growth can be partly measured by comparing its figures to those of the general population. Thai Government census data (from the National Statistical Office's website at www.nso.go.th) shows that in the last twenty years the nation's population grew from 44,824,540 in 1980 to 60,606,947 in 2000 (35%) while the CCT grew between 1982 and 2001 by 285.72%, as stated earlier. Looking at the situation before the LBC and KBC joined in the mid-1990s, it is notable that between 1980 and 1990 the general population of Thailand grew by some 21.7% while the CCT increased in size by 42.8% between 1982 and 1992. The "old CCT," that is, was already growing twice as rapidly as the general population even before it incorporated the LBC and KBC. By way of more recent comparison, between 1990 and 2000 Thailand's population increased at an annual rate of 1.05%, while the CCT's membership grew by a total of 20.1% between 1997 and 2002. My sense is that we can't simply divide 20.1% by four to arrive at annual growth rate of about 5% per year for the CCT, but clearly the CCT today continues to grow in size at a much higher rate than the total population. That rate of increase, in fact, looks to be much higher even than the CCT's growth rate before the 1990s.

While we can speculate as to why the CCT has been growing at such impressive rates, relative to the general population, the fact is that we don't really know why. Some of the CCT's districts, as well as individual churches, are engaging in relatively aggressive evangelism. Tribal birth rates are surely higher than the general population so that CCT growth figures benefit from its high percentage of tribal church members. Yet, a review of the districts' rate of growth between 1992 and 2001 and between 1997 and 2001 (Table One) reveals that only District 14 is clearly failing to keep up with national population increases. Districts 3 and 11 are apparently just barely keeping pace. Since 1997, Districts 1 and 5 seem to have lost growth momentum as well, but then for the same period, the figures for District 14 have picked up slightly. Otherwise, the CCT's statistics indicate generally church-wide growth at levels that vary from slightly above to impressively greater than the growth of Thailand's population of just over 1% annually.

At a CCT meeting held in January 2002, I had a chance to ask representatives from several of the high growth districts about their statistical increases in membership between 1997 and 2001. The Moderator of District 16 (Sangklaburi, Karen Baptist) affirmed that the district was rapidly growing in numbers, but he could not really explain why. It seemed almost commonplace to him that churches grow statistically. The District Coordinator for District 4 (Phrae), on the other hand, initially denied that the district's churches had grown by over 20% since 1997. He felt that there was a mistake in the numbers. A companion from that district, however, reminded him off the top of his head of two District 4 churches that have been growing in recent years. Brief discussions with representatives from District 2 (Chiang Rai) and District 10 (Karen Baptist) elicited no more information as to why the churches of those districts are growing at healthy rates.

Even where the CCT is not engaging in aggressive evangelism and where its birth rates are probably no higher than those of the general population, it is growing. Why? Church historians attribute the growth of the early church to a variety of factors, but two seem to stand out. The first was the person of Jesus. The second was the quality of Christian community life. Is it possible that these two factors are still at work in Thailand? Perhaps, but for whatever reason the

CCT's districts are growing in membership at impressive rates, especially in comparison to national population figures. Those rates are still more impressive, as the heir of "mainline" Protestant missions, when considered in the light of the mainline churches of Europe, North America, and Australia-New Zealand with their constant reductions in membership. (The Presbyterian Church USA website, for example, shows that PCUSA has dropped from a membership of 2,895,706 in 1989 to 2,560,201 in 1999, a loss of nearly 16%). This growth, furthermore, has had an impact on the composition of the CCT's membership, an impact that will increase in the years to come.

A Denominational Shift

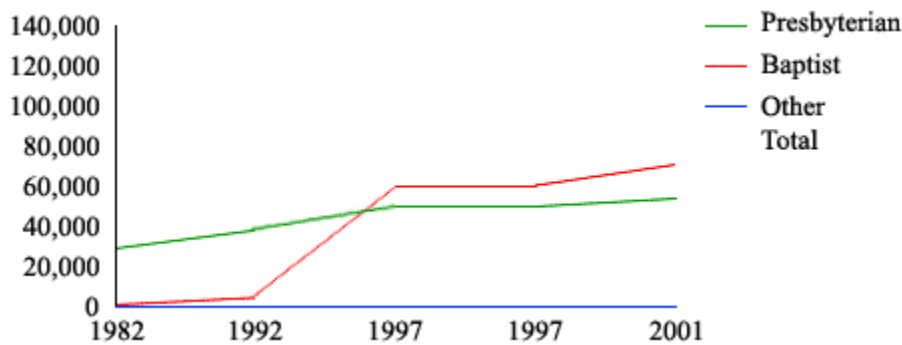
In the first place, the demographic weight of the CCT's denominational heritage is shifting away from American Presbyterianism towards a more pluralistic configuration increasingly leaning towards a more international Baptist heritage (still heavily influenced by American missionaries). Table Two (below) tells the story.

Table Two
CCT Membership Statistics 1982-2001: By Denominational Background

Heritage	1982	%	1992	%	1997	%	2001	%
Presbyterian	28,539	85.47%	36,861	77.33%	46,867	43.71%	51,629	40.09%
Baptist	3,252	9.74%	6,789	14.24%	55,472	51.74%	71,553	55.56%
Other	1,599	4.79%	4,020	8.43%	4,879	4.55%	5,611	4.36%
Total	33,390		47,670		107,218		128,793	

When rendered graphically, in Graph One (below), the shift from a predominantly Presbyterian heritage to a more pluralistic one with a few large Baptist districts contributing to a Baptist majority is seen even more clearly.

Chart One
CCT Membership Statistics 1982-2001: By Denominational Background



Presbyterian means here Districts 1-9, 14, and 17. The Baptist Districts are 10, 12, 16, 18, and 19. The three "Other" districts are District 11 (formerly Churches of Christ/Disciples of Christ),

District 13 (formerly C&MA), and District 15 (largely Marburger Mission with some Presbyterian).

This division is far from precise. District 7 (Chinese Presbyterian), for example, includes a large number of Hmong churches founded, originally, by the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF). District 16 grew out of a joint Baptist-Disciples of Christ venture. Even so, the general trend over the last twenty years is clear. The "old Presbyterian" districts are growing more slowly than are the "new Baptist" districts.

The most important and apparent immediate implication of this shift is more political than theological. Up until the mid-1990s, the "old" districts clearly dominated the political structures of the CCT; the only shift apparent over time was that Chiang Mai and the northern churches had gained increased voice in the highest councils of the church while the Bangkok churches lost influence. The incorporation of the LBC (District 18) and KBC (District 19) did pose a potential challenge to the powers in place, particularly as these two "mega-districts" commanded large numbers of delegates in General Assembly. The powers in place have met this threat by an artful change in the way numbers of delegates are calculated, a change that puts a ceiling on how many delegates the large districts can send to the assembly. For the time being, at least, the former Presbyterian churches continue to dominate the CCT politically.

On the face of it, the shift in denominational heritage has probably not made much difference in other ways either. In terms of worship, for example, the almost massive influence of the Pentecostal churches on Protestant worship generally has been a great leveler, encouraging a general drift in many CCT churches towards less formal, more demonstrative worship. This drift can be seen more clearly in the cities than the countryside; yet, one finds sets of drum and guitars being used and hand-clapping choruses being sung in the rural churches as well urban ones, old CCT churches as well as new ones.

Differences between the Baptists and Presbyterians in terms of pastoral care, as another important example, are more apparent than real. Historically (until the 1980s), the churches of a Presbyterian heritage relied more on elders than on trained pastors to care for their churches. The Baptist churches normally had pastors, but they were seldom trained theologically and gave only a few hours a week to their pastoral duties. The two systems, in effect, were much the same. Now, both the old Presbyterian churches and the newer Baptist ones are seeking to put into place a system of professional pastoral care. Increasing numbers of "Baptist" tribal students, meanwhile, are finding their way into the CCT's Thai-language seminaries where a further melding and leveling process is taking place.

In sum, the demographic shift away from the old Presbyterian core and towards a growing Baptist presence has not yet had much impact. The CCT had already worked out a "live and let live" policy that allows Disciples and Baptist districts to retain their distinctive polities within the overall framework of the CCT. The "new" Baptists in the CCT are tribal, and they have shown a general willingness to adapt to the ways and means of the CCT. This fact coupled with the ability of the old core to still manipulate the church politically is a perfect formula for preserving the status quo into the near future.

An Ethnic Shift

Since 1995, when the KBC joined the CCT, one fact stands out more clearly than all others: taken together, the CCT's ethnic minorities now constitute a majority of the CCT's membership. If it were to proceed on a simple one person, one vote basis, the CCT would do well to change its name to the Tribal Church of Christ in Thailand. The general statistics contained in Table One only begin to tell this story. In 1982, the CCT had only one ethnic tribal district, District 10 (Karen), which had just 1,728 members (5.2% of the CCT's total membership). After 1995, the CCT had only four tribal districts, three largely Karen (Districts 10, 16, 19) and one Lahu (District 18); in 1997 45.2% of the CCT's total membership belonged to churches of these four districts. In 2001, that figure had increased slightly to 46.6% of the CCT's total membership. Tribal membership, by these figures, has not yet reached 50% of the CCT's membership.

In fact, tribal churches account for more than 47% of the CCT total membership. District 2 has one large khaed (sub-district) that is Chinese Haw and Akkha in ethnic background. That sub-district has quietly pursued membership in the CCT as a separate district, so far without any success. District 7, as mentioned above, includes a large number of Hmong churches. Part of District 12's nearly phenomenal rate of growth is due to an aggressive program of evangelism among tribal peoples in northern Thailand. When all of these tribal churches and some others that belong to non-tribal districts are factored into the equation, tribal membership in the CCT is in excess of 50% of the total local church membership. Given these figures, it is not too much to conclude that with the addition of the LBC to its constituency ten years ago, the CCT entered into an era of profound cultural change.

It is not clear precisely what this cultural shift in the CCT portends. A great deal depends on the complex cultural forces at work in the tribal churches themselves. The Karen of northern Thailand are an especially important case because of their large numbers and their longer connection with the CCT. It is fair to say that there remains a keen sense of Karen identity among Karen churches in the North, a sense that the Office of History is finding is more widely shared even among young people than one might have thought. When the Office of History and the Ban Nong Ched Nuey Church of District 19 sponsored a weeklong "church & culture camp" for young people in 2001, the response by Karen youth and children was nearly overwhelming. Where 30-40 was initially expected to attend, the actual number was over 80. Other Karen churches have since taken up the idea of church & culture camps. I am not sure whether this same interest in tribal culture is found among the other tribal groups in the CCT, but it is possible and even likely that the CCT is going to become an even more culturally diverse body in the future. Whether or not cultural diversity is a strength or weakness remains to be seen.

It is not clear, however, how this diversity affects the life of the CCT. Certainly, national meetings are more colorful and multi-lingual. But, the new tribal members of the CCT have shown a strong preference for remaining quietly in the shadows; tribal voices are not heard in proportion to their numbers. The pressures of "Thai-ization" weigh heavily on all tribal peoples in Thailand, and it seems apparent that tribal Christians are more susceptible to that process than are their non-Christian neighbors. Western missionaries taught the tribal churches to look down on their own cultures and indigenous religious heritage as being both satanic and inferior. The

younger generation of tribals, especially Christian tribals, are educated in Thai-language schools and speak Thai nearly as well or even as well as their tribal language. That trend will surely continue into the foreseeable future.

Concluding Thoughts

A great deal, in fact, is not clear. We do not know, on the basis of the statistics available to us today, whether to be optimistic or pessimistic concerning the near-term and long-term future of the CCT. That the CCT is growing statistically is a fact. Why? We do not know. In what specific situations? We do not know. Does this growth reflect the strength of the CCT's local churches? Again, we have no idea. What are the reasons why people are becoming Christian? There are a range of reasons that can be given, but we do not know which ones are predominant.

Our ignorance of what these statistics mean, apart from a few general conclusions, is appalling. We are not sure that the bare fact of demographic growth is indicative of anything other than the bare fact that the churches are currently growing demographically. By way of comparison, Dr. Peter Brierly of the Christian Research Association in Britain has produced an insightful study of the 1998 English Church Attendance Survey [*The Tide is Running Out* (London: Christian Research, 2000)], which reveals a great deal about the actual state of church life in England today. If, there was such a survey among the churches of the CCT, what would it show? Church rolls may be growing, but is church attendance? No one knows.

Still, the CCT can take a certain amount of comfort in its demographic growth. Although we are ignorant of the dynamics of this growth, still it is better to be ignorant about demographic growth than it is about demographic decline. That growth, furthermore, raises some interesting questions about the strength of the CCT's local churches. The common wisdom in the CCT is that the local churches, especially in rural areas, are very weak. They are poorly led and have few resources for ministry. But, they are also growing in numbers. The tribal churches are among the poorest churches in the CCT, poor in terms of trained leadership and resources for ministry. But, they are the fastest growing segment of the CCT. Is it possible that the CCT's local churches are not as weak and leaderless as is widely believed? [See the article entitled, "[A Church Health Survey of the CCT's District Four](#)" for further reflections on the state of local church health.]

The implications of the CCT's demographic growth for its own life are somewhat clearer. In and of itself, that growth is not an engine for change. The CCT has so long ceased to be "Presbyterian" that it is meaningless to argue that the increase in Baptist membership makes it "less Presbyterian." At the same time, it does not seem that the increase in tribal membership is making the CCT any less "Thai" than it was before. The major institutional changes in the life of the CCT over the last twenty years, including the reduction of missionary influence and the concomitant rise in influence of the church's educational and medical institutions, has had nothing to do with demographic change. We are left, in sum, with an inconclusive conclusion. The need for further study is clear. Whether such study will take place and who will do it is, unfortunately, unclear.

Short Items

Le Pantalon Rouge

In 1912, on the eve of World War I, the French Minister of War, Adolphe Messimy, attempted to modernize the French army's uniforms, which since before 1830 had been a combination of bright reds and blues set off by flashy red trousers. The British and the German armies had already switched to uniforms of browns and grays more fitting to the necessities of modern warfare with its rifles that could shot accurately over many hundreds of yards. The French military, however, bitterly resisted Messimy's attempted reform. It felt that the army's prestige and honor were at stake. One witness at the parliamentary hearings on the matter, a former Minister of War himself, exclaimed, "Eliminate the red trousers? Never! Le pantalon rouge c'est la France!" Some years later Messimy observed, "That blind and imbecile attachment to the most visible of all colors was to have cruel consequences." (Based on Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 55. The quotations are taken from Tuchman.)

Ninety years later, it is easy to smile at this "quaint" story taken from an era when war and honor were still synonymous terms, but one cannot help but observe how frequently churches and their leaders adhere to the outmoded ways of thinking and behaving, crying out with fervor, "Le pantalon rouge c'est la France!" Religionists, indeed, are even more prone to a "blind and imbecile" attachment to the past because they assign eternal consequences to every word they utter and belief they cherish.

What's Happening with the Lahu Churches?

This past hot season, 11 Lahu students from the Lahu Bible Institute, District 18 of the Church of Christ in Thailand, carried out a project studying local church histories. They spent some two weeks in five churches, doing interviews and collecting data. At the end of the project, we reviewed the results of their research, and I asked them to briefly evaluate whether the churches they studied were weaker or stronger than they had been ten years earlier. Four of the five teams replied that their churches were definitely weaker. Only one team thought their church was stronger. On a whim, I asked the students about their homes churches. They belonged to ten different churches. Only one student felt that his church was stronger now than it had been ten years ago. That is to say, in the opinions of these students 13 of 15 Lahu congregations are weaker now than they were a decade ago. (It should be noted that among these 15 churches is one independent Lahu church not associated with District 18).

This sample is entirely unscientific. The students' judgments may be way off the mark. On the other hand, they had received some training in historical research methods, including the evaluation of historical data. Perhaps, their estimations of the direction of church life have some

merit. What if they are correct? A worrisome thought, that.

Conservative in Theology, Liberal in Spirit

In June 1927, the *Ladies Home Journal* published an article on Siam, which contained negative comments about Presbyterian missionary attitudes. In a letter to the Board of Foreign Missions, the Rev. Paul A. Eakin explains that the reporter, a Unitarian, based the article's comments on a sermon delivered by the Rev. Paul Fuller, a young and spirited missionary. The sermon, Eakin reports, was a passionate and uncompromising defense of the verbal inspiration of the Bible. Eakin describes it as being very fundamentalist. The reporter asked Eakin if Fuller's views represented those of the majority of Presbyterian missionaries in Siam. Eakin reports his reply as being, "...I should say that almost all of our Mission, both old and young, are conservative in their Theology, and liberal in their spirit." (Eakin to Brown, 6 September 1927, in the Maen Research Papers, Payap University Archives)

The late 1920s was an awkward time theologically for the Presbyterian Church USA. The denomination was slowly shedding its conservative, biblicist Old School heritage and moving to a more moderate theological orientation that sought to leave room for liberals and conservatives while avoiding the rancor of theological debate. Thirty years earlier, in the 1890s, a sermon like Fuller's would not have been cause for comment, and a reporter from the United States would have found nothing offensive in it. Thirty years later, in the 1950s, the moderates would be in general control of the denomination and such sermons simply were not preached on the field. A Reporter from the United States probably would not have bothered to go to a church anyway. The year 1927, on the other hand, was a good year for fence sitting, for trying to "be" conservative and "act" liberal. Eakin, who in later years was himself accused of being a closet-liberal, read the spirit of his own times and denomination aptly and did just that-sat on the nearest, widest, safest fence.

Seeking a New Center

Meeting in Chiang Mai in November 1930, the American Presbyterian Mission in Siam passed a motion, numbered Act. 30/211, to accept a set of recommendations put before the mission. Among those recommendations was the following, "That all Mission work should become Church-centric instead of mission-centric, which in Siam will mean the formation of a National Church." Six years later and two years after the founding of the Church of Christ in Siam, the mission's field secretary, Paul Eakin, reaffirmed that commitment, writing, "The establishment of a strong, self-supporting and self-governing and self-propagating Church is the goal of all our work. The goal of the Presbyterian Mission is to establish such a national church."

In 1940, however, a young missionary, Horace W. Ryburn, wrote to Eakin observing that the Presbyterian missionaries needed to stop acting like patrons and put themselves under the "National's leadership." He called on the missionaries, this is, to behave personally and professionally in ways that would actually implement the mission's stated "church-centric"

policy. It appears from what records we have from the 1930s that the great majority of Presbyterian missionaries were genuinely committed to devolution. It also appears that Ryburn's plea was justified. Individual missionaries in their particular situations were not practicing what they preached.

Sources: "Minutes of the Mission Meeting at Chiangmai, November 21-27, 1930"; Eakin to Bantoon Boon Itt, 14 August 1936; and, Ryburn to Eakin, 14 January 1940. All in the Records of the American Presbyterian Mission, Payap University Archives.

The Core of the Asian Gospel

"Religions are for humanity and not human beings for religions. Superiority or uniqueness is not the main issue. The core of the gospel is neither the theological divinity nor the philosophical truthfulness nor the mythological saviourhood of Jesus Christ. Rather it is the fullness of life, which Jesus lived and worked for. This is the missionary mandate for Christianity in Asia."

Source: Roger Gaikwad, "Issues in Christian Relationships with People of Other Faiths in Asia," *Journal of Theology and Cultures in Asia 1* (February 2002): 52.

Headwaters of Thai Revivalism & Pentecostalism

It is often assumed that Thai Pentecostalism is a relatively new phenomenon, beginning no earlier than the John Sung revivals of 1938-1939. There has been a strong tendency, thus far, to ignore the Presbyterian missionary and ecclesiastical sources of Thai revivalism, which go back to earlier revivalistic movements that began in 1930 and 1925, respectively. Several key Thai figures in the early days of Pentecostalism in Thailand, notably the Revs. Boonmark Kittisarn and Suk Pongnoi were products of those Presbyterian revivalistic movements. Thai Pentecostalism represents, it can be argued, a logical outgrowth of earlier Presbyterian (and Baptist) church life in Siam.

While so much is clear, what has been unclear thus far is the earliest origins of Presbyterian revivalism in Siam. An undated item written by the Rev. Paul A. Eakin in about 1940 sheds some light on at least one source of that revivalism. Eakin was the Field Secretary of the American Presbyterian Mission in Siam at the time. He writes that in roughly 1903 an American revivalist by the name of Dr. Johnston visited and preached in the churches in Bangkok. Dr. George B. McFarland served as his translator. Eakin claims that McFarland felt a quickening of his own spiritual life and, in response, made a definite commitment to Christian service at that time. Not long afterwards, McFarland visited the United States where he came under the influence of the enthusiastic revivalist, Billy Sunday. When he returned to Bangkok in 1905, according to Eakin, McFarland held the first Conference of Christian Workers, which was to become an important program for leadership training and church renewal in central Siam. Eakin closes his comments with the observation that McFarland was a good imitator and took on some of Sunday's "eccentricities."

McFarland's "conversion" to revivalism as early as 1903 is the earliest instance of revivalistic influence in Siam that I have come across so far. It is difficult to prove, but it is almost certain that his revivalism influenced some church members and leaders towards a revivalistic bent of their own. He was the son of veteran Presbyterian missionaries, and he himself became an important figure in public life in Bangkok to the extent that the Thai government awarded him several orders of merit and the King honored him with the title of Pra Ach Vidyagama, or "First Councilor." He was even more influential in Christian circles, and the Conference of Christian Workers conferences he held in Bangkok and Phet Buri appear to have been well-attended and widely appreciated. Johnston's Bangkok sermons and McFarland's revivalism, thus, are one the earliest sources of the Presbyterian revivalistic movement, which movement contributed to the emergence of post-World War II Thai Pentecostalism.

Source: Paul A. Eakin, "Influence of Foreign Evangelists," [ca. 1940], in the Eakin Family Papers, Payap University Archives.

The Luxuries of Life

The following quotation from Daniel McGilvary, writing in the *North Carolina Presbyterian* in 1870, is a gem. It summarizes and confirms the fact that the 19th and early 20th century Presbyterian missionaries did not intend to simply evangelize Siam by starting churches. They also sought to Christianize every aspect of northern Thai social, cultural, economic, and political life. McGilvary is explaining to his readers that his family and the Wilsons had successfully transplanted wild raspberries to Chiang Mai. They also had plans to experiment with transplanting plums from a "Shan town" (location not given). He then comments,

"We do not think that it is an object unworthy of missionaries to do all they can to improve the varieties of fruits and other luxuries of life-to cultivate the taste of the people and stimulate them to all those pursuits that tend to improve their social as well as their moral condition. The two are more closely allied than we might at first suppose. The introduction of the comforts of life will not make men Christians. Yet, it is equally true that Christianity tends to render men dissatisfied with the living as well as the morality, of half civilized nations. If men live like savages, it is difficult to make anything else out of them than savages. And the comforts and blessings of a temporal nature that attend the introduction of the Christian religion constitute a very tangible, and therefore no mean argument of its truth."

Source: Daniel McGilvary, "For the Little Folks," *North Carolina Presbyterian* New Series 3, 113 (2 March 1870): 4.

Forgetting the Past

"We can forget the past, but the past, most assuredly, will not forget us."

Source: Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002), 108.

News & Notes

Pastors' Consultation on Local Church Research

On 9-10 September 2002, the Pastoral Care Unit of the CCT sponsored the fourth in a series of seminar-workshop-consultations on training and encouraging pastors to conduct research into local issues and needs. As reported in HeRB 2, the results have been mixed. As many as 30 pastors, in total, have been involved in the process at one point or another. Nearly all evinced interest. Yet, of those 30 only three have successfully completed projects, while a fourth is nearing completion of his church's project.

Another pastor adapted the questionnaire developed by the students and staff of the Office of History's student hot season in Phrae (also see HeRB 2) and had two members of his congregation conduct the research. Finally, yet another pastor used the Phrae questionnaire in his own church. That is to say, this process has led to local research of some type being conducted in a total of six churches. The results, as would be expected, are mixed; but this series of events cannot, in total, be considered a failure. It is not a smashing success, either.

When one of the three who fully completed a project of their own devising was asked to evaluate his experience, he observed that it had been very helpful. His church is in the unusual position of being housed on the same compound as a Korean missionary establishment, and there have been issues involved in their relationship, most specifically in the use of facilities and equipment. The pastor wanted to know how his parishioners felt about the relationship. He said that the research process helped him a great deal because it allowed him to learn how his members felt in a non-antagonist way. When one participant responded that such research was a good tool for congregational democracy, this pastor agreed and further noted that it was also a "non-political" tool. If he had asked for a vote in a meeting with a show of hands, the members would have felt constrained to see how certain "phu yai" (big shots) vote and raise their hands accordingly. The questionnaire, filled out at home, avoided that political pitfall.

The pastor who has nearly finished his project picked up on this theme. The subject of his research is whether the church he serves should build a new church building. Plans for one have been in the works for nearly a decade, but nothing has been done because the issue is controversial. This pastor wants to find out how his members feel in a way that does not raise tempers or lead to confrontations. A questionnaire, he stated, that is distributed to the member's homes is the best way to learn what he wants to learn without causing trouble. I would further observe that the process of preparing, reviewing, and distributing the questionnaire has been entirely a local one, other than advice the pastor has received in these training events. This is important, first for the learning experience involved in using local-based research to address local issues, and, second, because it lends substantial credibility to the process itself. However, one group or another feels about the results, they cannot argue that those results do not reflect the voice of the church.

None of the questionnaires involved are professional products, and even after review in the seminars, they have obvious problems that limit the reliability of the data on some points. Yet, over all, the questionnaires do reveal important data that is generally clear and reliable. There are patterns. The distribution of answers seems typical. The data gathered by the pastors reflects general trends seen elsewhere in northern Thai churches. My personal sense is that in all of these cases locally produced instruments and data, with sufficient training and some continuing advice, is preferable to that done by outside professional research agencies.

Local Research Projects

The Office of History is currently running two local church research projects aimed at developing research skills in local church members themselves. Thra'mu Chitlada Kankaew, a temporary staff researcher employed with funds provided by the Baptist Union of Sweden, is working with a research team of nine members of the Mae Wae Church, District 19 (Karen tribal). Acharn Sukonrak Panya, our field researcher located in Uttaradit Province, is conducting a church & community project at Ban Nam Pai in that province.

The Mae Wae Project is proceeding generally in the direction originally envisioned for it by the Office. As conceived, the project will lead the local research team through a three step reflection and evaluation process aimed at defining what the church thinks it would be like if it was "healthy," discerning its current state of health, and identifying particular issues for research and action that will help the church improve its health. The Mae Wae Church is a poor congregation and more than half of the congregation is illiterate. It should also be noted that the village of Mae Wae is entirely Christian, mostly Protestant but with a small number of Catholic families living in the community.

Thra'mu Chitlada ("thra'mu" is a Karen honorific for those with education") reports that the church has been supportive of her work and the research team has been generally responsible and hardworking. She has asked them to conduct interviews with members, to collect various kinds of data, and to prepare a questionnaire on what constitutes a healthy church. She says that her main job has not been to teach the skills needed for these tasks but to encourage the team and build up its confidence. The most highly educated member of the team (and the village) is a high school graduate, who got her degree through the government's correspondence curriculum. She is impressed with the team's desire to learn and to do well and their overall commitment to the research process.

The Ban Nam Pai was originally designed to carry out the same set of tasks as the Mae Wae Project, but for a number of reasons it took on a quite different focus. Ban Nam Pai is a larger village that includes numerous Buddhist families as well as families that belong to other churches than the Ban Nam Pai Church (District 4); and the project conducted by Acharn Sukonrak has become a community project run by a team of 12 members of the community. This research team decided that before it tried to do the multi-stage project described above, it should do a smaller project directed towards solving a particular problem. Nearly 70 families in the village raise corn (maize) and struggle to make even a small profit from their labors, and the

research team wanted to know why. This team has also been active in collecting data and designed its own questionnaire. It has shown, perhaps, more of a sense of ownership of the research process than the Mae Wae team.

The most important consequence of the Ban Nam Pai project to date, however, is not directly related to the research project as such. The community has had a long history of interfaith antagonism between Christians and Buddhists, a history of division and mistrust that has made it hard to conduct community-wide activities. When the church first approached the larger community with the idea of a community research project, the idea was taken up with some enthusiasm and led to a series of community meetings that, in turn, have fostered a new sense of mutual trust. The Buddhist segment of the community was startled to see the Christians actually reach out to them and to propose that they work together on such a project. The mended sense of trust is now seen in a number of ways, not least of which is the willingness of the Christians to involve themselves in specifically Buddhist activities.

Both of these projects are in their early stages, and it is not clear where they will lead. They have started well, however, and what is particularly enlightening and heartening is the serious-minded desire of local people in both communities to learn research skills. They do not have to be convinced that basic research can be useful to them and their communities. They do have to be encouraged to believe that they can do research for themselves.

Book Review

Kosuke Koyama. *Water Buffalo Theology: A Thailand Theological Notebook*. Singapore: n.p., 1970. Published as *Water Buffalo Theology*. London: SCM Press, 1974. Also published as *Water Buffalo Theology*. New York: Orbis Books, 1976. Chapter 1 reprinted in *What Asian Christians Are Thinking: A Theological Source Book*, edited by Douglas J. Elwood, 16-40. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976.



Waterbuffalo Theology is one of the classic works of contemporary Asian theology. It charts the theological journey of a Japanese theologian trained in the United States who discovers that the struggles of post-War Japanese Christians and the immaculate theologies taught at Union Theological Seminary, New York City, did not prepare him to teach Thai theological students or preach to northern Thai congregations in a way that was meaningful to them. *Waterbuffalo Theology* describes Koyama's external dialogue with the northern Thai context, and his internal dialogue between Chiang Mai, Tokyo, and New York. It is a tribute to his sensitivity and emerging wisdom as a younger theologian that he allowed that context the power to transform his thinking; it is a tribute to his insights and instincts as a professional theologian that he saw aspects of the northern Thai context long ignored before and after his brief few years in Chiang Mai (1960-1968).

Yet, it must also be said from the outset that *Waterbuffalo Theology* is not Thai or northern Thai theology. It is a foreign theology done in the context of and in dialogue with northern Thais.

There are at least two clear measures of its alien-ness. First, the very title betrays it. In northern Thailand, the water buffalo is a dirty, ugly tempered beast, and it is improper to compare anything to do with the sacred with it. The Thai translation of *Water Buffalo Theology* is literally titled "Children of the Fields Theology", which might be rendered as "Farmer's Theology" or even "Hillbilly Theology." It is decidedly not titled in Thai as *sanasadt kwai* (water buffalo theology). Second, while the book has been widely read and admired outside of Thailand, it has had relatively little influence in Thailand-except, perhaps, among a small group of Koyama's students. One can speculate on why that might be, but ultimately it seems to me that it is not written in an idiom that "makes sense" to northern Thai Christians. They have not experienced some of the theological tensions within the northern Thai context that Koyama felt so keenly, particularly the tension between the Thai Buddhist and the biblical worldviews. *Waterbuffalo Theology* struggles with the newness and alienness of northern Thailand to the author, a struggle northern Thai Christians do not overtly feel. This is not to say that Koyama's text is irrelevant to the northern Thai context, so much as to observe that it speaks more readily to those of us who have come to it from somewhere else.

From the first page, Acharn "Ko," as his students in Chiang Mai knew him, forces us to step outside of the "normal" framework for theological reflection. He makes it clear throughout the book that theology in northern Thailand takes place in a complex dialogue with traditional Thai religion and worldview, especially Buddhism, and with the forces of modernization still sweeping Thailand today. He believes that God uses those forces to introduce Thailand to a very different way of looking at the world, one that begins with Thai traditional faith to face a more dynamic religious tradition.

Koyama is not writing a systematic theology that tries to "cover all the bases," and his reflections provoke as many questions as they answer. His contention in the early pages of the book that God used Western colonialism to import the Christian worldview into Asia is particularly provocative. Koyama claims, for example,

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 initiated. God's providence and human confusion! This is, theologically speaking, 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 neighbours ('the left hand of God')! (page 3)

He also states, "Whenever Christ was preached, the Lord's controversy challenged spiritual self-satisfaction and social slothfulness of the South East Asian nations with unavoidable persistence." (page 4) Is this true? How, where, to what extent? He offers no evidence, no carefully done historical studies, no contemporary surveys. We have nothing but the bold, sweeping claim. His characterization of Southeast Asians as spiritually self-satisfied and socially slothful smacks, furthermore, of typical foreign missionary prejudices. Were they self-satisfied and slothful? How does Koyama know?

We should note here that this view of the relationship of God to modernization was not new to missionary theology in Thailand/Siam. The "old time" missionaries firmly believed that God used the forces of social and economic change to open the Thai door for the reception of the Western Gospel. Koyama's view is more complex; he sees the paradox and the ambivalence involved in claiming God's presence in modernization-but he still makes the claim for that presence. In doing so, he betrays a view of Southeast Asian history that modern day historians will reject out of hand, namely that pre-colonial Asia was culturally stagnant and needed an external challenge. He claims, for example, "Modernization is, in this sense, an 'ointment' for a stagnant and traditional Asia." (page 46) Koyama, again, is keenly aware of the brutality and arrogance of Western colonialism, yet he still boldly holds to this central premise of colonialism as ointment and the contention that Siam was stagnant and makes these assertions a central theme in his theology in the northern Thai context.

One of Koyama's strengths as a theologian, on the other hand, is his sensitivity to the complex set of contexts that shape Christian reflection in northern Thailand. In addition to the interreligious and the socioeconomic contexts already mentioned, he is also aware of the northern Thai ecclesiastical context. The northern Thai church in the 1960s had what he terms a "crippling minority complex" that blinded it to its own theological situation and to its "prophetic privilege of being the minority in this land." (page 6) Although Koyama otherwise does not mention this context directly, it is clear that the church's situation in the North influenced his theology. At one point, for example, he writes,

"When I become a Christian, should I discard all Japanese 'Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just'? Should I reject them saying that 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just' of Japan is 'not true, not honorable, not just' in the light of Jesus Christ? If Christians of any country reject their own country's 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just' it is like a person cutting off his own nose and ears and gouging out his own eyes! If one rejects 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just' of his own culture, how can he-through what medium-appreciate the wonderful deeds of God in Christ for him? (Mark 5:19) A tragedy of immense proportion takes place whenever a community of Christians underestimates, ignores, and rejects 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just' of their own community. What kind of tragedy? There is a 'ghetto' existence among their own people!" (page 39)

Ach. Ko may well have been too considerate to pin the label of "ghetto" on the northern Thai church. He was surely aware that the label applied and applies.

Koyama is also aware of the Protestant missionary context of theology in northern Thailand. The section entitled, "Aristotelian Pepper and Buddhist Salt," contains an open letter to Dr. Daniel McGilvary, the long deceased pioneer missionary to northern Thailand. The gist of the whole section is that the missionary message has been largely unintelligible to northern Thais. It is clear from the whole of Waterbuffalo Theology that Koyama feels the distance between the message and the people very deeply. The whole book captures Koyama's struggle to cross that gap. In the course of his arguments in this section, furthermore, he writes what may be the most

important single paragraph in the whole book and maybe even the most important single paragraph on northern Thai theology ever written in English. It is worth quoting in full,

"Then, too, I have discovered that the seasoning takes place in the Thai theological kitchen, not in the broad living room into which missionaries have access. Their theological activity goes on while they squat on the dirt ground and not while sipping tea with missionary friends in the teak floored shiny living room. When I peep into the kitchen of their theology, the theological situation I see there is unique. No books have been written about this situation and no references are available in the best stocked theological libraries! I must confess my incompetence in grasping the details of the daring activities of this kitchen theology. My experience in peeping into the kitchen is sometimes like watching a great Chinese chef throwing six different ingredients into a heated oiled kwali. I can smell a most delicious aroma and I can see smoke, but I cannot identify the ingredients! Free theologizing is going on. No authorized 'theological commission' is watching over the activity. Terribly fragmentary use of the Bible, not acceptable in any 'accredited theological school suddenly explodes with enormous energy and answers their theological needs. This process, I realize, is going on unconsciously, unintentionally and almost semi-automatically so far as those in the kitchen are concerned. It is wrong to say that we must produce an indigenous theology. It is not necessary to produce one. It is there! Perhaps what we must the current ecumenical theological discussion." (page 78)

Koyama saw what few others have seen, namely that the northern Thai Christian community has an indigenous theology of its own. It is an informal theology, worked out opportunistically, unconsciously drawing on indigenous cultural themes to understand Christ. One of the things we still lack today is a clear description of northern Thai theology. That it combines missionary thought with northern Thai Buddhism and animism is clear. How it does so, in what portions, and with what results is not as clear. Koyama himself confesses his own ignorance of the nature of northern Thai "kitchen theology."

Koyama's use of the English language is sometimes interesting, sometimes exciting, and sometimes exasperating. He, on the one hand, inflicts almost imponderable theological jargon on his readers, throwing out fancy terms and theological neologisms at a whim. The opening section, "The Lord's Controversy with Thailand," is an unhappy example. It has meat in it and some challenging thoughts, but it does not provide an inviting introduction to the book. Terms like "Thai Anti-Nomadic 'Decay-Ontology'" or even "automotism" (page 15) obscure his meaning more than they clarify it, which may be the reason that this section does not appear in the Thai translation.

Still, at other times Koyama playfully reshapes the English language in ways that are profound. His concept of "crucified efficiency" stands the Western drive for efficiency on its head, for example, demonstrating how God's "inefficiency" transforms Western efficiency into something effective and truly efficient. He writes, "The 'crucified efficiency' teaches us, whether we are lumbering along in the inhospitable country road on an oxcart, or penetrating into the depth of awesome space, that the technological efficiency needs to be enlightened by the sense of the

'efficiency' of the crucified One. Technological shalom (peace, salvation) must sit in the shalom feast of the Messiah." (pages 62-3) What a beautiful use of the English language!

Another important contribution of *Waterbuffalo Theology* is renaming theology in the northern Thai context as "neighborology." In a brief few pages (pages 84-88), Koyama reorients our theological thinking to focus on the people around us as being real people who have real concerns and their own way of understanding the world. He enjoins missionaries (and, in fact, all of those living in northern Thai contexts) to sandwich themselves between the Bible and their neighbors so that biblical realities and the realities of one's neighbors of another faith are equally real for us. Koyama makes the crucial observation that neighborology means that, "Theology has become no longer a private affair but a matter that involves the community of men." (page 86) He takes as the biblical linchpin of neighborology the injunction in Leviticus 19:18 to love one's neighbor as yourself, rather than the Deuteronomic call to love God with one's whole being (Deut. 6:5). Koyama insists that neighborology represents the best way that Christians can share Christ with their neighbor, writing, "Earlier I have said that our neighbors in Asia are not interested in Christology but can be concerned with our neighborology. This means that our neighbors in Asia are ready to hear our message of Christ if we put in 'neighborological' language, though they would reject Christ if we present him in Christological language." (page 88)

There is far more in *Waterbuffalo Theology* than can be dealt with in a single review article. While there are points at which readers will disagree with Koyama's perspective and or conclusions, the work is suffused with his lively, intense ability to bring Tokyo, New York City, and Chiang Mai into dialogue. It is a theologically bold work, and anyone wanting to "do" theology in northern Thai contexts really must enter into her or his own dialogue with Koyama.