

This issue of *JTCA* seeks to create a space for discussion and exchange of perspectives about the diverse theological and critical approaches to the practice and discourse of religious fundamentalism in Asian context. The aim of it is to go deep into the analysis of the manifestations and effects of religious fundamentalism.

Namsoon KANG

## RECONSTRUCTING FUNDAMENTALISM: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF PROTESTANT STRATEGIES FOR RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL ACCOMMODATION IN NORTHERN THAILAND

Herbert R. Swanson

### Introduction

Attempts to define the term "fundamentalism" can be endless and largely fruitless, but it can hardly be denied that fundamentalist movements do exist within most of the world's great religions. They are characterized by what the *American Heritage Electronic Dictionary* (1992) broadly defines as a "rigid adherence to fundamental or basic principles." More refined definitions depend obviously on their contexts, and what may be considered fundamentalist in one society is less obviously so in another. Thus, even Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism, which of all of the world's major religious traditions seems least prone to fundamentalism, does encompass such movements. Swearer typifies Thai Theravada fundamentalism as being movements that have an "aggressive, critical, negative, and absolutist character" that includes a radical rejection of mainstream culture, a one-dimensional approach to social ills, and a "dualistic and absolutistic worldview." Such movements, in particular, make a "stark" distinction between insiders and outsiders (1991, 628-651).

Perhaps no religious movement in Thailand today has better fit these local criteria for fundamentalism over the years than missionary Protestantism, a movement that continues to exist, to a degree, down to the present. Historically, Protestantism has been religiously aggressive, critical, negative, and absolutist. In their heyday, Western, primarily American, Protestant missionaries stood in radical opposition to much of Thai culture, adhered to a rigid one-dimensional approach to social ills, and affirmed an absolutist dualism that separated Christians from heathens (see Pongudom; Hughes 1982; Swanson 1987 and 2003). Evangelical Protestant missionaries working in Thailand even today are more frequently than not

religious fundamentalists by the measure of Thai society, in spite of their more restrained religious rhetoric.

Thai religious temperament presents a striking contrast to Protestant missionary fundamentalism. That temperament is, within limits, generally accepting of other religions, and it is not aggressive, absolutist, or rigidly dualistic in a fundamentalist sense. The popular Thai religious consciousness is also highly syncretistic, blending both animism and Brahmanism into its Buddhist systems of beliefs and praxis. As Jackson notes, "...the existence of non-Buddhist spirit worship, magical rites, and the honouring of Hindu deities has not traditionally been seen as conflicting with the canonical message of the [Buddhist] religion (38)." Thai popular religious consciousness, thus, stands in virtual opposition to the Western fundamentalist exclusivism of the evangelical Protestant missionary movement in Thailand.

Viewed from the perspective of contemporary Thai Protestantism, this contrast between the syncretistic Thai religious and fundamentalist Protestant mentalities is much more than a mere curiosity. It constitutes a central fact of religious life for Thai Protestants. Since the 1980s, a number of scholars have argued that they have accommodated their Protestantism to the Thai religious context in various ways, be it in terms of their understanding of salvation, of grace, of conversion, or their relationship to the Buddhist community. (see especially Hughes 1983; Suwanbubha; McLean; Zehner). These studies make a strong case for such accommodation, but that case is limited by the fact that all of them deal either with small, select groups of individuals, such as pastors, or with special categories, such as university students. They have not focused on the beliefs and attitudes of local church members.

This paper revisits the question of how Thai Protestants mix and match their dual fundamentalist Protestant Christian and syncretistic Theravada Buddhist heritages. It draws on research data collected in January and February 2004 by eight students of the McGilvary Faculty of Theology, Payap University, who were enrolled in the M.Div. course (TS 571) on Research Methods for Ministry.<sup>1</sup> The students and the author jointly prepared a questionnaire containing 15 questions plus 7 background questions (see the Appendix). Each student then collected at least 50

questionnaires for a total of 447 forms returned. (one student gathered 97 responses). Nearly all of those surveyed are members of churches belonging to the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), an ecumenical denomination founded in 1934 largely out of American Presbyterian missionary work. Forms were collected in Districts 1, 4, 5, and 15 of the CCT, including churches in the provinces of Chiang Mai (200 forms), Nan (50 forms), Phrae (97 forms), Phayao (50 forms), and Uttaradit (50 forms).

The particular subject I will examine in this paper is northern Thai Protestant beliefs about and attitudes towards their Buddhist neighbors. The two facets of the northern Thai Protestant heritage, that is Protestant fundamentalism and Buddhist syncretism, differ significantly in their views of people of other faiths. The ways in which local church members reconcile these two views, thus, provides a key measure of the relative degrees of fundamentalist or syncretistic thinking they display.

As will be seen in what follows, the data collected by these students suggests that northern Thai Protestants are engaging in an ongoing process of accommodating their Thai and Protestant heritages to each other. Drawing on the work of Tongchai Winichakul and David Lehmann, we will use the term "localization" to describe that process. Lehmann argues for a dynamic view of local and global cultures whereby meanings and practices are constantly being renegotiated and redefined. Tongchai contends that no easy separation can be made between "globalization" and "localization." They have a dynamic relationship, and in many ways globalization actually fosters the reinterpretation of global themes, practices, and values in local terms (Lehman, 607-634; Winichakul). In this paper, I will argue that northern Thai Protestants have inherited both a global fundamentalist faith and a local syncretistic religious consciousness; and that they are engaging in an ongoing process of accommodating their faith and their consciousness to each other. The result is a meaningful Thai Protestant system of religious beliefs, values, and practices. As the samples collected by the Payap students are all from northern Thailand, this paper will focus on situation of northern Thai Protestants.

## Summary of the Findings

The data collected from the 447 respondents to the questionnaire "About Christians and People of Other Faiths" suggests that they are employing a number of strategies to accommodate their syncretistic Northern Thai and fundamentalist Protestant religious heritages to each other. First, the process of accommodation includes the *compartmentalization* of apparently inconsistent sets of beliefs and attitudes. Second, it sometimes involves a *shift* away from exclusivist rejection of people of other faiths and towards syncretistic acceptance of them. Third, the process also involves the *redefinition* of certain exclusivist beliefs and activities in more syncretistic terms. Fourth, the process of accommodation involves an attitude of having to "make allowances" for situations in which Christians are socially constrained to behave in ways they ordinarily would not. Fifth, the process generally involves the preservation of a distinctive Protestant *allegiance to God*, which does not seem to be inherently a rejection of people of other faiths. A shift towards syncretization is evident in all but one of the samples the students collected although the degree of the shift varies greatly from sample to sample.

## The Data

The questionnaire is divided into four sections. Questions 1-5 have to do with the respondent's theological understanding of Christian attitudes towards people of other faiths. Questions 6-10 deal with Christian-Buddhist social relationships. Questions 11-15 look specifically at Christian thinking about participation in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. Finally, Questions 16-22 provide background information on the respondents. The goal of the form is to discern whether the respondents hold more of a syncretistic or exclusivist understanding of their relationship to their Buddhist neighbors. The assumption is that the more syncretistic their views the greater the influence of local religious consciousness.

## The Findings

### Questions 1-5: Theological Views

The responses to the first three items on the questionnaire, displayed in Table 1, suggest that both syncretistic northern Thai cultural and exclusivist Protestant thinking influence northern Thai Protestants. Question 1 is syncretistic in intent, while Question 2 assumes a fundamentalist, exclusivist orientation. Question 1 asks if the respondents agree, "Every religion is able to teach people to be good;" a belief almost universally held in northern Thai Buddhist culture. Over four in five (84.7%) of the respondents agreed. Question 2 asks if they agree, "Christian teachings are the only correct religious teachings." Nearly the same number (83.6%) agreed to this proposition as agreed that all religions can teach people to be good.

Table 1

Frequency Distributions for Questions 1, 2, and 3 as Percentages

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure	Discards
1. All Religions same	2.0%	5.6%	2.5%	11.2%	53.2%	21.3%	2.2%	2.0%
2. Christianity Right	4.0%	10.1%	6.5%	7.6%	35.6%	30.4%	4.0%	1.8%
3. God pro-Believers	21.5%	30.4%	7.2%	5.8%	17.9%	11.9%	3.6%	1.8%

N = 447

We should note that 77.3% of those who responded positively to Question 1, also responded positively to Question 2; they are 65.5% of the total sample. Of those who answered Question 1 negatively, 59.2% affirmed Question 2; they are 6.5% of the total sample. A solid majority of the respondents, that is, affirm the patently syncretistic statement in Question

1 and the exclusivist statement in Question 2. At the same time, less than one respondent in ten denied the syncretistic statement and affirmed the exclusivist one.

While the two statements in Questions 1 and 2 may or may not contradict each other logically, the attitudes reflected in each of them are quite different. One is open to other faiths, and the other is closed. Which is to say, the respondents evidently affirm syncretistic and exclusivist propositions whether or not they perceive any contradiction. The majority appears to compartmentalize basic beliefs from each of their faith streams and sees little or no problem in holding both at the same time.

Question 3 seeks to test the degree of theological prejudice, northern Thai Christians have against people of other faiths. It asks if the respondents agree that God loves believers more than God loves non-believers. Only about one in three (35.6%) agreed to that proposition, while well over half (59.1%) disagreed. Since the "correct" theological answer is that God loves all people irrespective of their religion, these results indicate that the majority of the respondents do not believe that God takes sides against unbelievers. A strong minority, however, thought that God does favor Christians, in spite of general Christian teachings to the contrary.

Taken together, in sum, the responses to these three questions suggest that the localization of northern Thai Protestant fundamentalism is not necessarily an either-or process. Nor is it a logical process of deciding to reject cultural beliefs for religious ones or vice versa. Northern Thai Protestants can accommodate both, maintaining them apparently in separate compartments.

Question 4 asks respondents to describe what their churches teach about the salvation of people of other faiths. Question 5 asks them to express their personal opinion on the same issue. The responses show that less than two in five (36.5%) think their churches teach that non-Christians are damned, and somewhat less still (32.2%) agree personally that non-Christians are damned. Another one in five personally leave open a slight possibility for the salvation of non-Christians while nearly three in ten (28.0%) personally think that good people, whether or not they are Christians, will be saved. There is a slight shift away from exclusivism in personal beliefs on this question when compared to what churches are held

to teach: The shift, however, seems to be towards being unsure rather than to thinking people of other faith can be saved.

**Table 2**  
*Frequency Distributions for Questions 4 and 5 as Percentages*

Question	Damned	A Few Maybe not Damned	Good are Saved	Unsure	Discards
4. Church teaches us other faiths are	36.5%	21.9%	26.2%	13.9%	1.6%
5. You think they are	32.2%	21.3%	28.0%	17.0%	1.6%

N = 447

The responses in Table 2 indicate that, first, the respondents show a strong tendency towards exclusivism, but also that a more syncretistic perspective dilutes their exclusivism. Nearly thirty percent of these northern Thai Christian respondents, as we have seen, may be classified as syncretists on this question, while many of them (21.3%) leave some hope for non-Christians to be saved and nearly one in five (17.0%) are unsure.

These figures may be read in several different ways. Strictly speaking more respondents are exclusivists than syncretists. A middle group leans heavily towards syncretism but allows for the possibility of salvation for only a few non-Christians. Quite a few, finally, do not know how to decide. Northern Thai Protestants, if this sample is any indication, are divided among themselves regarding the eternal fate of their neighbors of other faiths. Some are clearly syncretist (32.2%), some are just as clearly exclusivist (28.0%), some are somehow both (21.3%), and some just do not know what to think (17.0%).

When viewed separately in Tables 3 and 4 and Charts 1 and 2, two churches are distinctive in their responses to Questions 4 and 5 concerning the salvation of people of other faiths, as well as other questions. The 50 respondents from the Chiang Mai Chinese Church, located on Fa Ham Road and generally known as the Fa Ham Church, are clearly exclusivist in their attitudes towards people of other faiths. Some 84.0% of them stated, as can be seen in Table 3, that their church teaches that non-Christians are

damned for their unbelief, far higher than the over all response of 36.5%. The respondents who belong to the Phrasitiphorn Church, Nan, gave a strikingly different response to this question. Only 4.0% of them agreed that their church teaches that non-Christians are damned for their unbelief while over half (54.0%) agreed that their church teaches that good people are saved whether or not they are Christians.

**Table 3**  
*Frequency Distributions for Question 4*  
*Comparing the Nan and Fa Ham Churches with the Total Sample*

	Damned	A Few Maybe not Damned	Good are Saved	Unsure	Discards	N
Nan	4.0%	20.0%	54.0%	22.0%	0.0%	50
Fa Ham	84.0%	12.0%	0.0%	2.0%	2.0%	50
T. Sample	36.5%	21.9%	26.2%	13.9%	1.60%	447

Chart 1 reproduces the data in Table 3, dropping only the small number of discards. It provides a graphic demonstration of the wide range in local church members' perception of what their churches teach. This data, unfortunately, does not allow us to ascertain whether there is a historical, progressive shift away from fundamentalist views to a more syncretistic position or not. Both charts do show that the general sample tends to show a moderate tendency highlighted by the extreme positions of the Fa Ham and Nan samples.

**Chart 1**  
*Frequency Distributions for Question 4*  
*Comparing the Nan and Fa Ham Churches with the Total Sample*

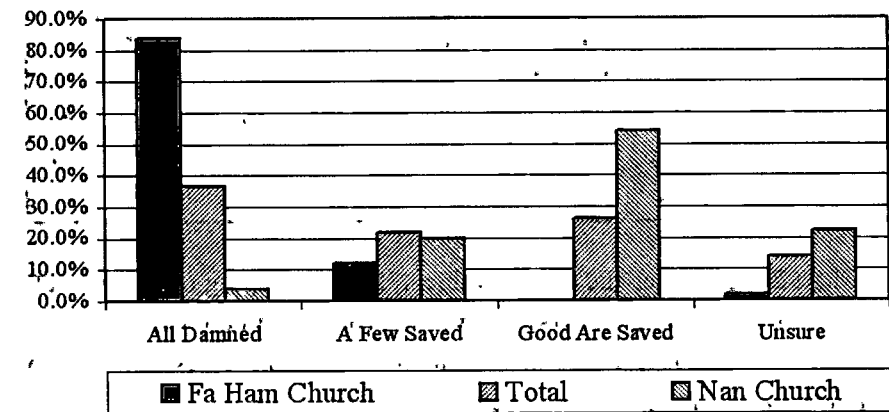


Table 4 contains the responses to the question of what the respondents themselves believe about the salvation of people of other faiths, and it reveals an important trend when compared to Table 3. Where the figures generally hold for the Phrasitiphorn Church and the total sample of respondents, the Fa Ham Church members show a definite shift away from the exclusivist teachings of their church towards a somewhat more syncretistic view. Most of the shift is either to the choice that admits that at least some people of other faiths will be saved or to the choice "unsure." Only one member of the Fa Ham Church agreed that good people are saved irrespective of their religion. While we should not make too much of this shift between what the respondents believe the Fa Ham Church teaches and what they think themselves, it does suggest the possibility northern Thai Protestants revise their view by stages. They, perhaps, do not believe that non-Christians are damned on one day and then the next day change their minds to think that people of other faiths have as good a chance at salvation as Christians. They become unsure or seek out a compromise position.

**Table 4**

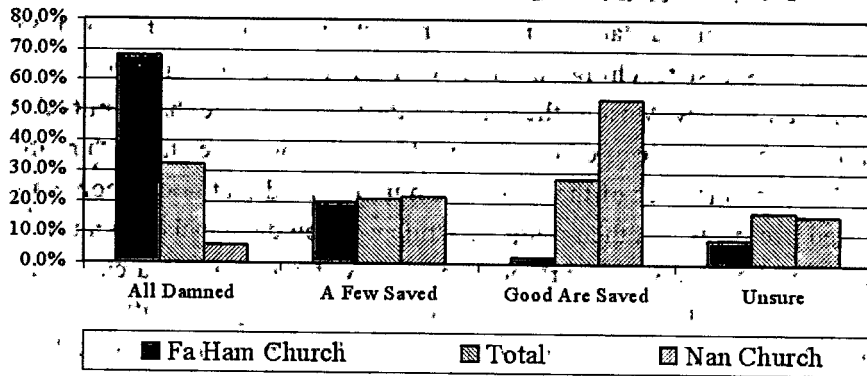
*Frequency Distributions for Question 5  
Comparing the Nan and Fa Ham Churches with the Total Sample*

	Damned	A Few Maybe not Damned	Good are Saved	Unsure	Discards	N
Nan	6.0%	22.0%	54.0%	16.0%	2.0%	50
Fa Ham	68.0%	20.0%	2.0%	8.0%	2.0%	50
Total	32.2%	21.3%	28.0%	17.0%	1.6%	447

Chart 2 reproduces the data in Table 4, again dropping only the small number of discards. It underscores the wide range of beliefs concerning the salvation of people of other faiths held by Protestants in northern Thailand, as we have already noted above.

**Chart 2**

*Frequency Distributions for Question 5  
Comparing the Nan and Fa Ham Churches with the Total Sample*



The shift away from exclusivism on the part of the Fa Ham Church respondents is important because that congregation is a Thai-Chinese church whose membership has its cultural and theological roots in China as much as in northern Thailand. It is a conservative congregation with a strong emphasis on evangelism and has relatively little engagement in local culture compared to all of the other churches and groups in our sample. In the northern Thai cultural context, however, it shows some movement away

from the inherited exclusivist teachings of the church in its ideological understanding of people of other faiths.

**Questions 6-10: Buddhist-Christian Social Relations**

Questions 6 and 7 are designed to test the degree to which northern Thai Protestants remain committed to evangelism, a commitment they inherited from the missionary era of the church. To deal with them in reverse order, the data for Question 7, shown in Table 5 below, indicates that northern Thai Protestants have retained a strong commitment to evangelism. Asked if they agree to the statement that, "it is not necessary for Christians to evangelize people of other faiths," just over three-fourths of the respondents (77.7%) disagreed strongly (35.6%) or disagreed (42.1%). Only 0.4% agreed or agreed strongly with the statement. An impressive majority of the respondents, that is, affirm the importance of evangelism, which is normally considered to be an exclusivist ministry based on the supremacy of Christianity over other religions.

**Table 5**

*Frequency Distribution for Question 7 as Percentages  
Comparing the Total Sample with the Nan and Fa Ham Churches*

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure	Discards
Don't need to Evangelize Compared to:	22.6%	33.3%	9.4%	11.9%	12.8%	3.8%	5.6%	0.7%
Nan Church	36.0%	34.0%	6.0%	4.0%	12.0%	6.0%	2.0%	0.0%
Fa Ham	58.0%	36.0%	2.0%	0.0%	2.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.0%

N = 447, 50, 50

The responses to Question 7 seem to contradict those in Question 5, in which only about one-third of the respondents (32.2%) agreed that "salvation is found only in Christianity." This apparent contradiction is reinforced by the fact that three-fourths (76.4%) of those who agreed with

the syncretistic notion that "people of other faiths who are good will be saved the same as good Christians" in Question 5 rejected the syncretistic idea in Question 7 that "it is not necessary for Christians to evangelize people of other faiths." Even northern Thai Protestants who believe, in sum, that salvation is as available through other faiths as it is in Christianity still strongly affirm the necessity of evangelism.

**Table 6**

*Frequency Distribution for Question 6 as Percentages  
Comparing the Nan and Fa Ham Churches with the Total Sample*

Question	Convert Them	Share & Hope they Convert	Be Compassionate	Don't Worry about it	Unsure	Discards
How to Love Neighbors.	45.0%	17.7%	32.2%	1.1%	2.0%	2.0%
Compared to:						
Nan Church	24.0%	32.0%	40.0%	2.0%	2.0%	0.0%
Fa Ham Church	64.0%	14.0%	16.0%	0.0%	2.0%	4.0%

N = 447, 50, 50

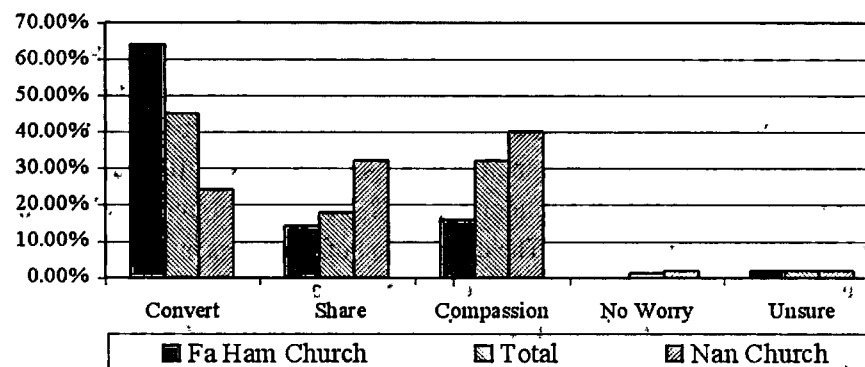
The responses to Question 6, as shown in Table 5 and Chart 3 indicate that there may be less of a contradiction the data just described seems to indicate. The respondents were asked to explain the meaning of the statement that Christians are to love their neighbors of other faiths. Some 45.0% selected the response that Christian must, "do everything, both in speaking and acting, to bring them to faith in God." Yet, another 32.2% agreed that Christians must show their neighbors of other faiths "compassion as Thai brothers and sisters without expecting anything in return." Interestingly enough, only 1.1% answered, "This is not a matter to worry about or think a lot about."

Of those who agreed in Question 6 that Christians love people of other faiths by showing them "compassion as Thai brothers and sisters without expecting anything in return," fully four-fifths (82.4%) also rejected the idea in Question 7 that it is unnecessary for Christians to evangelize people of other faiths. These respondents (32.2% of the total sample) have

apparently redefined evangelism in terms of compassion. They "evangelize" their neighbors of other faiths by treating them with a compassion that does have conversion as its agenda.

**Chart 3**

*Frequency Distribution for Question 6 as Percentages  
Comparing the Nan and Fa Ham Churches with the Total Sample*



The responses from the Phrasitiphorn Church, Nan, reinforce the sense that a significant minority of northern Thai Protestants has redefined evangelism in terms of a more open attitude towards people of other faiths. The figures in Table 5 (for Question 7) show that the respondents from Nan disagreed with the statement that, "it is not necessary for Christians to evangelize people of other faiths" more strongly than the general sample (36.0% from Nan as opposed to 22.6% generally). Yet, the data contained in Table 6 and Chart 3 (for Question 6) shows that the respondents from Nan much prefer compassionate relationships with their neighbors that involve no overt (32.0% for Nan compared to 17.7% generally) or even covert evangelistic agendas (40.0% for Nan compared to 16.0% generally).

In sum, the respondents have, in general, retained a core exclusivist commitment to evangelism. They also, however, show a strong tendency to redefine evangelism as a non-aggressive sharing activity that is not premised on the damnation of non-Christians.

Questions 8, 9, and 10, explore the respondents' sense of their relationships with their Buddhist neighbors. The data from these three

questions suggests that northern Thai Protestants feel that their neighbors of other faiths generally accept them and their faith. In Question 8, they were asked if they agree "generally the Northern Thai people look down on Christians as ones who follow the religion of foreigners." As can be seen in Table 3, 65.3% responded negatively, meaning that they believe their neighbors do not view Christianity as a foreigners' religion. In Question 9, some four in five (81.4%) answered affirmatively when asked if they feel that the Buddhists in their community accept Christians. Most of those who feel that Buddhists do not accept Christians (13.9%) responded with the weakest negative response of "Disagree Somewhat" (11.9%). Finally, Question 10 asked if Buddhists are the cause of inter-faith friction, when it occurs. While a bare majority (50.4%) answered affirmatively, a strong minority of the respondents (36.7%) responded negatively, and another 10.5% were not sure. The distribution of responses on this question suggests that the respondents, collectively, are able to look at their relationships with their Buddhist neighbors with a modest degree of balance and self-criticism.

Table 7

Frequency Distributions for Questions 8, 9, and 10 as Percentages

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure	Discards
8. Foreign religion	22.6%	33.3%	9.4%	11.9%	12.8%	3.8%	5.6%	0.7%
9. Buddhists accept	0.2%	1.8%	11.9%	33.3%	38.9%	9.2%	3.8%	0.9%
10. Source of problems	7.2%	17.2%	12.3%	15.9%	27.3%	7.2%	10.5%	2.5%

N = 447.

In sum, the responses to these three questions indicate that the respondents feel that Protestant Christianity has become an indigenous Northern Thai religious faith. They feel that their neighbors accept them as Christians. They feel that their neighbors do not think they are adherents

of an alien religious faith. A strong minority of them even recognizes that Christians are at least as responsible for interfaith friction as are Buddhists.

### Questions 11-15

The last five questions, Questions 11 through 15 focus on Christian attitudes towards participation in Buddhist ritual and ceremony on the premise that such participation is a key measure of the degree to which northern Thai Protestants have accommodated their exclusivist heritage to the syncretistic Northern Thai context.<sup>2</sup> The responses to these questions indicate, however, that there is a definite limit to the process of the localization. The respondents still largely reject participation in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies, and they feel emotionally uneasy in the presence of those rituals and ceremonies.

Question 11 states that, "Buddhists sometimes feel that Christians destroy brotherly and sisterly unity with them because they do not *phanom mue* (raise their hands in respect) during Buddhist ritual." It then asks, "What do you think?"

A substantial minority of 40.3% agreed that "whatever others think, Christians absolutely may not *phanom mue*." Another 23.7% selected the choice that states, "Although we empathize with them, Christians for the most part may not *phanom mue*." The strong majority of respondents, that is, eschew showing respect during Buddhist rituals even if their failure to do so is offensive to their Buddhist neighbors. Most significantly, perhaps, only one in ten (5.1%) agreed with the syncretistic statement that, "actually, Christians should be broad-minded and lift their hands in respect." Nearly one in five (18.6%), however, did agree that the question of raising hands in respect during Buddhist ritual is not an important one, and Christians can do whatever they want regarding it. Another one in ten (10.3%) were not sure how to answer. These responses appear to be a relatively solid vote for exclusivist Protestant non-participation in Buddhist ritual and a strong rejection of syncretistic values of broad-mindedness.



Table 8

Frequency Distributions for Question 11 as Percentages  
Comparing the Total Sample with the Nan and Fa Ham Churches

Question	Cannot	Usually Not	Can	Unimportant	Not Sure	Discards
Showing respect during ritual	40.3%	23.7%	5.1%	18.6%	10.3%	2.0%
Compared to:						
Nan Church	28.0%	38.0%	6.0%	16.0%	12.0%	0.0%
Fa Ham Church	58.0%	14.0%	2.0%	16.0%	6.0%	4.0%

N = 447

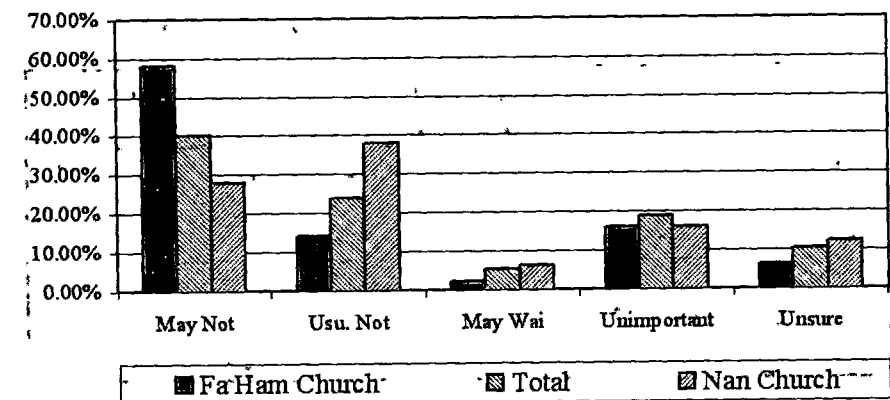
The respondents from the Fa Ham Church, as we would expect, strongly affirmed that Christians cannot *wai*, that is show raise their hands in respect, during Buddhist rituals even if that failure is offensive. Some 58.0% chose that answer. The members at the Phrasitiphorn Church in Nan maintained their pattern of more syncretistic attitudes with only 28.0% agreeing that Christians cannot *wai* during Buddhist rituals. Chart 1 provides a graphical description then of what appears to be the process of localization taking place among Northern Thai Protestants. The chart looks at the first three responses of Question 11 and shows a progressive decline from the Fa Ham Church through the total sample to the Phrasitiphorn Church in responses to the statement that Christians cannot *phanom mue* during Buddhist rituals. By the same token and to roughly the same degree, it shows a progressive increase in the response that Christians "for the most part" cannot *phanom mue*, which response leaves some syncretistic latitude. Note, finally, that very few of the Nan respondents agreed with the syncretistic injunction to be broad-minded on this issue.

According to these figures, most of the Nan respondents will normally refrain from raising their hands in respect during Buddhist rituals, but they recognize that some situations may require them to do so. They have not redefined their attitudes about the impropriety of showing such respect nor have they compartmentalized it. They are simply making allowances for particular circumstances. A smaller number Fa Ham Church respondents agree to the same strategy, but the majority reject it out of hand; the total

sample stands between these two churches. The trend seems to be towards a more syncretistic-like "contextualism," which is not full syncretism. The process of accommodation on this issue seems to end at the level of "making allowances."

Chart 4

Frequency Distributions for Question 11 as Percentages  
Comparing the Total Sample with the Nan and Fa Ham Churches



The point that is reinforced by the data in Chart 4, as well as Table 8, is that refraining from showing respect during Buddhist ceremonies remains the boundary that Northern Thai Protestants normally will not cross. The responses to Question 12, as shown in Table 9 and Chart 5 below, indicate even more clearly that northern Thai Protestants are drawing the line of accommodation at participation in the rituals and religious ceremonies of their neighbors of other faiths. The question begins with the statement that, "Some people say that there is no problem with Christians showing respect Buddha images." It then asks if the respondent agrees. Table 9 shows that the respondents strongly reject performing what may be considered the most important religious act of their neighbors.

Nearly nine respondents in ten (86.6%) disagreed to one degree or another with the statement that it is acceptable for Christians to show respect to Buddha images. Only about one in twenty (5.9%) responded affirmatively to the question. The respondents seem to be, first, defining Buddhist

attitudes of respect for Buddha images as a form of worship. Second, they reject participation in that worship, most likely because they see such participation as a violation of the biblical commandment to have no God but God. Only a tiny minority of about three in fifty apparently do not equate showing respect to Buddha images with Christian worship and therefore feel they can *phanom mue*.

Table 9

Frequency Distributions for Question 12 as Percentages  
Comparing the Total Sample with the Nan and Fa Ham Churches

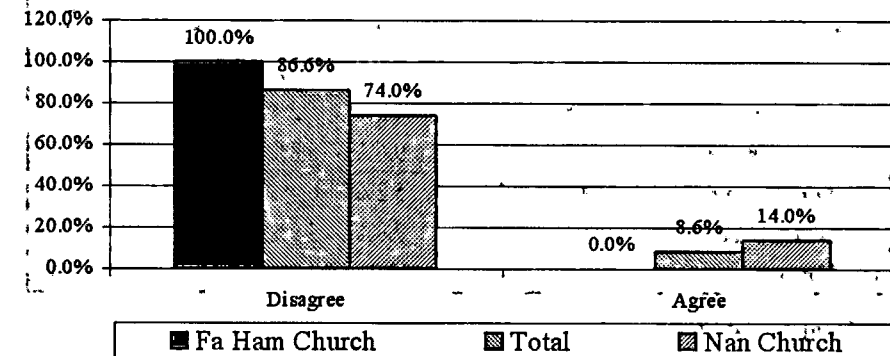
Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure	Discards
Showing respect to a Buddha Image is OK	54.6%	28.6%	3.4%	2.7%	2.5%	0.7%	2.2%	5.4%
Compared to:								
Nan Church	50.0%	22.0%	2.0%	4.0%	8.0%	2.0%	4.0%	8.0%
Fa Ham Ch	80.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

N = 447

The figures contained in Table 9 indicate that there are definite limits to the localizing strategies as described above. Protestant, as we have noted, evidently see showing respect to Buddha image as an act of worship and the Buddha image as an object of worship. In the setting of actual northern Thai Buddhist practices, they are probably correct to equate this aspect of Buddhist ritual with worship, as Christians understand the act. The limitation, thus, that Protestants have set to localization is that it cannot impinge upon their worship of God. They continue to accept the premise they inherited from their missionary past that paying respect to Buddha images is inconsistent with their primary allegiance to God. Chart 5, below, confirms this sense of there being "definite limits" to syncretistic localization. Even the Phrasitiphorn Church largely disagrees with the proposition that it is acceptable for Christians to show respect to Buddha images.

Chart 5

Frequency Distributions for Question 12 as Percentages  
Comparing the Total Sample with the Nan and Fa Ham Churches



Note: all of the negative responses and all of the positive responses are separately grouped in the two categories of "Disagree" and "Agree."

The responses for Question 13 indicate that most of the respondents refuse to participate in Buddhist ritual and ceremony of virtually any kind. They affirm again their particular refusal to *wai* (another term for raising the hands in an attitude of respect) in the context of Buddhist merit-making rituals with some 81.3% Christians agreeing they "should not" do so. A majority (53.3%) thinks that Christians should not even be present at Buddhist merit-making rituals even if they do not *wai*.

We should note here that an unusually large number of respondents either failed to respond to some (or occasionally all) of the items in Question 13. In most cases, these discards amount to roughly 10% of the whole. Table 10, thus, contains the *valid* percentages for these questions, that is, the percentages of those who actually responded to the question. These figures give a more correct picture of the responses. The reason for so many blank or failed responses has, apparently, to do with the form of the question, which had only one question line but seven response lines. Quite a few respondents found the question confusing.

Table 10

The Frequency Distributions for Question 13 as Valid Percentages

Question	No	Depends	Yes	Unsure	Uninterested	N
Merit-making & wai	81.3%	10.0%	1.9%	1.7%	5.0%	418
Meri-making & don't wai	53.3%	15.8%	15.1%	5.3%	10.6%	398
Religious Procession	69.8%	11.9%	4.2%	5.2%	8.9%	404
Taking Buddhist Alms	55.2%	22.4%	9.6%	5.8%	7.1%	397
Giving Robes to monks	59.0%	23.7%	5.2%	6.4%	5.7%	405
Incense for Dead	61.3%	18.7%	7.9%	5.9%	6.2%	406
wai Monks	39.2%	25.4%	22.9%	4.9%	7.6%	406

Total N = 447

On this list of seven commonly held Buddhist rituals and ceremonies, the only activity in which there are some marked differences of opinion has to do with the last item on the list, showing respect to a monk; and there was some confusion over this question. The term used on the form, *wai phrasong*, can be taken either to *wai* in order to show respect for a monk in a ritual setting or to greet a monk as a daily, common greeting. If the respondent did not read the item carefully, it could even be taken to mean *showing respect to* a Buddha image. Had the item clearly meant a simple greeting, it is likely that a larger percentage of the respondents would have indicated that *wai*-ing a monk—as a person, not as a religious functionary—is acceptable. The very confusion surrounding this last item, in any event, only underscores the respondents' concerns about not participating in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies.

Many respondents also found Question 14 confusing, and the "valid percentages" in Table 11, again, include only those respondents who actually answered to the question! The purpose of this question is to measure the affective (emotional) response of Protestants to attending Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. As can be seen from the figures in Table 9, there is an almost even division between those who have negative feelings of discomfort, unwillingness, or dislike and those who attend with little feeling or are comfortable, willing, or like to go. Stated in different combination, relatively few Protestants have "good feelings" about attending Buddhist rituals and ceremonies.

Table 11

The Frequency Distribution for Question 14 as Valid Percentages

Question	Negative Responses	Indifferent Responses	Positive	Uncertain	N
14.1 Comfort level	50.1%	35.3%	12.4%	2.2%	371
14.2 Willingness	45.5%	32.1%	19.2%	3.2%	343
14.3 Like or Not	54.5%	26.3%	16.1%	3.1%	354

Total N = 447

The data obtained in Questions 11-14 suggests that the respondents are being more cautious and selective in accommodating their two religious heritages in terms of participation in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies than they are in terms of ideology. There is an especially strong reluctance to pay respect to anything having to do with Buddhism, be it images, monks, or elements of ritual. Personal observations suggest that northern Thai Christians take very seriously the commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures against idolatry and against placing other loyalties before God. They perceive that their neighbors worship Buddha images and that Buddhist rituals, more generally, are acts of worship in something like a Christian.

At first glance, the attitudes apparently held by northern Thai Protestants concerning Buddha images and Buddhist rituals seems to reflect old missionary prejudices against Buddhism. They do not seem to take into account the classical Buddhist attitude that images and rituals are but symbols, which the faithful must look *through* to see the Buddha. Swearer observes, however, that in Southeast Asian popular Buddhism Buddha images are not simply symbols of the Buddha. Local people believe that the images contain an inherent sacred power, to which the Buddhist faithful give homage with the expectation that in their merit making and their giving homage to the images they will gain religious returns and have access to the power of the images and rituals (1995: 19). These attitudes conflict with fundamental Protestant doctrines at two points. First, Christian doctrine and praxis enjoins Christians to depend solely on the power of God. Second, Protestantism has made an especial point over the centuries to preach that humans cannot save themselves; they cannot obtain merit by their own actions. It is on these points of theological concern that northern Thai

Protestants are least willing to employ their strategies of accommodation.

We may also speculate, however, that the northern Thai Protestant reluctance to participate in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies and, especially, their widely held attitude that Christians should not show respect to Buddha images reflects a northern Thai religious attitude as well. In his study of northern Thai cosmology, Richard Davis observes that the northern Thai "most scrupulously observe the maintenance of conceptual boundaries during their rituals." They seek to prevent behaviors that might violate their understanding of a properly ordered set of beliefs and rituals and thereby destroy the order of their religious universe. Davis notes that the northern Thai are particularly anxious to maintain a proper relationship between high and low things (1984, 284, 299). In a northern Thai Protestant cosmology, God must necessarily stand highest and most sacred on every religious scale, and it is possible that local Protestants seek to accomplish at least two goals by limiting their participation in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. First, they are preserving their sense of what is high (sacred) and low (mundane). Proper worship of the Highest Spiritual Power (God) must necessarily take place in a self-conscious setting of Christian worship. Second, they are setting "proper" boundaries between themselves as Christians and their Buddhist neighbors. To the extent that these speculations are close to reality, they also obviously involve a Protestant attitude towards worship that is expressed in terms consistent with the northern Thai religious consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>It seems, in sum, that the respondents have set a generally clear boundary on the process of accommodation. They engage in that process with more caution and less willingness to shift towards syncretism when their faith in God is directly and obviously at stake. The great majority of the respondents either reject the shift towards syncretism entirely or continue to feel that under normal circumstances they cannot engage in acts that they feel probably break the biblical commandments. In particular, as we have seen above, they mostly feel that they cannot show respect to Buddha images even if their neighbors find that refusal offensive.

## Summary

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This analysis of the data collected by the eight Payap students in January and February 2004, reveals five general strategies for accommodating their Western Protestant and Northern Thai Buddhist heritages to each other. As described in the introductory summary above, those five strategies are: *one*, the compartmentalization of apparently contradictory beliefs; *two*, a general, if varied ideological inclination towards syncretism; *three*, the redefining of exclusivist beliefs and approaches in more syncretistic terms; *four*, making allowances for constraining situations; and, *five*, the retention of a distinctive Protestant allegiance to a personal God.

## Conclusion

The results of the survey of northern Thai Protestant attitudes towards their Buddhist neighbors lends credence to the widely held sense that popular Thai religious consciousness does not resonate well with foreign fundamentalisms. It is a syncretistic consciousness, which both incorporates a variety of religious traditions and displays a benign, perhaps indifferent attitude towards other religions. The responses to Questions 8 and 9 of the questionnaire also indicate that our respondents generally feel secure and accepted in spite of their belonging to a religious minority. Religious fundamentalisms (at least, of the internal variety) may, thus, be less of a threat to public well being in a Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist context than they are on the contemporary global stage where fundamentalist religious activism has become a major issue for international concern. The reason that this is so in Thailand has to do, evidently, with the very nature of the "syncretistic" Thai religious consciousness, which does not see religious differences as being all that important.

The syncretistic, pluralist tendency of Thai religious consciousness apparently finds fundamentalist religious attitudes off-putting. When northern Thais accept a Western Christian fundamentalist faith, thus, they use various strategies to reshape that faith with a set of beliefs, values, and behaviors that are more compatible with Buddhist syncretism and pluralism. Obviously, they do this in personal ways across a range of possible attitudes

and behaviors from virtually fundamentalist to all but entirely syncretistic positions. The graphs in this paper that compare the attitudes of the Fa Ham and Phrasitiphorn Churches with the total sample indicate that most northern Thai Protestants most of the time take a somewhat middle of the road approach that balances their fundamentalist and syncretistic heritages in various combinations. They tend to be somewhat more syncretistic ideologically and somewhat more fundamentalist behaviorally, again if the data cited in this paper is a fair measure of their beliefs and behavior.

Viewed from an international Christian perspective, those of us who are not Thai must be careful in how we assign meaning to the Thai Protestant strategies for reconfiguring their faith in their own social and cultural contexts. Most importantly, we should not attempt to recast their strategies of accommodation in the Western Christian categories of conservative and liberal, or ecumenical and evangelical. Northern Thai Protestant strategies have nothing to do with either Western evangelicalism or ecumenism. Northern Thai Protestants cannot be accused of or praised for taking a "liberal" attitude towards relationships with people of other faiths. Their relatively syncretistic attitude, if they must be Western ideological concepts at all, is a "conservative" one that seeks to remain true to the principles of Protestantism within their own northern Thai cultural contexts. The concept of accommodation does not mean that they are forsaking either their "Thainess" or their "Protestant-ness," although it does mean that they put their dual heritage together in ways that may seem incongruous outside of that context.

Viewed from a Christian theological perspective, the findings of this paper also serve to remind us that a good deal of theological wisdom and creativity resides in the local churches of Asia. The large number of comments that came back with the 447 forms collected for the students' study indicates that individual northern Thai church members have thought very seriously about the issues the questionnaire raises. They wrote in marginal notes correcting the terms used on the form, and a couple of them even added their own categories of response. They have collectively created a broadly cogent accommodation of their Protestantism to their Thai-ness and their Thai-ness to their Protestantism. That cogent response encompasses the supposedly more "fundamentalist" churches of Phayao

Province and the supposedly more "liberal" churches of Chiang Mai.

Religious fundamentalisms in other places, other contexts present our weary old world with challenges that are perhaps as dangerous to its peace and security as the Cold War was in its day. This is particularly true in Western Asia, where massive social and political injustice fuels angry fundamentalist reactions. In the Thai context, by way of contrast, Western Protestant fundamentalism has met with a more measured response from local peoples, including those who are themselves Protestants. This is not to say that there have not been tensions, periods of oppression, and even inter-communal violence. There have been, but by the measure of our world today the more striking feature of the response of Thai local people to the "fundamentalist challenge" is the way in which Protestants themselves have accommodated their religious and cultural heritages to each other. Their process of accommodation is a creative theological process that has integrity and that allows Thai Protestants to live meaningful, faithful lives of Christian service and witness in ways that "make sense" in a Buddhist world.

## NOTES

- 1 They are Mr. Boon Rak Suriwong, Ms. Jirirat Saetung, Mr. Patompong Boonyakert, Ms. Ratsamee Arkharasavast, Ms. Rungtiwa Manoo, Mr. Suradej Wisutichon, Mr. Teerakit Suesan, and Rev. Theetapan Khopchai.
- 2 Davis emphasizes the importance of rituals in Thailand as a means by which people organize their daily lives and social relationships (see Davis 1993, 36).
- 3 I am sorely tempted to add *packaging* to the list of strategies discussed in this paper. By "packaging," I mean those instances when northern Thai Protestants hold one set of beliefs or attitudes in terms of another, such when they refuse to *wai* Buddha images (Protestant concern) because to do so would be a confusion of higher and lower categories (northern Thai concern). However, as I have presented the matter here it is based on speculation and not on the data at hand. The possible strategy of packaging is, thus, better left off the list here as a matter for further study.

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## APPENDIX

Questionnaire Distributed by the Payap Theological Students

Questionnaire About Christians and People of Other Faiths

February 2004

This questionnaire was prepared by Masters' student at the McGilvary Faculty of Theology, Payap University in order to study the relationship between Christians and people of other faiths. It is a classroom activity. Please fill out this form according to your honest understanding of the questions.

Thank you for supporting this research project.

The Research Committee

Please answer every question by drawing a circle around your choice  
Or by checking the boxes provided [ ] according to your choices

1. Do you agree that every religion is able to teach people to be good?  
Disagree Entirely    Disagree Somewhat    Disagree Somewhat    Agree Somewhat    Agree Entirely    Uncertain
2. Do you agree that Christian teachings are the only correct religious teachings?  
Disagree Entirely    Disagree Somewhat    Disagree Somewhat    Agree Somewhat    Agree Entirely    Uncertain
3. Do you agree that God loves those who believe in Him more than those who do not?  
Disagree Entirely    Disagree Somewhat    Disagree Somewhat    Agree Somewhat    Agree Entirely    Uncertain
4. What does your church usually teach concerning the salvation of people of other faith?  
(Please select only one response)  
[ ] they will go to hell because salvation is found only in Christianity  
[ ] some people of other faiths might be saved, but most will not; but most Christians will be saved

- [ ] people of other faiths who are good will be saved the same as good Christians  
[ ] I'm not sure on this question
5. What do you think about the salvation of people of other faith? (Please select only one response)  
[ ] they will go to hell because salvation is found only in Christianity  
[ ] some people of other faiths might be saved, but most will not; but most Christians will be saved  
[ ] people of other faiths who are good will be saved the same as good Christians  
[ ] I'm not sure on this question
  6. The Bible teaches us to love our neighbors. What does loving our neighbors of other faiths mean? (Please select only one response)  
[ ] do everything, both in speaking and acting, to bring them to faith in God  
[ ] share in their joys and sufferings with the hope that they will know God; but do not emphasize conversion  
[ ] show them compassion as Thai brothers and sisters without expecting anything in return  
[ ] this is not a matter to worry about or think a lot about  
[ ] I'm not sure on this question
  7. Do you agree that it is not necessary for Christians to evangelize people of other faiths?  
Disagree Entirely    Disagree Somewhat    Disagree Somewhat    Agree Somewhat    Agree Entirely    Uncertain
  8. Do you agree that generally the Thai people look down on Christians as ones who follow the religion of foreigners?  
Disagree Entirely    Disagree Somewhat    Disagree Somewhat    Agree Somewhat    Agree Entirely    Uncertain
  9. How willing are the Buddhists in your village or community to accept Christians?  
Not at all    Unwilling    Somewhat Unwilling    Somewhat Willing    Willing    Very Willing    Uncertain

10. When Christians have problems have people of other faiths, do you agree that usually Christians are not the source of the problem?

Disagree Disagree Disagree Agree Agree Agree Uncertain  
Entirely Somewhat Somewhat Entirely

11. Buddhists sometimes feel that Christians destroy brotherly and sisterly unity with them because they do not show respect during Buddhist ritual. What do you think?

(Please select only one reponse)

- whatever others think, Christians absolutely may not *wai*
- although we empathize with them, Christians for the most may not *wai*
- actually, Christians should be broad-minded and *wai*
- this is not an important matter; we can do whatever
- I'm not sure on this question

12. Some people say that there is no problem with Christians showing respect to Buddha images. Do you agree?

Disagree Disagree Disagree Agree Agree Agree Uncertain  
Entirely Somewhat Somewhat Entirely

13. What do you think if Christians take part in the following Buddhist rituals and ceremonies?

Merit-making ( <i>wai</i> )	shouldn't	as the situation dictates	always can	unsure	unconcerned
Merit-making (don't <i>wai</i> )	shouldn't	as the situation dictates	always can	unsure	unconcerned
Temple processions	shouldn't	as the situation dictates	always can	unsure	unconcerned
Accepting alms	shouldn't	as the situation dictates	always can	unsure	unconcerned
Presenting robes	shouldn't	as the situation dictates	always can	unsure	unconcerned
Greeting monks	shouldn't	as the situation dictates	always can	unsure	unconcerned

14. Generally, when you have to attend the ceremonies listed in Question 13, how do you feel?

14.1. Very Uncomfortable Somewhat Somewhat Comfortable Entirely Uncertain  
Uncomfortable Uncomfortable Comfortable Comfortable

14.2. Very Unwilling Somewhat Somewhat Willing Entirely Uncertain  
Unwilling Unwilling Willing Willing

14.3. Entirely Dislike Dislike Like Like Entirely Uncertain  
Dislike Somewhat Somewhat Like

15. Do you agree that for the most part you don't want to go to the rituals of other religions because you worry about what other Christians will think?

Disagree Disagree Disagree Agree Agree Agree Uncertain  
Entirely Somewhat Somewhat Entirely

16. Age 11-15 16-20 21-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61-70 71 & Over

17. Sex Female Male

18. Your current residence is rural amphur suburban urban

19. Position in the church Pastor Elder Deacon General Member

20. Education None G.1-3 G.4-6 G.7-9 G.10-12 Paw.Waw.Chaw.  
Paw.Waw.Saw. B.A +

21. Were you born into a Christian family? Yes No

22. Are there presently people of other faiths residing in your home?  
Yes No

23. If you have ideas concerning the relationship of Christians to people of other faiths that you want to share with the committee, please write them here