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Lead Essay

Syncretism



The word "syncretism" is a fighting word among Western, ideologically-bound Christians. The Right Wing Faithful hurry around trying to destroy it, prevent it, and devote serious amounts of theological energy decrying its very existence. The Left Wing Faithful stand off to the side with a smug little grin on their faces, knowing that syncretism happens all the time and is really part of the divine plan. They love it as much as the folks on the right hate it. As is so often the case with Western dualistic ideologues of both stripes, each has a point and misses the point.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (Compact Edition) defines "syncretism" as being "Attempted union or reconciliation of diverse or opposite tenets or practices, esp. in philosophy or religion." The earliest use of the word given in the OED is dated 1618, and it's clear from the examples of its meaning given there that it had a negative connotation from the beginning. Trying to unite or reconcile different religious beliefs and practices, say between Protestants and Catholics, is a "bad" thing to do. It is so bad that we have had to invent a whole series of euphemistic terms-enculturation, indigenization, contextualization-in place of the word syncretism.

If we cut across the political correct grain and stick with the term syncretism, two fundamental or central points stand out. First, syncretism is an unavoidable result of the Christian missionary movement; one cannot transmit the faith across cultures without there being considerable adaptation of it in the new culture. Syncretism happens. Second, the fact that syncretism is unavoidable does not mean that it is all for the good nor does it mean that it is inherently wrong. My sense is that conservative Western Christians should fret about it a good deal less than they do, and liberal Christians of European antecedents need to worry about it a good deal more than they seem to.

The first point is that syncretism happens, and it happens to conservatives and evangelicals just as much as anyone else. The last issue of HeRB, [HeRB 11](#), contains an article comparing the Korean and Thai Protestant experiences. In my research on the Korean church, I was deeply impressed by the argument made by several scholars that one of the reasons that the Korean churches have grown so rapidly is because of the way in which they have identified themselves with their culture. Korean Protestant churches are truly indigenous in that they overtly, clearly share in the general religious consciousness of their society. Some scholars note that there is a particular convergence between Korean Pentecostalism and the traditional Korean religion, known among scholars as shamanism. Both emphasize the manipulation of spiritual powers, call on holy spiritual powers to dwell in them, engage in exorcism, and in general encourage an emotional faith focused on obtaining the good life, materially and spiritually, through prayer and other forms of propitiation of spiritual powers. Women are particularly identified with the old Korean traditions, and Christian women seem to be more likely to engage in shammanistic-like practices than men. It is worthy of note that there seems to be a direct correlation in Korea between Christian fundamentalism and the use of shammanistic-type religious practices. That is

to say, the more conservative the church the more likely it is to have incorporated "old-time" Korean religion into its expressions of the Christian faith.

In the United States, the melding of patriotism and evangelicalism is one of the clearest examples of religious syncretism one can find anywhere. Syncretism happens. It is inevitable. When we stop to think about how humans communicate with each other in a culture, it becomes clear that local languages and cultures will always shape the Christian message to the local context. We should be thankful that they do, or else there could be no communication of anything across cultures, let alone something as complex and meaning-laden as the Christian faith.

Yet, it is also inevitable that humans corrupt everything we do. That is not some kind of perverse old-fashioned Calvinism, but a reality that hits us in the face every time we read or watch the news-or critically examine the world right around us. Syncretism itself, in similar fashion, unavoidably has a corrupting influence on the Christian faith that has to be taken seriously and addressed, as best we can, in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. The Christian faith has to do with salvation (Conservative-speak) and liberation (Liberal-speak), but the church is forever in danger of losing its "saltiness."

The very process of cross-cultural communication, that is, may be one cause of the church's failure to live in a faithful, Christ-like mold. As has happened in various ways here in Thailand, the church appropriates cultural forms that do not reflect the biblical message of liberation and salvation. Thus, as one important example, the churches of Thailand put great store in the place of worship while devoting little attention to meeting the social, let alone the religious, needs of their neighbors. Missionaries, historically, emphasized physical healing and social service as part of the Christian "package" of salvation that they brought to Thailand. As a rule, however, Thai churches show far more inclination to follow the model of the temple (*wat*), which also emphasizes ritual and ceremony, than they do that of the missionaries. The biblical model of salvation-liberation repeatedly stresses the importance of serving God, the faithful, and the widows and orphans over against mere worship (Micah 6.6-8 cf. Mark 12.32-33); and it is a weakness of most Thai churches that they fail to reach out in healing love to the world around them.

The churches of Thailand are, in their own ways, just as syncretistic as those in Korea. Evangelical missionaries and other Westerners would do well to celebrate that fact more and worry about it less. How else is it possible to communicate the Good News of the faith in Thai cultural contexts? They should also stop trying to control the process of syncretization, since no foreigners are ever going to be able to do much about it one way or another in any event. Ecumenical missionaries (the few that there are any more) and other Westerners related to the churches of Thailand, on the other hand, should cease to think that the hope of the Thai church is to "make it more Thai" somehow. In the things that matter, it is already as Thai as Thai can be (or Karen, or Lahu, or Isarn, or Northern). They need to think more about ways that they can encourage a more serious engagement with the biblical message and the model of Christ among the churches.

That is to say, in sum, that the communication of the Gospel and the living of the Christian life in any cultural context anywhere in the world involves an ongoing tension between faith and culture. Faith must express itself through culture yet culture is never an adequate vehicle for the expression of the faith. If we denigrate culture, we look down on the God-given means by which we become Christians. God created us as culture-makers. If, on the other hand, we lionize our own or any other culture we stand in danger of turning it into an idol, placing its precepts and values above those reflected in Christ and Scripture. In the Incarnation, God both affirmed the ultimate value of culture as the vehicle for divine communication and activity-and also sought to transform radically the way humans understand both God and themselves.

Syncretism is God's gift to the church; without it we could not share the faith. Syncretism is also a two-edged sword, which can lead us away from faith as well as towards it. Western Christians, both of leftish and a rightish persuasions, seem to be so enamored with their own versions of ideological and theological correctness that they are unable to see both the beauty of culture and its pitfalls as a medium for religious communication.

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Articles

A Church Health Survey of the CCT's District Four

Herb Swanson

Introduction



From March through May 2004, the Office of History and District Four (Phrae-Uttaradit) of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) conducted an extensive church life survey of the health of the district's 16 churches and 7 muad (organized worshipping communities). The Office's research team included four members of the staff and six undergraduate theological students from the McGilvary Faculty of Theology, Payap University. On Saturday, 15 May 2004, this research team presented a final report to forty-plus representatives from District Four's churches and muad, which summarized the key findings of the survey. So far as I know, nothing even remotely like this church health survey has ever been attempted in the CCT previously, and for that reason alone the data collected is of interest. More importantly, there is very little data available on the actual condition of CCT churches, apart from the perspectives of denominational leaders, which perspectives do not always reflect those conditions as they exist. One of the purposes of this survey was to go beyond opinions based personal observations to discover the actual health of local churches and worshipping communities.

The Questionnaire

Two versions of a questionnaire were distributed to the churches, one for churches and muad with pastors and one for those without. The Office of History staff prepared an initial draft set of questions based on the results of the 2002 survey on what it means to be a good (or healthy) church. That is, we self-consciously sought to apply local standards of church health to the churches. In general, the number of questions on a given topic and the content of most of the questions reflects those results (for a summary of the results of the 2002 survey, see the News Item "Preliminary Findings from Phrae" in [HeRB 2](#)). Thus, for example, the present study emphasizes worship because of the significance the members of the churches themselves place on it. After considerable "in-house" work on the original draft of the questionnaire, it was submitted to District Four's Executive Committee, which proposed a number of changes in wording and some in the questions. On the basis of their suggestions, the Office of History prepared a second draft, which was again submitted to the Executive Committee. The third draft was then tested with members of two different churches, and the final draft in two versions was completed. It should be said that the Office of History staff did not accept all of the changes in the drafts proposed by the District leaders, primarily for technical reasons having to do with preserving the clarity of questions and because a few of the questions proposed were irrelevant to the research topic.

Final Draft: [PDF Version](#)

The Project

The project research teams visited every church and muad in the district for a period of from a few hours to three days, depending largely on the size of the individual congregation. In addition to distributing and collecting the questionnaires, the teams conducted small group and individual interviews to test their understanding of the questions on the questionnaire and gather additional information on the current state of local congregations. A good deal of this additional information was not used by the project staff to prepare its final report to the District, but all of it was turned over to the District officers for their use.

The research teams reported in once every week, and as much as possible the staff used the data they had collected to begin preparing reports for each of the 23 churches and muad involved in the study. Although under considerable time pressure, the project staff was able to produce individual reports for each congregation as well as an overall report for the District. It was able to collect questionnaires from roughly one-third of the total communicant membership of the district so that it can be argued that its reports and this paper provide a good indication of the thinking of the local members concerning their own congregations. While, as will be seen below, the responses tend to paint a very positive picture of the state of those congregations, the responses obtained from the members of churches and muad facing particular difficulties generally clearly reflect those weaknesses.

The Findings

From the Church of Christ in Thailand's earliest days down to the present, both missionary and the denominational national church leadership has generally believed that the CCT's local churches are weak, poorly led, and incapable of carrying out local ministries effectively. This attitude continues to guide the development of CCT programs and the work of its agencies even today. The local church members of District Four, however, disagree. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, they collectively affirm the strength of their own congregations and insist that their churches are carrying out the various ministries of the church competently.

Table 1 shows that, in general, District Four's local members believe that their churches and muad are relatively strong. The frequency distribution for the whole district and for each of the categories in Table 1 show, that is, that roughly half of the respondents in each category state that their congregation is either "not very strong" or "somewhat strong." Very few report that their church is "not strong at all" or "not strong," and less than one in ten in each category claim that their church or muad is "very strong." The respondents tend thus to give a somewhat cautious answer that does not overstate either the weakness or the strength of their churches. The data in Table 1 also shows churches and muad without pastors and those in Uttaradit Province are less inclined to express a positive attitude towards the strength of their congregations. From the personal observations of the students (and the author), churches without pastors and those in Uttaradit Province are generally weaker in their congregational life and ministries, and the members themselves have some collective sense that such is the case.

Table 1
Question 1
Strength of Congregations

Responses	Total	Congregations with Pastors	Congregations w/out Pastors	Phrae	Uttaradit
<i>Not strong at all</i>	0.7%	0.5%	0.9%	0.7%	0.5%
<i>Not strong</i>	2.8%	2.1%	3.9%	2.1%	4.4%
<i>Not very strong</i>	22.8%	21.1%	25.7%	21.1%	26.8%
<i>Somewhat strong</i>	28.8%	29.4%	27.8%	27.8%	31.1%
<i>Strong</i>	36.4%	39.8%	30.9%	40.1%	27.9%
<i>Very Strong</i>	7.1%	5.6%	9.6%	6.9%	7.7%
<i>Unsure</i>	1.3%	1.3%	1.3%	1.2%	1.6%
<i>Valid No.</i>	604	374	230	421	183
N = 678					

Table 2 confirms that the district's membership, again in general, believes that their congregations are performing their various duties and ministries well. They especially believe that the churches are doing well in worship, and they acknowledge that they are weakest in carrying out evangelism. As we will see, the respondents are by and large consistent in their evaluation of both worship and evangelism.

Table 2
Question 3
How well the churches carry out the following tasks?

Answer	Cooperation	Help Others	Community	Giving	Bible Study	Evangelism	Worship
<i>Poorly</i>	14.4%	12.4%	6.9%	11.5%	17.5%	29.0%	3.5%
<i>Well</i>	84.5%	83.1%	91.4%	87.3%	81.0%	67.0%	95.7%
<i>Not sure</i>	0.9%	4.4%	1.7%	1.2%	1.5%	4.0%	0.8%
<i>Valid No.</i>	659	655	650	652	651	649	654
N = 678							

The responses from individual congregations vary considerably, and for the most part tend to fall into line with the personal observations of the research team members who visited them. Some 78.4 % of one congregation's members, for example, affirmed that their church is strong, while only 5.4% said it is not strong. In another congregation, by way of contrast, 68.8% responded that their church is not strong, while only 31.3% claimed that it is strong. Still, in these cases and all others, the respondents show a strong tendency to give generally moderate answers, not claiming either too little or too much for their churches and muad.

The data contained in Tables 1 and 2, in sum, indicates that local church members in District Four feel relatively confident about the life of their churches. They do not, for the most part, have strongly negative attitudes about that life, but at the same time they tend to take a fairly balanced perspective. Their appraisals, in light of other data collected by the research team, seem to be usually reasonable and sensible. No one claims that there are no problems and everything is just fine, but there is also a widespread sense among the respondents that their situation is not nearly so bleak as it is often believed to be by others, particularly the CCT's national church leadership. At the same time, we must keep in mind that these summary figures reflect the fact that, as a rule, the larger churches, especially those located in Phrae Province, tend to be stronger than the smaller churches and muad. If, that is, we counted the individual responses from the 23 churches and muad in District Four, we would find a fairly large number that do not reflect the general sense of being relatively strong the general figures suggest. We can look at the matter in at least two ways. Negatively, Tables 1 and 2 do not reflect the fact that quite a few churches and muad are fairly weak according to their members' own responses. Positively, it can be argued that a strong majority of the district's members belong to relatively strong congregations.

In the absence of longitudinal data, Questions 4 and 5 seek to establish some sense of the general direction of the churches and muad in terms of increase or decline. The responses to these two questions reinforces the impression already established from the data in Tables 1 and 2 that, collectively, the church members in District Four feel positive about their churches. Some 63.8% agreed that their church or muad is stronger today than it was five years ago, and 77.4% agreed that their congregation will be stronger five years from now than it is today. The answers to Question 5 concerning future developments are particularly important because only 7.3% disagreed with the statement that their church or muad will be stronger five years from now than it is today. The respondents feel not only generally positive about the current state of their congregations but also optimistic about their future over the next five years.

It should be noted, however, that individual interviews conducted in every church and muad suggest a very different picture for the long-term. In all but two congregations, church leaders expressed considerable pessimism about the more distant future of their congregations. They note that young people and children are less and less involved in congregational life. Even those young people who are involved in church life eventually leave their churches to do further study or vocational training and seldom return home once they enter the work force. Church leaders foresee a time when their churches will be populated entirely by the elderly and wonder how long into the more distant future they can last. Questions about the role of youth and the involvement of children in church life, unfortunately, did not figure in the questionnaire and is thus one important subject that calls for further study.

Table 3
Questions 4 and 5
Strength of Congregations Five Years Ago and Five Years from Now

Responses	5 years ago weaker	In 5 years stronger
<i>Disagree entirely</i>	3.2%	0.2%
<i>Disagree</i>	13.1%	3.4%
<i>Disagree Somewhat</i>	7.5%	3.8%
<i>Agree somewhat</i>	21.4%	10.5%
<i>Agree</i>	35.7%	46.3%
<i>Agree entirely</i>	6.8%	20.6%
<i>Not sure</i>	12.3%	15.3%
<i>Valid No.</i>	650	655
N = 678		

In the initial 2002 survey of the churches' understanding of what constitutes a "good" or "strong" church (church health), the members of the Phrae churches placed primary emphasis on worship. A church that worships well is a strong church. This emphasis reflects the central importance of ritual in northern Thai culture, and however much those in other contexts might wish to disagree with this central concern for worship, in the District Four's cultural and religious context it makes a good deal of sense to use the strength or weakness of worship as one measure of church

health. As can be seen in Table 4, the respondents consistently assigned worship very high marks. They affirmed that the worship in their congregation does bring them closer to God (94.2%), helps them better understand the Bible (94.7%), and helps them better understand the way to live as a Christian (95.2%). They expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their worship experiences (95.6%). Although not contained in Table 4, they also agree to Question 12 (quality of preaching) and Question 13 (lively singing) in the same range of 90% -plus positive responses. The respondents seem, in sum, to be very pleased with the quality of worship that they are experiencing.

Table 4
Questions 7 through 10
Evaluation of Worship Experience

Responses	Q. 7 Brings Closer to God	Q. 8 Understand the Bible	Q. 9 Understand Christian Life	Q. 10 Feel Satisfied w/ Worship
<i>Disagree</i>	3.8%	3.9%	2.6%	3.0%
<i>Agree</i>	94.2%	94.7%	95.2%	95.6%
<i>Not sure</i>	2.0%	1.4%	2.3%	1.2%
<i>Valid No.</i>	653	666	662	666
N = 678				

The responses described in Table 5, however, shed some doubt as to exactly what the respondents meant by their answers to Questions 7 through 10, 12, and 13. Questions 15 through 18 ask the respondents if their churches need to improve in the areas of preaching, music, the order of worship, and in the leading of worship. Substantial majorities agreed in each case that the quality of worship needs to be improved. In Question 11, furthermore, 55.4% of the respondents agreed that worship in their church "lacks liveliness."

Table 5
 Questions 15 through 18
 Evaluation of Worship Experience

Responses	Q. 15 Need to improve preaching	Q. 16 Need to improve music in worship	Q. 17 Need to improve order of worship	Q. 18 Need to improve worship leaders
<i>Disagree</i>	12.1%	17.6%	24.5%	21.8%
<i>Agree</i>	82.9%	77.1%	68.4%	70.8%
<i>Not sure</i>	5.0%	5.3%	7.1%	7.4%
<i>Valid No.</i>	659	660	664	665
N = 678				

The respondents seem to be sending a mixed message with these two sets of responses. On the one hand, they affirm the value of worship as they experience it today, while on the other hand they also agree that their worship needs to be improved. Observations by the research team suggest that the actual quality of worship in most of the churches in District Four is not particularly high and that there is considerable need for improvement, especially in preaching. On that score, the respondents seem to agree, but their sense that worship could be better does not appear to reduce their appreciation for worship as they now experience it. They apparently feel that they receive a number of benefits from worship and that, as it stands, it is an important part of their lives. What emerges, in sum, is what appears to be a balanced, sensible appreciation for the importance of worship to the religious life in a northern Thai cultural context and a realization that the actual conduct of worship could be better than it is.

In the 2002 survey, the CCT members in Phrae Province felt that another important measure of church health is the members' knowledge and use of the Bible. Table 6 displays the responses to the 2004 questionnaire for Questions 19 and 20, which ask the respondents to specify how frequently they read the Bible personally and in their families. According to their responses, 58.7% of the respondents read their Bible at least once a week, including 18.3% who stated they read the Bible daily. As expected, family rates are lower, although 39.9% said they read the Bible in their families at least once per week, including 10.0% who read the Bible with their families daily. These figures indicate that the respondents highly value the Bible and devote some time to reading it. This level of commitment to reading the Bible is particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that, according to the responses to Question 39 on educational levels, 58.9% of the respondents have only a grade school education or less.

Table 6
 Questions 19 and 20
 Frequency of Reading the Bible Personally and in the Family

Responses	Q. 19	Q. 20
	Personal Bible Reading	Family Bible Reading
<i>Less than once/mo.</i>	15.4%	30.9%
<i>1-2 times/mo.</i>	25.3%	28.8%
<i>1-3 times/wk</i>	25.6%	19.0%
<i>4-6 times/wk</i>	14.8%	10.9%
<i>Daily</i>	18.3%	10.0%
<i>Valid No.</i>	644	612
N = 678		

The data contained in Table 7 suggests that the members of the Fourth District feel generally confident in their ability to understand the Bible and apply its teachings to their daily lives (Questions 21 & 22). They are nearly as confident in the general biblical knowledge of their congregation's members (Question 23). Again, this data stands in almost stark contrast to the attitudes widely expressed by denominational leaders and educators concerning local church knowledge of the Bible. It is not infrequently stated that "the problem" with local church people is that they don't know the Bible. I might add, as a personal aside, that in an interfaith meeting between members of a CCT church and a temple in their same community concerning their religious understanding, it was clear that even the average members of the church were better able to express their religious understanding than were their Buddhist neighbors. Given that specific observation and the data from District Four, it may be argued that local church Christian education is, or at least has been, stronger than is generally recognized.

Table 7
 Questions 21 and 23
 Knowledge & Use of the Bible

Responses	Q. 21	Q. 22	Q. 23
	Bible Knowledge	Using Bible in Life	Church Knowledge of Bible
<i>Negative</i>	10.8%	4.5%	10.0%
<i>Positive</i>	87.9%	94.4%	86.8%
<i>Valid No.</i>	667	665	661
N = 678			

The 2002 survey of the churches in Phrae Province also identified pastoral care as another important element in church health. One of the decisions made by the research team for the 2004

survey, however, was that this survey would not ask church members concerning the strengths and weaknesses of pastoral care in District Four in any detailed way. The study, that is, would focus on congregations and not on individuals, including most especially pastors. Thus, the questionnaire for churches with pastors contains only one question (Question 26) concerning pastoral strengths. The questionnaire for churches without pastors contains an additional two questions (Questions 24 and 25) concerning the members' desire for pastoral leadership and whether or not they think their church or muad will be stronger if it has a pastor.

Some 90.7% of the members of churches and muad without pastors agree that they want pastors (Question 24), and 89.8% believe that their congregation will be stronger if they have a pastor (Question 25). In response to Question 26, the members indicated that they would want their pastor-if they had one-to emphasize Bible study, preaching, and church administration in that order. In those churches with pastors, the members ranked their pastors as strongest in preaching and weakest in music. While the members of congregations with pastors ranked their pastors strongest in preaching, how capable those pastors actually are as preachers remains an open question. One the one hand, as we saw in Question 12 above, church members do feel blessed by the preaching they hear. On the other hand, as was also described above, they also want to see that preaching greatly improved. The question of the actual quality of preaching in District Four is one that needs further study.

As is widely seen as representative of CCT churches generally, the 2002 survey of the Phrae churches and muad found that the members did not place particular emphasis on evangelism. This survey, thus, contains only two questions having to do with evangelism (Questions 27 and 28). The data obtained from these two questions, again, calls into question the generally accepted wisdom held among Protestant leaders both inside and outside of the CCT that CCT churches are failures when it comes to evangelism. In Table 8, we find that about one-fifth (21.2%) indicated that their church or muad was not intentional in conducting evangelism, although the great majority of these responses fell into the highest negative category of "not much." Most of the members felt that their churches are, in fact, intentional to a degree in evangelism.

Table 8
Question 27
Intentionality of Churches Regarding Evangelism

	Not at all	Not	Not Much	Somewhat	Intentional	Very much	Unsure
<i>Response</i>	21	22	96	239	181	74	22
<i>Per cent</i>	3.2%	3.4%	14.6%	36.4%	27.6%	11.3%	3.4%
N = 678							

This data is consistent with the answers the respondents provided for Question 28, which asked about how frequently they themselves share their faith with their neighbors of other faiths. Fully one-fourth (25.4%) of the respondents stated that they share their faith "regularly," and another 44.3% agreed that they share their faith more than once a year. Only 49 respondents of the 618

who answered this question (7.9%), agreed that they have never shared their faith with a person of another faith.

This data, as much as any collected in the course of the 2004 District Four church health survey, contradicts the general, widely held image of that CCT churches are weak and unable to carry out local ministries. We can account for this data either by assuming that the local people gave misleading answers to Questions 27 and 28, either purposely or out of ignorance, or the commonly held attitudes about those churches are incorrect. At the very least, the truth of the matter can only be discovered by further research into the actual situation in the churches and mud themselves.

In the 2002 survey of the Phrae churches concerning what they believed constitutes a healthy church, some importance was place on the relationship of the churches to their districts; and in 2004 the church health survey of District Four found the churches generally happy with that relationship. Some 81.7% of the respondents agreed that the district contributes to the development of their churches while only 11.2% disagreed. Interviews in the churches suggest that a recent change in the district officers contributed, in part, to this positive response as the new set of officers have shown themselves more responsive to local church needs.

One of the more surprising findings of the church health survey is the number of respondents who had received some form of lay training through the district or through national CCT offices. Nearly half (48.3%) of the respondents said they had received such training, and of that half, half again (49.7%) had attended more than one training session of one type or another. As important as the numbers receiving training, is the positive evaluation of the training events by the respondents who participated in them. As can be seen in Table 9, a very large majority (97.8%) stated that they felt that the district sponsored training sessions they attended were useful to their churches. That percentage included 47.2% of the total number of respondents who believed that those sessions were "very useful" to their churches.

Table 9
Question 33
Usefulness of District Sponsored Training Session

	Not at all	Not	Not Much	Some	Useful	Very	Uncertain
<i>Number</i>	1	1	6	48	87	126	2
<i>Percent</i>	0.4%	0.4%	2.2%	18.0%	32.6%	47.2%	0.7%
N = 267							

Questions 34 and 35 were added by the research team and are designed to test the relationship of the churches and mud to their Buddhist neighbors. Individual interviews revealed that there was a small amount overt local tension between Buddhists and Christians in just a few communities, but the data collected by the questionnaire, as shown in both Tables 10 and 11, suggests that District Four congregations generally have good relations with their Buddhist neighbors. Table 10 indicates that local church members are normally willing to participate in the traditional

celebrations of their neighbors. (It should be noted that the survey teams, as a rule, explained this question to mean Buddhist celebrations such as Loy Kratong and Songkran). That is to say, the Christian community does not refuse to be present, at least, for such celebrations as it once did in the past.

Table 10
Question 34
Participation in Traditional Celebrations With People of Other Faiths

	Entirely Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Agree Entirely	Uncertain
<i>Number</i>	37	49	46	227	220	36	27
<i>Percent</i>	5.8%	7.6%	7.2%	35.4%	34.3%	5.6%	4.2%
N = 642							

Table 11, by the same token, shows that the respondents very much agreed that their Buddhist neighbors are willing to accept them as Christians.

Table 11
Question 35
Willingness to Accept Christians by People of Other Faiths

	Not at all	Not Willing	Not Much	Somewhat Willing	Willing	Very Willing	Uncertain
<i>Number</i>	4	9	57	183	294	82	10
<i>Percent</i>	0.6%	1.4%	8.9%	28.6%	45.9%	12.8%	1.6%
N = 640							

Conclusion

Although stated at various points, above, it bears repeating that one of the main conclusions from this survey of church health in District Four of the CCT is that the churches and many of the district believe themselves to be in generally good health. Smaller congregations and those without pastors are less confident in the state of their church's health, but since the majority of members belong to larger churches with pastors it is evident that most members of the district belong to relatively healthy congregations. It must be emphasized, also again, that the national CCT leadership has long operated under the assumption that most congregations are in a state of poor health, which means that the results of this survey are "counter-intuitive" so far as they are concerned. Indeed, some district-level leaders of District Four themselves initially rejected the findings of this survey as being "impossible." When they were led through an analysis of the data, they began to see that they themselves had been looking at the worst cases in the district as being typical of the whole district, which is clearly not the case.

It should also be noted that the members of the churches and muad cooperated very well with both this survey and the one conducted in 2002; and they proved entirely able to fill out a questionnaire and participate in small group discussions. Admittedly, there were more problems with the 2002 survey, as many local members had never filled out a questionnaire before and found the whole experience problematic at best. The students who conducted this year's study, in contrast, found most church members quite comfortable with the idea of filling out the survey form. They reported that some of the small group discussion sessions were very lively and informative. Which is to say that, with proper preparation, sociological instruments can be used effectively with local churches of the CCT.

Specific findings include the following:

1. There is a serious need to improve the content and the feel of worship and preaching, in spite of the members' general appreciation of what they participate in and receive today;
2. In general, the short-term health of the District's churches and muad is relatively good; however, their long-term future is worrisome. The membership is aging, and young people are either failing to join in church life entirely or, after graduation from high school, moving away from home and the church. One can foresee the time, in twenty to thirty years or so, when several churches and muad will cease to exist entirely if present trends continue.
3. It is clear from the survey, that larger churches with pastors generally experience a higher degree of church health. One of the pressing issues facing the district is to find ways to assist smaller congregations and those without pastors to attain those same levels.
4. Local church members believe themselves to be living relatively good Christian lives. They give time to the Bible and are confident in their ability to use it for daily living. They find meaning in worship. Many of them share their faith with others on a regular basis.

As has been noted at several points in this summary of the findings of the 2004 survey of church health in District Four, those findings provide a significantly different picture of the health of the district's congregations from that generally held by district leaders and by that held by CCT national leaders. The issue of local leadership, to reiterate one key example, is not nearly as worrisome so far as church members are concerned as national leaders and agencies believe it to be; and far more has been done to train local church people than is generally realized. On the other hand, the most pressing issue facing nearly all of the churches and muad of the Fourth District (and one they are deeply concerned about), the disappearance of their young people from the church, has received very little attention at the national levels of the CCT. One cannot help but conclude that there is, first, a serious need for further church health studies in the CCT and, second, at the very least those who are working at the district and national levels of the church need to test their own assumptions concerning the actual state of the churches to which they are responsible.

The data presented here cannot be taken to be conclusive. The 2004 church health survey in Phrae and Uttaradit Provinces, as extensive as it was, still amounts to little more than a pilot project for the study of church health in Thailand. The questionnaire the survey team used

requires considerable rethinking and retesting. Still, the data collected from all of the congregations in District Four is generally consistent, and the student survey teams felt that other data and impressions they gathered tend to confirm that data rather than contradict it. That is to say, the experience of the Fourth District clearly suggests that church health surveys are potentially useful in the CCT and could well become an important tool for program development and evaluation if sufficient time and thought are invested in them.

Fundamentalism & Asian Theology: Reflections on the 2004 PTCA Consultation

Herb Swanson

Introduction



The PTCA (Programme for Theology & Cultures in Asia) consultations that it has been my honor to attend over the last few years have invariably been at once stimulating and perplexing, and they have met a personal need to engage with Asians in overt theological reflection that I have seldom experience in Thailand. Christian thinkers from other parts of Asia bring fresh perspectives to old issues, and they draw on resources strikingly different from those relied upon by Western theologians in the past. Yet, I have come away from virtually every PTCA event asking myself what those perspectives and resources have to do with the theological contexts of Thailand and, to an extent, all of Southeast Asia. PTCA deliberations are frequently dominated by the voices of Northeast and of South Asia, and while Southeast Asians are always present somehow the voices of the Indic and Sinic epicenters of Asian ecumenical theology seem to command greater attention. It may be that Southeast Asians, more often than not, are less articulate in English than especially participants from South Asia. At the same time, some of the most articulate Southeast Asians are the children and grandchildren of overseas Chinese parents who feel as much kinship with China as they do with their "native" countries in Southeast Asia. Be that as it may, the issues that burn brightly in other parts of Asia seem distant from the realities of local church life in Thailand -and distant from the ways in which those churches express themselves theologically.

The PTCA theological consultation at Tainan Theological College and Seminary, Tainan, Taiwan, held 16-19 August 2004 on the topic of "Religious Fundamentalism and Its Challenges to Doing Theology in Asia" was for me yet another stimulating and perplexing encounter with ecumenical theological thought from other parts of Asia. I would like to reflect here in a very personal way on what I heard and observed at Tainan. This is not intended to be a report on the consultation, and other participants who might read this essay may well wonder if we even attended the same event. My purpose is to once again reflect on the Thai settings for "doing theology" and how it differs from as well as is similar to other Asian settings. I would like to begin by thanking the PTCA officers and organizing committees for inviting me to participate in the Tainan consultation and for the very fine way in which they housed, fed, and pampered all of us who took part. The PTCA process is an incredibly important one, and I always feel it is a particular honor to be allowed to participate in it.

I

On first blush, the issue of religious fundamentalism is a timely, front-page headlines topic at a time when the Palestinian struggle and the battle for Iraq dominate the world's attention. The 11 papers and the discussions that followed each of them offered a wide range of definitions and viewpoints concerning fundamentalism, which stimulated us to struggle with the meaning of the concept in often lively exchanges that alternated between highly negative and more balanced attitudes towards the subject. Some participants declared outright that fundamentalism is a negative category and fundamentalists hold to an unacceptable, dangerous, and faithless form of religion. Most of these anti-fundamentalist perspectives revolved around the idea that fundamentalists have a dualistic religious worldview that is divisive because it condemns everyone who does not believe and behave according to its own dogmas and moralisms. Yet, time and again, other participants countered with more positive views of fundamentalists, arguing that they are frequently good people who are able to live and share their faith in commendable ways. Fundamentalists can often bring hope to people who otherwise have no hope. At times, our attention seemed to be focused on especially Islamic fundamentalism but also ultra-conservative Christian and Hindu movements; but, at other times, various participants looked at dominant world political powers and individuals (notably President George Bush) as being the "real" forces of global fundamentalism.

As we moved back and forth across the landscape of religious and political ideologies, it became clear that the consultation did not have a clear conception of or definition of fundamentalism. Or, rather, it had so many particular conceptions and definitions that collectively it could not shoe horn into a common perspective. In spite of some more appreciative observations on fundamentalists, it seemed at times as though the participants viewed anything that they themselves saw as theologically and ideologically "bad" as being fundamentalist.

The papers and debates raised, in any event, issues concerning the nature and impact of fundamentalism. That was stimulating, and the "failure" to arrive at a common definition and understanding only served to further encourage personal reflections. What was perplexing was trying to figure out what the whole debate had to do with the theological context of the Thai church. First, Thai Buddhist religious and Thai secular political thought takes serious pride in its willingness to accept people of other faiths. The sectarian religious and nationalistic political thought of other regions of West, South, and Northeast Asia seem to be more compatible to fundamentalist thinking so that the concept itself is relevant to theological reflection in those regions. But in Southeast Asia generally and in Thailand in particular, it is more difficult to see how dualistic, divisive fundamentalism is relevant to theological reflection in Thai contexts (except, perhaps, in Islamic southern Thailand where West Asian sectarian dualism seems to exert some influence).

Second, it is also difficult to see how the concept relates to the particular context of the churches of Thailand themselves-apart from foreign missionaries from the West and some other parts of Asia who tend to be dualistic in their thinking in ways alien to Thai culture itself. I have almost surely alluded to the following statement elsewhere on this website, but it bears repeating here: a national leader of the Church of Christ in Thailand observed in my hearing just a few years' ago

that the denominational leaders of the CCT, the (Southern) Baptist Convention, and the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT) get along just fine so long as there are no missionaries present. He was quite clear. It is missionaries who create divisions among the churches of Thailand. In actual fact, of course, the relationship between the various denominations and even between local churches is not that rosy, but it is true that Thai church leaders and members tend to be less ideological in their attitudes about people of other denominations and of other faiths than do Western missionaries. They, indeed, are not infrequently criticized by those missionaries for their lax attitudes.

So, then, what does the concept of fundamentalism have to do with Thai theological reflection? Again a few years' ago, a somewhat younger CCT denominational figure, who is generally considered to be quite "liberal" in his theology and politics, declared to me in so many words that the whole evangelical-ecumenical split that seems so evident in churches around the world today has nothing whatsoever to do with the Thai church. It is foreign, he argued with some intensity, to the very way in which Thai peoples think about religion. In teaching Thai church history at the seminary level, I have found that Thai theological students have a good deal of trouble comprehending some aspects of missionary religious thought, particularly when it comes to that same distinction between "evangelicals" and "ecumenicals."

In a better world than the one we live in, Thai theological thought would almost certainly not have to concern itself with the fundamentalist-ecumenical split, and the Thai church could have long since gotten on about the business of constructing Thai theologies without further ado. However, fresh generations of foreign evangelical missionaries—as aggressive, insensitive, and ideological as ever—keep shoving the Western dualistic agenda back onto the Thai church's plate. In terms of Thailand, their agenda is a fundamentalist one, although they themselves might reject the label; and, as such, influences Thai churches in a number of ways that should engender more theological reflection here than actually takes place, at least overtly.

Viewed from the perspective of the CCT, an ostensibly ecumenical denomination, the influx of evangelical and then Pentecostal missions has reaped a mixed bag of benefits and headaches for the Protestant community. The Pentecostal churches, much more than the "straight" evangelical ones, have contributed new liveliness and enthusiasm to that community. They have also, however, sown the seeds of division and dissension born out of impatience and even disdain for the older churches they found in place. They came judging more than was necessary and loving less than was needed, and they have reaped the sad harvest of judgmentalism, one that taints the spiritual fruits they otherwise have to offer. Thus, fundamentalism remains a major issue with which the Thai churches have to contend, theologically as well as ecclesiastically.

Yet having said this much, my own sense is that the Thai churches have been quietly working out a range of distinctive Thai Protestant meldings of Thai and Protestant religious cultures that go beyond simplistic distinctions between fundamentalism and ecumenism (see, for example, the paper, "Northern Thai Protestant Attitudes Towards Other Faiths: Analysis of a Questionnaire"). There is some evidence to suggest that the leaders and members of the more recent evangelical and Pentecostal churches are on their own journeys melding and integrating their Thai-ness and Protestant-ness into theologically viable mixes (see the doctoral dissertations by

Nantachai, McLean, and Zehner listed in the "Bibliography of Materials Related to Christianity in Thailand"). Their journeys are inevitable; and while the constant re-infusions of missionary dualistic fundamentalism mean that each new group of Christians has to start the process over, the process of accommodating faith and culture itself goes on and results in a wide, creative range of theologies. That is to say, that while the issue of fundamentalism is important to the Thai churches, perhaps the best theological response they can give to fundamentalism is the one they are already giving—the quiet melding of Protestant and Thai cultural and religious themes into individual Thai Christian faith systems in ways that foreign missionaries are hardly even aware of and can in no way subvert.

Or, to put the matter back into the context of the Tainan consultation, the issue we were discussing is relevant for Protestants in Thailand. The dualistic, good guys-bad guys way we dealt with it is not.

II

The Tainan consultation reinforced the conviction that theological reflection is intimately tied to the language in which it is conducted. PTCA consultations are necessarily conducted in English, and no one feels particularly comfortable with that fact. Everyone connected with the PTCA movement understands that Asian theological reflection is best done in Asian languages, although few, I think, would subscribe to the notion that it can be done only in those languages. Yet, as I sat as a native language speaker of English listening to our discussions and trying to process them back into my second language, Thai, I could feel the constraints of English intruding on our thinking.

Take, for example, the whole thorny issue of gender-inclusive language. The use of such language is very much of a theological issue in the PTCA context; and it is basically understood that if one wants to participate in PTCA events one had better write and speak gender inclusive, politically appropriate English. No problem. Except this issue, which often commands the energies and attention of participants, is largely irrelevant to theological reflection in Thai. It's not that Thai isn't a sexist language. It is. But Thai linguistic sexism is not to be found in the use of sexist language per se; rather, it is obscured by the hierarchical nature of the language, which gives superior status to older, well-educated, wealthy males. Thai linguistic sexism, that is, is located in a complex lexicon of status, and it is all but impossible to separate out the question of sexist language from the larger issue of hierarchical-ist language. The difference is not merely a matter of word usage but has to do, instead, with the very focus of theological reflection.

More broadly, one cannot help but wonder what it means for theological reflection in Thailand that much of PTCA's stimulating theological reflection does seem to come from, as mentioned above, either South or Northeast Asia. What does it mean that a good deal, although not all by any means, of the more academic theological reflection on the Thai situation is done by missionaries and foreigners? One of the main points that I have been arguing throughout this bulletin and on this website is that local Thai theological praxis/reflection is quite creative. Koyama found this to be the case forty years' ago (see *Water Buffalo Theology*), and, if anything, it is even more so today. I, personally, have seen some indication that most local Thai church members tend to be considerably more articulate in their faith than are most of the local

temple faithful. Why, then, is there such a dearth of systematic, written theology in Thailand ? Why do Thai church leaders and scholars devote so little attention to overt (i. e. written) theological reflection such as is found in other Asian nations? We can guess that Thai Buddhist culture's supposed emphasis on praxis over philosophy might have something to do with the lack of overt Thai Christian theological reflection; but I am coming to the conclusion that the matter is much more complex than that. Thai theology is "done" in a way quite different from that of Europe, and the English-speaking nations while PTCA for all of its "Asianness" still "does" its theological reflection in a European fashion.

One does wonder how relevant the whole PTCA process is to even the churches of India, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea. I felt, again, in Tainan how apparently Western was the format, the language, and even many of the attitudes being articulated by participants from across Asia. But, then, many of them have received their theological training in Europe, Britain, the USA, or Australia and New Zealand. They have learned how to be critical in a Western sense and engage in scholarly debates outside of their own theological and ecclesiastical settings, and while there is nothing wrong with that at all, it still renders the PTCA ecumenical Asian theological process highly problematic in most ethnic Thai settings.

I say, "ethnic Thai," because, interestingly enough, some of the most stimulating and creative exercises in critical theological thinking that I have observed here in Thailand have been carried out in Karen tribal contexts where the PTCA process has had more direct influence than it has had otherwise in Thailand. Otherwise, several attempts to introduce the PTCA process into the CCT, using different formats and strategies, have failed to produce much of any substance; and have not resulted in a long-lasting theological movement.

III

Another of the perplexing issues emerging out of the Tainan consultation, again speaking personally, is that of the place of political correctness in theological reflection. Word usage was heavily patrolled, and virtually all of the heated moments in the consultation arose because of the politically incorrect usage of certain terms, notably "tribal" and "animistic." One participant, new to the PTCA process, used the term "tribal" in a pejorative sense, speaking about "tribal divisiveness" in his own national context. While he was not referring to tribal people, this negative use of the word sparked an angry response from a tribal participant from Northeast India, which was strongly reinforced by one or two other participants. They insisted that the word tribal should be used only in a positive sense and that it is unjust to tribal peoples to see "tribalism" as being in any sense negative.

Fair enough. For the great majority of us, the images attached to the word "tribal" are not much of an issue, but for those who are known by the word they are significant especially in national contexts where tribal people are subjected to second-class citizenship in fact, if not in theory. There is a parallel situation in Thai with the term "hill people" (*chao kao*), which is often applied to tribal people in Thailand. Ostensibly simply descriptive of where tribal people live, the term has a somewhat negative tone to it. It implies someone of lesser status and education who is, perhaps, not quite civilized. On Thai TV and elsewhere, one not infrequently sees spoofs and caricatures of tribal people that recall Vaudeville's blackface portrayals of black people.

Yet, I was struck by the manifest intolerance of those who corrected the Tainan participant's apparent misuse of the term "tribal." The point he was making was that in his national context ethnic and religious ("tribal") differences, bolstered by fundamentalist attitudes, were a prime cause of national injustice and suffering. Sad to say, the strong reprimand of his unintentional use of an English word led the consultation to largely overlook the larger point he was making. Nor did those who attacked him for his misuse of the term "tribal" take into account the fact that he is not a native-language speaker of English. (For that matter, none of those who took serious exception to his use of the term are themselves native-language speakers of English).

The usage of the term "animist," when applied to the beliefs of certain groups in Southeast Asia, drew a similar and equally abrupt response from an Indian participant, who in an informal moment shared with several others after a plenary session angrily refused to explain his understanding of the word itself. He stated that to call any people "animistic" is pejorative, demeaning, and reprehensible; he asserted that the word had not been used in India for a century.

Again, fair enough. To judge by the American Heritage Dictionary (1969), the term animism refers to "primitive" beliefs regarding spiritual powers in nature, which can be seen as a rather demeaning way to refer to the beliefs of modern day Asians. Yet, the term continues to be used among academics of Southeast Asia in a relatively neutral sense, and it actually names an important aspect of Thai religious consciousness having to do with the place and power of local spiritual powers and beings. There does not seem to be another term for "animism." The term "traditional religiosity," for example, is much broader and does not necessarily name that aspect of traditional religious thinking having to do with spirits and spirit propitiation.

From my own understanding of the Thai context, it seems to me that it is possible to raise a number of issues regarding the role of political correctness in Asian theological thought. First, it does seem that Asian theologians could exercise a bit more patience with each other; and, perhaps, it would be wise to sort out more carefully exactly why the use of certain words is rejected so adamantly. Those speaking from one Asian context should especially be careful not to universalize their understanding of certain English-language terms to all other Asian situations.

Second, the PTCA and other ecumenical-liberal forums would also do well to reflect more carefully on their reliance on apparently Western approaches to the political correct usage of certain English-language terms. The call for political correctness can be seen as reflecting an inherently Western dualistic approach, one that assigns "good" and "bad" uses of terms like "tribal" and "animism" without any recognition of gray areas or differences in Asian contexts. While ecumenical-liberal Christians criticize fundamentalists for their rigid dualism, on this issue of political correctness ecumenicals frequently display virtually the same rigidly dualistic approach—a kind of ecumenical fundamentalism, if you will. Perhaps it is necessary to "fight fire with fire," but such an argument is not self-evident. The point here is that while the international ecumenical Asian theological movement is stuck with using English as its medium of exchange, it would be wise to consider how Asian Christians can best use the language in a non-dualistic, more Asian-like way.

Third, in Thai, at least, there is an approach to political correctness that is different from that seen among native language speakers of English. For some time now, there has been a movement afoot to transform the meaning of the Thai term for people who are "crippled" (*khon phikarn*). In English, now, we have to put the term "crippled" in quotation marks, because political correctness all but forbids the use of the term at all. In Thai, however, there are no strictures against using the word cripple, but there is an ongoing move to change its meaning—a movement symbolized Thailand's active, proud participation in the Special Olympics. This transformation of meaning seeks to present crippled people in positive terms and to make the point that they have skills and abilities and values irrespective of or even deriving from their condition. While there are those who will object in English to the idea that crippled people are still people "in spite" of their condition, the terms applied to the "differently challenged" in English can amount to polite euphemisms that still highlight the different-ness of people who are "handicapped." In a much less than perfect world, the Thai language approach of retaining the original words and packing new meanings into them seems just as viable as the English-language speakers' approach of discarding terms entirely—and less aggressive, less dualistic in a way that seems to better fit a Southeast Asian world view.

The use of the English language for Asian theological reflection, in sum, inevitably removes that reflection from its Asian context, not wholly, of course, but in important part. It also, frankly, renders those reflections less relevant to local situations in Thailand where problems haggling over the meaning of certain English words and terms has no meaning at all. More largely, the very use of English as a medium for theological reflection seems to encourage linguistic approaches and dualistic attitudes that are, if anything, inimical to Asian theological reflection.

IV

As mentioned in the Introduction, I find these PTCA consultations invaluable, in part, because of the fresh perspectives the various participants bring to them. One of the most intriguing discussion of the Tainan consultation followed a paper on the role of the media in creating and fostering fundamentalisms. In the drive for using Asian resources for Asian theological reflection, it seems that the use of media analysis as a tool for that reflection has not received much attention. The media, particularly the press and television, play a huge role in the creation of images and myths, ones that profoundly influence world opinion. Local channels of communication are being usurped more and more by global networks, which all too often present uncritical and even ignorant images and data concerning even local events. The media generally thrives on sensationalism, and they transform complex issues into small, superficial bites that mislead as much as they inform. At the same time, however, the media also reflect what people want to hear about, so that there is a dynamic (and frequently uncreative) relationship between the media and their audiences.

The paper and the discussions that followed raised important questions concerning how theologians should respond to the media, using it both as a source of reflection and subjecting it to critical theological rebuttal and comment. How can pulpits be used to counter the negative (evil?) side of the media? How does the use of the media for Christian evangelism impact local Christian peoples? In what ways can peoples of faith foster new channels of communication?

And, while we had more questions than answers, the direction of the discussion provided food for thought in the Thai context as well.

Another highly stimulating discussion revolved around one of the participant's use of Augustine and Aristotle as sources for Asian theology in his paper. Other participants objected that there are perfectly good Asian sources that make the same points as these Western sources. One other participant argued that Augustine's anti-feminism discredits him as a source for Asian theological reflection. Still another participant argued that Augustine is also an elitist source and therefore also "anti-minjung," that is a source that does not reflect the suffering of poor Asians. These objections generated counter-objections of their own, especially the observation that if contemporary theologians use only sources that are not "anti-feminist" they will have precious little left to work with. Feminism is a recent movement and theological sensitivity to its issues is a recent phenomenon. More largely, other participants argued that Asian theologians should be allowed to "play" with whatever sources they deem useful; and the validity of that usage should be tested by the results of their theological conclusions. In this case, it was noted that virtually everyone agreed with the paper's conclusions, which suggests that its use of Western sources for Asian theological reflection was valid and helpful. One participant also argued that we should not take a dualistic approach to such sources as they combine both positive and negative aspects. Theologians need to discern what is useful in a source rather than reject it because some of its contents are "bad."

Yet another discussion period capsulized in many ways the quality and intensity of the exchanges that took place at Tainan. In response to a paper that presented a relatively positive picture about the reality of Christian evangelicalism-fundamentalism in the Philippines, some participants observed that in particular contexts fundamentalists show many positive traits. They show a real depth of faith and unity in the Spirit. It was also observed that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to make any clear distinctions between terms such as evangelicalism, fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, and that these terms do not make a lot of sense in Asian contexts anyway. One participant said, for example, that Asians had not gone through the Enlightenment so that all of the discussion about modernism and its relationship to fundamentalism was irrelevant. He asserted that Asian theology must start with the Asian historical and contemporary experience, which renders many Western philosophical and theological terms irrelevant.

Other participants observed, however, that we cannot make a simple distinction between Western and Asian experiences anymore. He pointed out how Western in appearance, for example, our own group was even though it was composed largely of Asians discussing Asian theology. Another person stated that there are people in Asia who are genuinely post-modern and who even reject much of traditional Asian culture. An Indian participant noted that in his country the concept of post-modernism is largely irrelevant since India did not participate in the European Enlightenment, but the concept of fundamentalism is highly relevant even if it originated in the West.

Finally, a brief exchange concerning the term, "separate but equal," indicates how different national contexts influence the thinking of Christian Asians. One of the Indian participants

stated that Indian minority groups sought to be separate but equal within the Hindu majority culture. An American participant observed that such a goal was dangerous, and he reflected on the ways in which White Americans used the doctrine of "separate but equal" to force Black and Native Americans to live in oppression. The Indian participant responded immediately that in India, minority groups feared being engulfed by the majority culture and the separate but equal doctrine helped to protect them from that fate.

Conclusion

PTCA consultations always remind me of how complex a continent Asia is, both geographically and culturally. It also serves to underscore the complexities of theological reflection in the diverse context of Asia. Whatever the drawbacks of the PTCA process, it serves to remove its participants from their own situations and encourages them to reflect cross-contextually as well as cross-culturally. One cannot help but be impressed by the forthright declaration of his desire for full independence for Taiwan as Taiwan by one of the Taiwanese participants. The evident pain of discrimination of tribal peoples in South Asia further sensitizes one to those same pains in Thailand. An Indonesian Catholic spoke with that same evident pain about the tensions caused by fundamentalists within his own religious tradition. There were more such moments than I can record here, and the real value of those moments was that they helped all of us to think our own situations in new ways or, at least, from a fresh perspective.

Appendix

Papers Presented to the Consultation in the Order of their Presentation:

Jeri Gunderson (Philippines/USA), "The Perversion of the Cross: A Feminist Critique of Religious Fundamentalism."

Padmini Solomon (Malaysia/India), "Religious Fundamentalism: Whose? Where?"

Luna L. Dingayan (Philippines), "A Study on the New Religious Movements in the Cordillera Region (Philippines)."

Matheus Purwatma (Indonesia), "Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy in Doing Local Theology: The Challenge of Fundamentalism in the Doing of Theology in an Asian Context."

Chellaian Lawrence (Sri Lanka), "Religious and Political Fundamentalism: A Christian Response."

Herbert R. Swanson (Thailand/USA), "Reconstructing Fundamentalism: a Preliminary Analysis of Protestant Strategies for Religious and Cultural Accommodation in Northern Thailand."

Jinkwan Kwon (South Korea), "Fundamentalism in Korea -in Comparison with Minjung Theology."

Joshva Raja (India), "Media Myths of Fundamentalism and a Need for Theology of Dialogue at the Grassroots."

George Oommen (India), "Dalits and Hindu Religious Fundamentalism: Countering Aggressive Majoritarian Constructs of Nationhood."

Pratap Gine (India), "Tribalism: A New Form of Religious Fundamentalism-A Challenge for Doing Theology in Asia."

K.P. Aleaz (India), "The Challenge of the Sangh Parivar in Doing Theology in India."

Short Items

A Believer's Story

Some months ago, I was told the story of a woman who has accepted Christ but not become a Christian, and it is a story worth telling here. She is evidently a middle aged woman who at one time worked for a company in Bangkok, where her immediate superior, also a woman, was a Christian. Her boss spent some time at the beginning of each work day reading the Bible, and eventually the woman herself became curious about why. Their discussions led to the boss to giving her a Bible and explaining something of the Christian faith to her. I do not know the details, but from her reading, discussions, and through the example of her boss, the woman discovered her own faith in Jesus. She reads the Bible and prays daily, and she gives ten percent of her income to worthy causes. She speaks with conviction concerning the spiritual value of tithing, and, according to my source, the woman appears to be very knowledgeable of the Christian faith. She has read the Bible completely through twice and is on her third round; she reads it every morning to her husband, who allows her to tithe his salary as well as hers.

This woman, however, has not been baptized and does not attend any church. She actively participates in the life of a local temple, giving part of her tithe to God (as she calls her giving) to the temple. She also participates fully in the ceremonies and rituals of her temple but says that she uses the time to pray to God. She told my source that one day she will probably be baptized and join a church, but for the time being it would be very hurtful of the older members of her family, grandparents and parents, if she publicly declared herself a Christian. In the meantime, she seems to have found a good balance between her faith in Christ and her respect for her family, not allowing them to come into conflict. She even seems to be bringing her husband to a knowledge of Christ as well.

Defining Religions

This note follows on Note #1, above. In that note, we are introduced to a woman who believes in God and Christ, who reads the Bible daily, who tithes as a conscious act of her faith, and who

shares her faith with others. She is not baptized, not a member of any church, and she does not attend worship regularly. Is she a Christian?

Jonathan A. Silk has written a fascinating article analyzing how to define Mahayana Buddhism [in *Numen* 14, 4 (October 2002): 355-399]. He demonstrates that scholarly definitions of Mahayana Buddhism have been based on a fruitless search for a set of common characteristics shared by all Mahayana Buddhists but not shared with any other Buddhists. He concludes that the concept "Mahayana Buddhism" represent a "polythetic class." In such a class, each member of the class has an important number of traits that are considered relevant to the whole class. No member of the class, however, has all of the traits. Two Mahayana sects can thus be very different from each other and yet both belong to the polythetic class labelled "Mahayana Buddhism" because they share a number of similar traits. Although not discussed by Silk, the problem, of course, is to determine how many traits a particular sect has to have before it can be included in the class, "Mahayana Buddhism." Silk also does not deal with the fact that some traits may be more important than others in defining the class. Still, he contributes a helpful approach to defining "mega-concepts" for which it is impossible to arrive at one inclusive definition.

To return to our woman, she clearly shares a number of traits with the polythetic class, "Christian." She has faith in Christ, reads the Bible, tithes, and shares her faith. Are these traits sufficient for her to be classified a Christian? Or, does receiving baptism constitute a necessary trait for all members of the class? If so, then the class, "Christian," is partly a "monothetic class," that is all members in the class must have certain common traits to be in it. In this case, however, simply being baptized is insufficient grounds for classifying individuals as Christians because many people have been baptized, even as adults, who no longer consider themselves or are considered by others to be Christians.

Christianity, like Mahayana Buddhism, is a "polythetic class." All that really means is that it is hard to define who are "Christians." Our definition depends on what traits we assign to the class and the weight we give to each trait, which leaves us a lot of room to argue about who are "really" Christians and who are not.

Armed Conflict in Decline

According to a news release from the Associated Press published on CNN.com on 30 August 2004, two international bodies that track international armed conflict report that a definite decline is taking place in international armed conflicts. Since the end of World War II in 1945, the most battlefield-related deaths took place in 1951, when some 700,000 died in armed conflict (this does not include war-related deaths from starvation, "unofficial" conflicts between ethnic or other groups, or the massacre of civilians). The 1990s saw a resurgence in armed conflict, mostly due to the break-up of the Soviet Union, but now the trend downward has resumed. In 2002, only about 15,000 people were killed in state-supported armed conflict. The number rose to 20,000 in 2003 because of the war in Iraq. These figures are still well below the figures of the 1990s, which saw between 40,000 to 100,000 war deaths annually. The article gives numerous reasons for this decline, but major credit goes to the U.N. and other international agencies that

have become increasingly pro-active in intervening to prevent or end armed conflicts. The end of the Cold War, in particular, has also brought an end to proxy wars and freed the U.N. to do its job without American or Soviet intervention. The result is that the U.N. undertook 14 peace initiatives in 2003 and deployed a monthly average of 38,500 military peacekeepers around the world, three times the number for 1999.

I know it does not feel like the world is getting more peaceful with our headlines dominated by news from Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, and the world feels less secure because international terrorists have become major players on the world stage. We should not, however, undersell the quiet, unspectacular advances that are being made in our world to make it a better, safer place to live. In the twentieth century, armed conflict between nations repeatedly tore apart the fabric of world peace. As we enter the twenty-first century, world public opinion is less and less tolerant of state-sponsored violence for political ends, and that opinion counts for more and more in the global village. We can only hope & pray this trend continues and expands to include other forms of violence, personal as well as governmental and ethnic.

Detoxifying Bureaucracies

Don Cook's *The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies, 1760-1785* (NYC: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995) is a carefully documented and well-written history of England's mismanagement of its North American colonies, which led to American independence. More largely, it is a description of how a governmental bureaucracy went out of its way to create a crisis, failed to deal competently with that crisis, and in the end lost far more than it could ever have gained from its original goals. Before 1760, the British government had generally left its American colonies to fend for themselves, which they did to their own benefit and that of England itself. After 1760, however, England sought to bring the colonies "to heel," creating resentments and stirring up a series of crises that eventually led to war. In the process, it turned some of its most loyal American subjects into its most determined enemies, and by 1785 it was widely recognized in England itself that the whole thing had been an enormous political mistake and embarrassing military debacle. The country did not have sufficient military resources to wage war with its far-distant colonies, and, as importantly, it did not have the bureaucratic savvy to wage that war, its best political leadership having been shoved out of power by King George III. Cook makes it abundantly clear that George's stubborn, willful, and thoroughly unimaginative insistence that the colonies pay "their fair share" of British governmental costs and behave towards England in a loyal, submissive manner was the key factor in the prolonged crisis with the colonies. He, furthermore, could not abide most of the competent politicians of the day, so he consistently put men of limited abilities in positions of authority. His machinations allowed incompetents to sit in important positions and carry out incredibly foolish policies.

If we survey international crises large and small today, how many of them grow out of or are significantly acerbated by incompetent bureaucratic mismanagement and the willful stubbornness of uncreative political leadership? To what degree does that same mismanagement and willfulness infect religious bureaucracies? One wonders, for instance, whether or not the demise

of Christianity in parts of Europe and elsewhere is as much a reaction against institutionalized ecclesiastical bureaucracy as it is a rejection of the faith itself. It seems fair to say, in any event, that one of the key issues involved in creating a more peaceful world is detoxifying bureaucracies of all sorts.

Tomlin's Missiology

The Rev. Jacob Tomlin of the London Missionary Society was one of the first two Protestant missionaries to arrive in Bangkok in 1828. In his diary entry for Christmas day 1831, Tomlin explains something of his missiological approach. Writing concerning a group of Chinese who were engaged in their own worship of God, he states, "It is indeed of great importance that the heathen be taught how to pray to, and worship, the true God, otherwise they are liable, through their old idolatrous habits, prejudices, and ignorance, to fall into great errors, and, like the Cutheans of old, to mingle idolatry and true religion together." He then gives examples of Chinese in Bangkok who engaged in such syncretistic practices and concludes, "We must therefore treat them as children, and set before their eyes a living example; take them by the hand; teach them reverently to kneel down; pray for them, and put right words into their mouths. Afterwards they will imitate us in their own private worship." ("Rev. J. Tomlin's Journal in Siam," *Missionary Herald* 29, 5 (May 1831): 170.)

Tomlin articulates here two key principles in his missiological approach. First, syncretism is one of the great dangers facing the missionary enterprise. Two, the best way to avoid syncretism is through an intensive socialization process using the missionaries themselves as both models of and instructors in the correct way behave as Christians. Both of these principles reflect the almost universal nineteenth-century Protestant missionary assumption in Siam that the missionaries taught a God-given, biblically-based pure form of the Christian faith, which can be communicated cross-culturally in its pure form.

First Protestant Worship Service in Thai?

The Rev. Charles Robinson of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) mission in Bangkok wrote in a letter dated 11 February 1836 that the ABCFM mission held what he believed to be the first public worship of God in Thai on 24 January 1836. He wrote, "The meeting was held at the dispensary, of course most of the hearers were sick, but no less in need of the Great Physician on this account. About thirty were present on the first Sabbath. It was a time of deep interest to us. We had prepared a prayer and a hymn in Siamese, and this was probably the first time ever that a prayer to the true God, or his praises, were publicly heard in that language. The people appeared very attentive." [in *Missionary Herald* 32, 10 (October 1836), 380-381.]

Robinson himself wrote that this was "probably" the first public Christian worship service in Thai. Catholic churches had, of course, been worshipping in Siam for centuries, but in Latin not Thai. Protestant public worship in Siam up to January 1836, so far as he knew, had been conducted in Chinese. It seems reasonably likely that Christian worship in Thai did actually

begin on January 24th, 1836.

Mary Bradley Blachly in America

The following excerpt from the book, [*Progressive Men of Western Colorado*](#) (Chicago: A.W. Bowen & Co., 1905), pages 382-383, tells the story of Mary Adele Bradley (1854-1926), daughter of Dan Beach and Sarah Blachly Bradley, who married Andrew Blachly in 1877. Although not precisely a chapter in Thai church history, Mary's story complements that of her mother as told in the article, "[Sophia Bradley McGilvary and Sarah Blachly Bradley: Notes Towards a Family Biography](#)," in HeRB 8. In particular, it suggests that Mary inherited some of the same sturdy pioneering spirit that was evident in her mother and in her stepsister, Sophia Bradley McGilvary. The one curious aspect about Mary revealed in this excerpt is that her husband was also her first cousin. His father, Eben Blachly, was Mary's mother's brother, that is Mary's uncle. In any event, what follows gives us insights into the world of the old-time missionary families. It tells us about how one of their children made her way in the world. Somehow, it gives the whole picture slightly more color to know that one of those children lost her husband in a bank robbery replete with galloping horses and pistol-packing desperadoes. My thanks to Mr. Jon Van of Nakhon Payap International School for forwarding this story to me.

"Andrew T. Blachly"

"The late Andrew T. Blachly, of Delta, whose tragic death on September 7, 1893, at the age of forty-six, by a daring hold-up and robbery of the Farmers & Merchants' Bank, of which he was at the time cashier, awakened universal regret and horror throughout the Western slope of this state, was born in Dane county, Wisconsin, on September 22, 1847, and was the son of Eben and Jane (Trew) Blachly, of that state, both of whom are now deceased.

"The father was a doctor and after many years of general practice in Wisconsin, moved to the vicinity of Kansas City, Missouri, where he opened and conducted a school for Negro children, carrying it on in conjunction with his wife, who had, like himself, received a college education and was well qualified for the work. They kept the school going mainly by their own endeavors and at their own expense from 1866 until 1877, when the father died and the mother sold her property and joined her son in the West. They were the parents of five sons and one daughter. The first and second born of the sons served in the Civil war. One was captured and confined in Libby prison and the other died in a military hospital.

"Andrew received a good education, attending the Lodi (Wisconsin) Academy and pursuing a partial course at Washington and Jefferson College, in Washington, Pennsylvania. He left home in 1869 and came to Colorado, where he clerked in the office of the Kansas Pacific Railroad at Denver part of the time, teaching school during the rest until 1872. From that time until 1878 he was occupied in mercantile business for himself at Monument, Colorado, and also published a paper called the Mentor for two years. In 1880 he moved to Salida and kept a drug store until 1881, when he changed his base to Gunnison and there carried on the same business until his health broke down in 1885. He then moved to Delta county and took up a homestead on which he lived five years. He planted a few acres in fruit, but sold the place before the trees began to bear

much. Locating at Delta, he opened a real-estate office and pushed his business vigorously and profitably for two years.

"At the end of that period, in company with D.S. Baldwin, he organized the Farmers and Merchants' Bank of Delta. He served as cashier of this institution until September 7, 1893, when just after the bank had been opened for business three robbers walked into the room and ordered him to throw up his hands and turn over to them the cash. Instead of doing this he called for help and the leader of the outlaws shot him, killing him instantly. The robbers then went behind the bars and talking all the money in sight, made their way to the back door where their horses were tied. As they mounted their horses and passed to the rear of the post office they encountered W.R. Simpson, who had heard of the robbery. He stepped into an alley and shot two of them dead. The third man, who was their guard while they made the raid, succeeded in getting away with the money they had taken.

"At the time of Mr. Blachly's death he was living on a ranch he had purchased a short time before. On this property his family resided until recently and under the wise and vigorous management of his widow it became one of considerable value and productiveness. Mr. Blachly was married on September 7, 1877, to **Miss Mary A. Bradley**, a native of Bangkok, Siam, the daughter of Dan B. and Sarah (Blachly) Bradley, the former born in Utica, New York, and the latter in Dane county, Wisconsin. The father died in 1876 and the mother in 1893.

"To Mr. and Mrs. Blachly eight children were born, all sons and all now living. They are Arthur T., Fred F., Clarence D., Howard D., Harold W., Ralph R., Louis B. and Edward H. By their help Mrs. Blachly has been able to carry on the operations of the ranch and greatly enlarge its productiveness. She sold the one on which they were living at the time of her husband's death and bought another of forty acres. On this she has four acres in fruit and also runs a fine herd of cattle in the hills. She and her sons are very successful in managing the business, and she has won a high reputation as a business woman of excellent judgment. The oldest son was fifteen years old when his father died and the youngest one year old. The first named is now a student in the medical department of the State University at Boulder, and will be graduated there in a short time, after which he will practice his profession in the neighborhood of his home. Mrs. Blachly has prospered in all her undertakings and made money steadily. She is regarded as a very good manager and a lady of great industry and enterprise. Her husband was a Republican in politics, a Mason in fraternal life and a Presbyterian in church membership. She is also a Presbyterian and she and the sons are in sympathy with the principles of the Republican party in political affairs. Their ranch is located one mile and a half east of Delta, on the Garnett mesa."

News & Notes

Herb Moves On

As of 1 January 2005, I will no longer work for the Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand, and have some hope of relocating in the United States for a few years. This move will

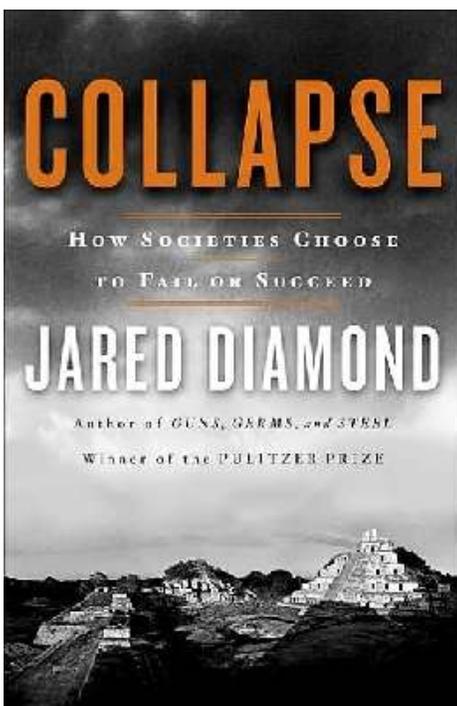
probably mean that HeRB will appear less frequently than it has in the past. Regular readers should check back late next March (2005) to see if anything is happening and then, if not, again later in the year. It is likely that HeRB will continue, but obviously my changing circumstances will influence the contents substantially. I do intend to continue this website, in any event, and will at the very least maintain what it now contains, probably adding one or two new items per year.

Youth & Religion in Thailand: A Project

Dr. Philip Hughes and I have initiated a study of trends in youth religiosity in Thailand that involves a partnership between the CCT's Office of History, Office of Home & Family, the Religious Studies Program at Mahidol University, and the Christian Research Association (Australia). While focusing on youth trends in Thailand, the project includes a comparative study of trends in Australia as well. The stated purpose of the study is to discern how contemporary youth in Thailand view religion in general and in terms of their own values and life. It also seeks to discover how trends in youth thinking about religion in Thailand are similar to and different from those in Western nations, particularly Australia. The project will take roughly three years to complete and will include Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian (Protestant and Catholic) youth from Northern and Central Thailand.

Book Reviews

Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years*. London: Vintage Random House, 1997.



This book is fun, informative, and presents a fascinating approach to the study of the human past. In an age when many historians reject the very possibility of writing over-arching "macrohistory," Diamond presents what he himself considers to be the ultimate in macrohistory, a history of all peoples in all places from the end of the last Ice Age, some 13,000 years ago, down to the present-in a paperback edition with just 425 pages of text! The reason the author thinks he can get away with such an outlandish claim (and, largely succeeds) is because of his approach and perspective, which is taken from the biological sciences. He treats the human past in its geographical and environmental settings, arguing that those settings provide historians with a set of ultimate explanations to the whole course of human history. Beginning with the problem of why Europe and North American have become the wealthiest and most powerful nations of the world, Diamond conducts an

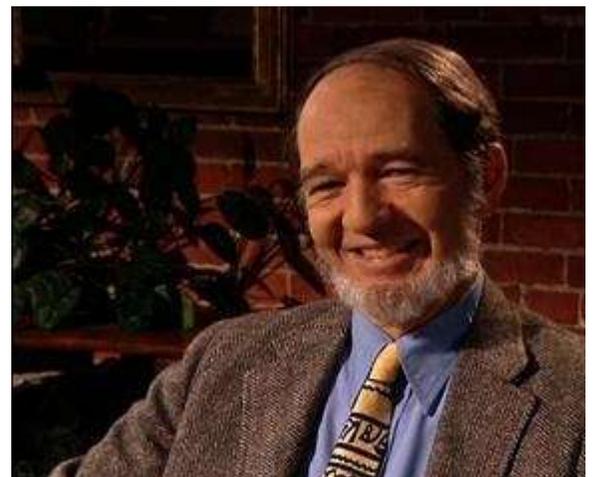
elaborate investigation of the geographical and environmental factors that allow some peoples to become dominant over others. His investigation starts with the description of the Polynesian expansion across the Pacific, showing how some groups prospered while others died away.

Proceeding in a question-and-answer fashion, the author concludes that some peoples were simply luckier than others. Diamond is insistent that the indigenous peoples of Australia or New Guinea are in no wise inferior to those of other races; they failed to become dominant peoples because of the geography and environment in which they live. He argues that the ultimate factor in human history is food production. Those peoples who produce the most food prosper because more food means increased population; and as their population increases they are able to develop the human and natural resources need to expand their power at the expense of other, less fortunate neighbors. Food production, in turn, depends on domesticating plants and animals both for eating, and in the case of larger domestic animals (such as the water buffalo), helping to intensify further food production. It turns out that there are only a very small number of plants and animals suitable for domestication, and those peoples who lived in proximity to them in ancient times were the ones who prospered. The toss of the geographical coin especially favored the peoples of Mesopotamia who had an inordinately abundant number of species suitable for domestication.

Diamond especially points out how geography and environment favored the vast Eurasian continent in the development of powerful peoples. Eurasia is dominant partly because of its immense size, which allows the development of many cultures and the large populations needed for the emergence of the human inventiveness needed for people to take advantage of their geographical opportunities. Equally as important, the Eurasian geographical axis runs East-West, which means that plants and animals domesticated in one environment can expand across the mega-continent at roughly the same latitudes. The Americas suffer from having a North-South axis in which it is virtually impossible to transfer the domesticated plants and animals of one climate to the colder or hotter climates immediately to the north and south. Thus, the plants and animals domesticated in Mesopotamia expanded relatively quickly into Europe and northern Africa, which have roughly similar climates, while the Incas and Aztecs of the Americas did not even know of the existence of each other.

In the math of Diamond's geo-historical approach, domestication equals food equals power. Food production is the basis for all of civilization. It is no accident that writing, for example, appears where increased food production led to population growth, which in turn led to greater social and cultural complexity. Food producers were the ones who could thus develop the weapons and technology (Diamond's "Guns" and "Steel") needed to dominate other peoples, and they were the ones who became more immune through population density to the diseases ("Germs") that would eventually decimate smaller populations that lacked such immunity. The reason, thus, that Euro-

Jared Diamond



American civilization now dominates the globe is because it is the direct descendant of the Fertile Crescent. Its peoples have benefited far more and far more directly than any others from the revolutions in plants and animal domestication and food production that began in Mesopotamia thousands of years ago.

Diamond's arguments are obviously more detailed and complex than this brief sketch of them even suggests, but even at that he sometimes leaves the reader breathless as he hops from continent to continent, era to era making the case for his geographical and environmental perspective on human history. One tries not to be sucked into the book's line of reasoning, but I have to admit that it is highly persuasive in many ways. The great majority of working historians, including yours' truly, tend to look at a much narrower range of factors, whether they be political, social, or religious. Diamond, by way of contrast, thinks of history as being one of the biological sciences and sees the explanations that the rest of us make for historical events as being only "proximate" causes. He acknowledges that certain historical figures have an impact on history, and he realizes that cultural differences between peoples also have an impact. At the "ultimate" level, however, food is power; and in order to gain the food necessary for power human societies need domestic plants and animals that suit their environments and which can be exported to adjoining areas. Thus, the Australian aborigines never had a chance to become a powerful people because Australia was virtually devoid of both plants and animals that could be domesticated. The one domesticated animal they had, the dingo, was a relatively late import from Asia. European settlers could easily defeat the aborigines in their totally one-sided battle for the continent because the settlers came from a complex culture that had the technology (guns and steel) and brought the diseases (germs) of a densely populated society needed to decimate the indigenous peoples. As always, Diamond insists that such peoples as the Australian aborigines are every bit as bright and creative as white Europeans. They simply had the bad luck to be lodged in the wrong environmental niche.

Guns, Germs and Steel is a highly personal book in spite of its sweeping intentions. The author has lived and worked for many years in New Guinea, and thus many of his examples and allusions have to do with that island. Sad to say, Diamond hardly realizes that Southeast or South Asia exist. In his catalogue of civilizations, for example, he never mentions the Khmer Civilization. India receives scant attention. The Pacific islanders, on the other hand, receive a good deal of attention, more than their place in world history would seem to warrant, because Diamond sees them as providing specific test cases for his theories. Much more serious from my point of view is Diamond's failure to treat culture in general and religion in particular as factors in human history. He claims that geographical and environmental factors provide the ultimate explanation for the course of human history, yet he is not actually able to account for why within a given environment one village takes better advantage of its situation than another village nearby. One sees this on the rice plains of Chiang Mai where two communities, right next to each other are still markedly different in income levels and quality of life (regarding, for example, the incidence of drugs and AIDS). Why did Rome emerge as powerful village, then town, then city, then kingdom, and finally empire? Or, again, how does one account for the vast cultural and religious influence of Greece, a small and not particularly fertile peninsula that could fight the great Persian Empire to a standstill?

Diamond attempts, as an example of the limitations of his geographical explanation, to show that Europe is geographically better off than China because where China has been subject to the whims of one central government for thousands of years, it is all but impossible to unite Europe even today. He cites the example of sea faring. While the Chinese government suspended sea-faring activities in the 1430s, Columbus was able to go from European country until he finally found one, Spain, that was willing to finance his voyage to the West (pages 412-413). Diamond makes it sound as if it was inevitable that a divided Europe would sail the seas while a united China would not-as if someone was going to inevitably back Columbus, an assumption that is impossible to prove. In fact, it was never certain that Spain was actually going to finance his trip until the final decision was made.

The author is particularly remiss in his attitude towards religion, which is clearly negative and all but dismissive. We are particularly aware of the power of religion today, but religion has always played an important role in human affairs; and it is difficult to make any correlation between environment and religion. Diamond, in any event, does not try, and he apparently sees religion as only being a mechanism for augmenting power.

The central weakness in Diamond's presentation, as apt and appealing as it is generally, is in his assertion that his geo-historical approach provides ultimate explanations to the course of human history. The assertion is nonsense if for no other reason that he begins his own tale many hundreds of thousands of years after the human species emerged and spread across important parts of the globe. If we want to discuss the "ultimate" course of human history, then we need to find out why we have an opposable digit, the thumb, and why we are omnivores. We need to talk about the advantages of hunting in packs and being able to move on two legs so that our other two "legs" are free for other uses. If, in fact, we want to search out the true ultimate causes of the course of human history, we need to discover the very reason for being of the universe itself.

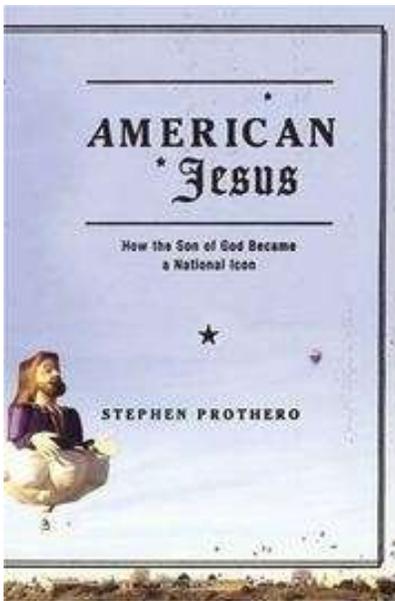
Diamond does not provide us with ultimate explanations, however many times he uses the term. Rather, he presents what is best termed macrohistory, the study of the overarching, major factors in human history. He is right on when he points out the massive importance of geography and environment as one of the key factors in human history, but he is wrong in trying to assign ultimate significance to these factors. There is still a great deal he cannot explain because a good deal of what happens in our lives is not directly related to geographical factors.

In northern Thai church history, for example, geography and environment have certainly had their impact. Those factors explain, for example, why Protestant missionaries did not begin work in the North until quite late in the game. They also explain why the Presbyterian Laos Mission was divided into several semi-autonomous stations, each located in the major city of a fertile valley surrounded by mountains. Geography does not explain, however, the impact of Old School Presbyterian theological thinking on missionary behavior and their evangelistic and ecclesiastical strategies in the North. It does not explain why there is a strong church in one rural community of Lamphun Province while the church has disappeared completely from other communities in that same province. That is to say, sometimes the macro-historical factors of geography, food production, and climatic conditions have little relative impact on actual events. At other times, they have a massive impact.

Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*, in sum, reminds us in a forceful, useful fashion of the importance of geographical, biological, and environmental factors in human history-especially when we are dealing with global developments over centuries of time. My sense is that he has overstated his case somewhat and that the Euro-American dominance of the planet since the nineteenth century was not as inevitable as he claims. As a layman when it comes to many of his arguments, I am left feeling a little uneasy as to whether some of them are actually valid or not. He claims for example that some species are more easily domesticated than others, which seems logical; but one wonders if the fact that some species of plants or animals have not yet been domesticated is actually proof that they cannot be-as he seems to think. Yet, it also seems undeniable that the history of human food production has given some peoples large advantages over others and that, often times, the peoples so advantaged have responded in innovative, inventive ways to actually take advantage of their situation. We need to leave some room, however, for serendipity, for pure chance, for inspiration, and for creative genius even at the macro-level.

Given his flaws and a certain level of hubris in his claims, I would still strongly recommend Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* to the readers of HeRB. It is a well written, tightly argued approach to the study of the human past that deserves critical reflection.

Prothero, Stephen. *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*. New York : Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003.



Although it is a book on American religious and cultural history, Prothero's *American Jesus* raises a number of broader questions concerning the relationship of Christian faith to culture and presents a useful concept, the icon, for analysis of that relationship. The book itself is a study in the development of popular images of Jesus in the United States, the author's argument being that Jesus has become the central figure, or "icon," in American religion. He now belongs to all Americans, not just those who consider themselves Christians. Prothero contends that it is nearly impossible to live in the United States without coming to terms with Jesus, and he demonstrates how even the most disparate groups, including American Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists, have all more or less assimilated Jesus into their religious faith. Prothero also argues, however, that Americans have long been busy creating and re-creating Jesus in their own images. Those images are always changing as American culture and sub-cultures change; in some eras Jesus is a highly feminized individual, in others he is a "best friend," and in still other periods he is a manly, macho tough guy.

Prothero credits (or faults, as the case may be) nineteenth-century liberal Protestants with playing a key role in transforming Jesus into America's national icon. The "modernists" were increasingly uneasy with Christian dogma and increasingly critical of the traditional views of the

Bible; and they were the ones who began to de-biblicize and de-deify Jesus, transforming him into an independent religious figure who actually lived, taught, died, and was resurrected. The result has been a massive American literature about Jesus, countless paintings and poems devoted to him, and a huge hymnology epitomized by "What a Friend we have in Jesus"; and while Americans drew on European writers and artists as well as their own, the market for selling Jesus was and is far, far stronger in America than Europe or elsewhere. Perhaps most telling is the manner in which Americans of other faiths have re-fashioned Jesus to fit their religious tradition. American Jews, particularly Reformed Jews, in the last half of the nineteenth century discovered that the "real Jesus" was a Jew, a rabbi, a teacher of Jewish wisdom. Material about him was included in Jewish religious instruction. American Hindus, as another example cited by Prothero, rediscovered a more gnostic view that emphasized Jesus' divinity, his oneness with the Divine. In the case of both Hindus and Jews, a considerable number of thinkers came to believe that they "knew Jesus" better than Christians. They distinguished the "religion of Jesus" from the "religion about Jesus," and argued that the so-called Christians have been tricked by Paul and their own traditions into believing in a false Jesus.

American Jesus is a cultural history. As such, the author draws on a wide variety of sources not usually associated with church or religious history. There is a long section about the history and influence of Sallman's "Head of Christ." The well-known Jesus musicals, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*, are given their due consideration. Prothero's chapter on Mormon conceptions of Jesus is fascinating and informative. Throughout his narrative, Prothero focuses on popular images of Jesus so that the reader learns something about popular American religious literature, art, and music. He also provides historical background to the various groups discussed, but one does not have a sense that his background commentary deviates from his main arguments.

Prothero never loses touch thus with his main arguments, which are straightforward but insightful. Jesus is an American icon. But, he is an icon created in the image of Americans, be they Protestant or Catholic, Mormon or Jewish, Black or Asian.

The subject of American images of Jesus is a massive subject to cover in a book of 300 pages, and Prothero himself recognizes that he could write another book on the subject using almost entirely another set of data and examples. Yet, he has managed his subject expertly. His prose is perhaps slightly "trendy," but not offensively or inappropriately so. He has his footnotes in place and his bibliography well alphabetized, but the academic paraphernalia does not get in the way of his story. One could wish, perhaps, for more illustrations as Prothero refers to numerous paintings that are not included in the illustrations, but this is a minor complaint at most. The book makes an important contribution to American religious thought. It is by turns though provoking, amusing, and enlightening.



Stephen Prothero

Suppose one was to write a comparable book on Thai religious thought, particularly with Thai Christianity in mind, what would one write about? Is there a national Thai religious icon comparable to Jesus as an American icon? Keeping in mind the many differences between Thailand and the United States, I think it is possible to argue that there is a parallel national religious icon here in Thailand, namely the King (and, by extension the royal family). It is certainly not the Buddha even though Thai Buddhists obviously treat the Buddha as a religious icon much more self-consciously than the way Americans treat Jesus as a national religious icon. Thai Christians and Muslims, however, strongly reject the Buddha and Buddha images so that the Buddha does not function as a trans-religious national icon. Muslims and Christians, however, largely share in the deep devotion and loyalty of all Thais for the King. And, wherever one goes in Thailand, one sees the King daily-on coins, currency, calendars, in the theaters, in all public buildings and most public spaces, on TV, in the news. There is a massive literature about the King and the royal family, some of it produced by members of the royal family themselves. The King is to Thailand virtually what Jesus is to America. Friend. Patron. Guide. Focus of Devotion and Trust.

Now, whether or not various groups in Thailand re-create the King in their own image is more problematic. It would be fascinating to see if tribal peoples or urban Thai-Chinese, Muslims or Christians, have different images of the King. I remain convinced largely on the basis of personal observation, in any event, that one cannot understand the Thai Christian conceptions of God apart from the King of Thailand. Prothero is insistent that to be an American means to have an opinion, almost invariably laudatory, of Jesus. By the same token, to be a Thai means to have "an opinion, almost invariably laudatory," about the King, and Christians share fully in this national icon, which it can be argued is much more of a religious than secular or political icon.

In a Thai context, then, Prothero's *American Jesus* is value for at least two reasons. Generally, it offers a model for studying popular religion. In particular, it elucidates the helpful concept of a "national religious icon." In the narrower context of Thai Christianity, Prothero suggests that it is all but inevitable that Christians will share important religious images with the larger culture. What those images might be and how they influence Thai Christianity faith are matters warranting a great deal of further investigation.