

# HeRD 2000

## Herb's Research Diary

### HeRD #801 - It's All in the Numbers

As we closed out the old year, a strange, intense little rivalry developed between the great majority of people who believe that the new century and millennium arrived on 1 January 2000 and an intrepid minority who argue that the millennium doesn't arrive for another year yet. The minority are known as "millennium purists" I gather. If we just look at the numbers, that minority is obviously correct. Months, years, centuries, and millennia start on the FIRST, not the ZEROETH. There was never a year 0 A.D. The idea that there could be one is silly. So, the 1st century A.D. ended on 31 December 100 and the 20th century ends this coming December 31st as well. When we add 1 to 1 we come up with 2, but that doesn't make us "math purists." That's just the way it is. It's a convention.

On the other hand, the "Millennium Now!" majority are looking on the number 2000 as a symbol. The "Conventionalists" can holler "foul!" til they're blue in the face, and it won't matter a bit. The calendar has turned over in a special way that comes but once in a 1000 years. Celebrating 1 January 2001 just doesn't have the pizzaz or the meaning that the pure, zero-lovely figure of 2000 carries. In the end, it doesn't really matter much. If there's a lesson worth paying attention too, however, it could well be concerning the power of symbols. That's what all of the special celebrating was about: the SYMBOL of changing over from "1" to "2". It's just as well that we're done and finished with it all and can be on about our business.

By the way, Happy New Year! And Happy 2000.

### HeRD #802 - Culture Is Where You Find It

In the quiet early morning hours one day this last August, suffering from the lingering effects of jet lag, I sat in my sister Marilyn's home in Elk River, Minnesota, browsing through an exquisite book of photographs taken over a period of 90 days in northern Minnesota. Woods and water. Wolves. Snow. Bright October leaves and birch trees. Ice. Jim Brandenburg, the photographer, displays in those 90 shots a sensitive artistry that I found touching, meaningful--partly, I suppose, because of my own memories of northern Minnesota.

Aside from their intrinsic beauty, Brandenburg's carefully studied shots capture and symbolize an American state culture invented by the people of Minnesota. Much of it is identical to the cultures of Oregon or Maryland, but it's a colder, northern culture marked by severe temperatures, a shorter growing season, lakes, canoes, evergreen forests, and northern prairie land. Geographically, ethnically and politically, as well, Minnesota culture is more than just a sub-set of a national or a regional culture. Its immigrants came from Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Germany, rather than Italy, Ireland, or Africa. It's political culture is unique. It's symbols include the stylized logos of several sports teams, teams that also define a set of local loyalties.

As I sat in that quiet central Minnesota home, I became momentarily aware of Thai culture, northern Thai culture, and Thai local village culture in a new way. Yes, so-called "traditional" culture is changing and, in some ways, dying. Yet, those cultures are incredibly different from Elk River's culture, and all of the Western goods, the teaching of English, and the importation of international styles doesn't change that fact. Just as the people of Minnesota quietly, daily craft their culture out of a diversity of international, national, regional, and local

strands--so the peoples of Thailand are constantly re-inventing local cultures of their own, crafting them out of local, regional, and national as well as global realities.

### **HeRD #803 - Culture is What We Make of It**

Picking up on HeRD #802, I found myself taking a different view of Thai national, regional, and local cultures as I sat in my sister's home in Elk River, Minnesota. Much of the older cultures of Thailand ARE being lost, and there's much to regret in the loss. But, that's very much true of places like Elk River as well. Indeed, I remember being very conscious of those losses when I lived in Laurel, Maryland, a small town with a rich heritage being inundated by the population pressures of the American East Coast megalopolis. Yet, the people of Laurel still lived and breathed an American border state culture distinctive from either Minnesota or Georgia.

Are we making too much of this globalization business? Are we under-estimating the power of local cultures to take from global trends what makes most sense in their own localities and build something distinctive from those trends? Is the culture of Elk River really any worse for the changes its undergone in the last 50 and 100 years? Is Chiang Mai any worse for the changes its experienced in that same period? Some things are definitely better, especially health care and access to knowledge. Some things are frighteningly worse, such as environmental degradation and a soul-numbing materialism, now as blatant in the North of Thailand as it is in the North of America. Yet, I think we are no more or less adept at culture building than our ancestors of a century or ten centuries ago, and sitting in Elk River and thinking about northern Thai villages made me keenly aware of the fact that something more than cultural destruction and degradation is going on in both. People, living their daily lives, are quietly, constantly constructing local culture as well. The products of their unending efforts are, I think, no less beautiful and meaningful than those of their great-grandparents. No more, to be sure, but no less as well.

### **HeRD #804 - Thoughts While Sitting In Church**

While in Elk River, Minnesota, I attended a joint Sunday service conducted by the local United Church of Christ and Episcopal churches. It was a well-done, orderly, and even interesting service presided over by the Episcopal priest. What was most striking to me, however, was that same mix of old and new that we see in Thailand, although the contrast between them isn't, perhaps, quite so blatant. The priest, garbed in Episcopal robes, is a woman. Her liturgical stole was bright and modern. She processed in, however, behind a brass cross just as her male predecessors have done for centuries. We were in the UCC church, an older structure, and the sanctuary had been recently repainted in a contemporary off-gray color with types of paints that didn't even exist when the building was new many decades ago. Bold, brassy banners marched down the walls, spaced between old-fashioned stained-glass windows. The stylish late-nineties microphones stood out almost garishly on the traditional pulpit and lectern. Then there was the acolyte, a boy of maybe 10 or so, who was wearing multi-pocketed blue jeans and Nike running shoes, along with his more old-fashioned acolyte robe. The contrasts between the traditional and the contemporary were almost over-powering, esp. for one who had literally stepped off the plane only 48 hours or so earlier. The people around me weren't in the least aware of these contrasts. A 19th century sanctuary done up in the tones, hues, and shades of the 1990s felt perfectly natural to them. It IS perfectly natural. It's clear, nonetheless, that these Elk River churches experience what we might call "rolling indigenization," the constant and unavoidable process of staying in touch with their own time and place. Repainting the building. A new sound system. A computer with email and web access. A new photocopier (the Sunday bulletin looked like it'd been printed professionally, tho nothing more than a good printer and

photocopier were involved). How people dress. The books the preacher reads and reflects on in the pulpit. In a hundred different ways, these Elk River churches persistently relocate themselves in their own time. And they speak about their Christian faith in ways that reflect that time.

### **HeRD #805 - Is It the Same?**

HeRD #804 reflected on the fact that American churches keep up with their own times and remain rooted in their own places through a natural, largely unconscious process of "rolling indigenization." Churches in Thailand participate in the same process. They're constantly building new buildings, using new styles and materials. Their members and leaders are frequently better educated, healthier, and more aware of the larger world than was the case even 20 or 30 years ago. Television has invaded every day consciousness to an amazing (alarming?) degree. Protestant churches have many more pastors than they used to have, and their level of training is improving. The hymns and songs being sung in church. How people dress. There's no question but that churches throughout Thailand are staying abreast of their times just as much as those in North America and elsewhere.

Yet, old patterns also persist. The churches still exhibit attitudes and patterns of behavior acquired many decades ago under missionary patronage. In spite of some tentative moves to a more open relationship with people of other faiths, Protestant Christians are still plugged into an evangelistic agenda, largely keep to themselves religiously, and take their identity from their separateness. There is, thus, the mix of old and new. The churches both resist change and rush towards it almost heedlessly; and we have hardly a clue about how the processes of indigenization, rolling or otherwise, work themselves out in Thai churches. So much research done in the last twenty years or so has been so fixed on trying to figure out "what's wrong with the Thai church" or on "how to reach the Thais" that it's largely failed to achieve insight into where and what the Thai church actually is.

### **HeRD #806 - Deflection and Disturbance are Everywhere**

In March 1899, Dr. John De Witt, professor of church history at Princeton Seminary, gave an address to the Presbyterian Historical Society, meeting in Philadelphia. His topic was the history of the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. In his preamble, De Witt pointed out that there is a fundamental difference, "between an object in its idea and the same object as actually existing and operating under historical conditions." Although he clothed his comments in the learned rhetoric of theology and philosophy, basically he was reminding his audience that things never turn out in the real world of actual events the way we want them to. They're never as clear-cut or well-defined either. He observed that the language of history, "... is not yea, yea, and nay, nay: but is the speech of more and less; and analysis is quantitative as well as qualitative. History does not exhibit itself in sharp divisions, nor does its great currents flow in a straight line. Deflection and disturbance are everywhere, and the judgments of the historian, like his portrayals and narrative, will inevitably take character from this fact."

A century has passed, but De Witt's observation is as timely now as it was in 1899. Many aspects of the historians' craft have improved in the intervening years, but we're still stuck with the problem of making wise assessments concerning the past. The ambivalent, multi-faceted, down-right exasperating nature of the human past is what it's always been. It surely hasn't improved in the twentieth century, and that being the case historians can't expect to make a silk purse out of the sow's ear of the past. Deflections and disturbances are everywhere.

### **HeRD #807 - The Colonization of the Past**

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *DECOLONIZING METHODOLOGIES* combines aspects of a scholarly analysis of research methodologies with an angry cry of outrage at the way Western researchers have misrepresented indigenous peoples. She focuses especially on their treatment of the past, writing, "A critical aspect of the struggle for self-determination has involved questions relating to our history as indigenous peoples and a critique of how we, as the Other, have been represented or excluded from various accounts. Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples with a view to REwriting and RErighting our position in history. Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes." (p. 28) She continues, "The sense of history conveyed by these approaches is not the same thing as the discipline of history, and so our accounts collide, crash into each other." Smith notes that historians focus on colonial powers more than indigenous peoples, all but writing the people of the land out of their own past. They generally focus on themes of interest to the West and use theoretical constructs that reflect linear, totalizing, and abstract thinking. She argues that indigenous peoples end up feeling strangers in their own past. Western historiography, in other words, has been simply one more tool for subduing and colonizing indigenous peoples.

Those engaged in research on the Thai church need to give close attention to Smith's anguished appraisal of how research can be an act of colonial aggression. Great amounts of research effort, for example, have been invested in a narrow interest in evangelism. Most of that research is locked away in English and little of it has reached the churches. That may be just as well, since the subjects researched didn't arise from the life and concerns of the churches themselves. Smith, I think, has a point.

### **HeRD #808 - Differing Experiences**

Smith in *DECOLONIZING MYTHOLOGIES* (p. 33) observes that the colonization of indigenous peoples radically alters their perception of themselves and their place in the world. Prior to colonization they were "direct descendants of sky and earth parents." After the colonial armies, bureaucrats, educators, religionists, and scholars appeared on the scene they became marginalized even in their own homelands. They were transformed into savages ripe for Christianization. They were colonial natives living at the periphery of an empire. Their towns and villages were placed on precise maps and, not infrequently, given new, colonial names.

Since all of these things actually did happen in many places in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific, it's useless to deny Smith's analysis of how colonization treated indigenous peoples. It's important to remember, however, that not all of the indigenous peoples were originally empowered children of the sky and earth parents. Some were already marginalized people. The Karen are a prime example. Their foundational stories reflect a lost status and a deeply felt sense of having been orphaned. They were a people waiting for a better future; and in Burma, in fact, colonialization was an improvement over the pre-colonial situation they had experienced. Smith, as a Maori, seems to forget at times that indigenous peoples' experiences with colonialization weren't uniform.

### **HeRD #809 - The Poor Need A Theory**

Impatience with research and academic theory seems to be a widely held trait. Over the years, I've seen a good deal of such impatience among Christians in Thailand, foreigners as well as locals. Smith, however, in *DECOLONIZING METHODOLOGIES* (p. 38), argues strongly that disenfranchised indigenous peoples need to discover and use theories of their own-- as a form of liberation from oppression.

She writes, "I am arguing that theory at its most simple level is important for indigenous peoples. At the very least it helps make sense of reality. It enables us to make assumptions and predictions about the world in which we live. It contains within it a method or methods for selecting and arranging, for prioritising and legitimating what we see and do. Theory enables us to deal with contradictions and uncertainties. Perhaps more significantly, it gives us space to plan, to strategize, to take greater control over our resistances. The language of a theory can also be used as a way of organising and determining action. It helps us to interpret what is being told to us, and to predict the consequences of what is being promised. Theory can also protect us because it contains within it a way of putting reality into perspective. If it is a good theory it also allows for new ideas and ways of looking at things to be incorporated constantly without the need to search constantly for new theories." Without adding to her comments, I'd suggest that Asian churches could usefully substitute the word "theology" for Smith's "theory".

### **HeRD #810 - The Language of the Colonizer**

Smith in *DECOLONIZING METHODOLOGIES* (p. 36) argues that indigenous peoples have to do their work in their own languages. She refers to an African writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and states, "For Ngugi wa Thiong'o, to write in the language of the colonizers was to pay homage to them, while to write in the languages of Africa was to engage in an anti-imperialist struggle. He argued that language carries culture and the language of the colonizer became the means by which the 'mental universe of the colonized' was dominated."

If we work past the leftist rhetoric to the point, it's a point well taken. Language does carry culture, and if our concern is to see the Christian faith become an indigenous faith in Thailand, then it behooves us to look to the creation of a body of Christian literature in the languages of Thailand. This doesn't mean just translating books into those languages, a process that keeps the Thai churches mentally chained to "the language of the colonizer." It means creating a literature written by and out of the context of the Thai churches, a more difficult but entirely necessary process. This issue is especially pressing for Karen churches because their language and culture is under massive pressure from central Thai. Young Karen Christians resist learning to read and write Karen because "there's nothing to read." Yet it's impossible to translate the religious consciousness of the Karen into Thai or English. The basic orientation towards the divine is entirely different. The same is true, I think, for the northern Thai. IF they'd been able to save their language from centralization into the Thai mega-state, their theological expression would have been quite different from that of central Thai, particularly in the use of royal language to define God and Jesus. But they didn't, and it isn't.

Language matters. It matters a great deal. It's the primary tool in the indigenization of the Christian faith in any culture.

### **HeRD #811 - Imperial Knowledge**

On his first voyage of exploration to the South Pacific (1768-1771), Captain James Cook took with him a well-known botanist, James Bank. Bank kept a journal in which he recorded his observations and opinions of what he saw. Smith in *DECOLONIZING METHODOLOGIES* (p. 80) writes, "Bank's journal covers a number of topics which were of great interest at that time and was full of comparisons with other places known to the British. The ease with which comparisons could be made reinforced the imperial eye with which Banks saw the land and all that was part of it. While at one level this ability could be called knowledge, it was IMPERIAL KNOWLEDGE that measured everything new against what was know by Banks himself." (emphasis added)

If, again, we work through Smith's rhetoric to her point, it can be argued that Presbyterian missionaries treated Thailand in much the same way that Banks treated the land and peoples of New Zealand. They observed and recorded what was of interest to them. Their theological perspective came with them from the imperial center. It contained a bag full of analytical, imperial concepts (e.g. "heathen," "ignorant," "idolatrous," "atheistic," and "benighted") useful to those observations and categories. In general, the missionaries measured what they saw by what they'd learned before they came; and they found the Thai wanting in most regards. Ultimately, they used the information they collected to the benefit of their intention to colonize Thailand religiously, by turning it into a Christian nation.

Viewed in this manner, it becomes even clearer that the missionary perspective and the knowledge they brought with them were quite alien to Thailand. Their perspective and knowledge, furthermore, weren't value free. They weren't tuned to the world view of the people, a world view the missionaries openly denigrated and sought to destroy.

### **HeRD #812 - Defining "The Problem"**

What's "the problem" with the Thai church? That's the favorite question of many church-related researchers in Thailand, be they Thai or foreign. Why doesn't it grow? Why doesn't it understand the "real" gospel? Why are its leadership structures so weak? Researchers have given these and other related questions a great deal of their attention. It's worth noting, that the impressively large and growing body of research on the Thai church has reached few general conclusions to any of these questions. Maybe "the problem" is the way in which we're defining "the problem."

Smith's observations in *DECOLONIZING METHODOLOGIES* (p. 92) concerning the ways in which research has been done to indigenous peoples are pertinent. She writes, "A continuing legacy of what has come to be taken for granted as a natural link between the term 'indigenous' (or its substitutes) and 'problem' is that many researchers, even those with the best of intentions, frame their research in ways that assume that the locus of a particular research problem lies with the indigenous individual, or community rather than with other social or structural issues....Often their research simply affirms their own beliefs. For indigenous communities the issue is not just that they are blamed for their own failures but that it is also communicated to them, explicitly or implicitly, that they themselves have no solutions to their own problems." She concludes, "This environment provides an absolutely no win position and sets up the conditions for nurturing deep resentment and radical resistance from indigenous groups."

My personal sense is that there is nothing more or less "wrong" with the Thai church than there is with churches in Korea or North America or elsewhere. Thai congregations have their strengths as well as their weaknesses, and the fact that they persist in what all admit is a difficult, Christian-resistant religious environment could be taken as a sign of strength rather than weakness. A more balanced approach is called for.

### **HeRD #813 - Divine Sovereignty in the North**

However the near and long-term futures of the Protestant church in Thailand play out, they will always be marked by the fact of Presbyterian dominance of its first 130 years or so. As I continue my research into the historical background of 19th-century Presbyterian missionary thought and behavior in Thailand, I'm more and more struck by just how important their Presbyterian heritage was to their work here. The following quotation from McGrath, *REFORMATION THOUGHT: AN INTRODUCTION* (p. 120), points to that importance. He

writes, "Our attention now turns to one of the leading ideas of Reformed theology, of considerable importance to its political and social theories: the concept of divine sovereignty. The Reformed theologians tended to regard Luther's concern with personal experience as unacceptably subjective and too oriented towards the individual; their concern was primarily with establishing objective criteria on the basis of which society and the church could be reformed - and they found such objective criteria in Scripture."

These "leading ideas of Reformed theology" became potent influences on the Presbyterian conduct of missions in Thailand in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In particular, the missionaries brought with them Presbyterianism's traditional resistance to emphasizing personal religion. They believed that "subjective religion" was built on the shifting sands of emotion; they desired, instead, to have the Christian faith rooted solidly in objective realities and sound scriptural doctrines. It's possible to understand the roots of evangelical and Pentecostal history in Thailand as partly a reaction against this Presbyterian trait. The Presbyterians also brought with them a key concern of social reform, which in the 19th century meant the "civilization" and the "Christianization" of Thailand. They made a major commitment to the importation of Western ideas, techniques, and technologies--a fact that in turn had a major impact on the whole course of Protestant church life in Thailand down to the present. We can't understand the history of Thai Protestantism, in sum, without also understanding key themes coming out of Reformed history in Europe and North America as well.

### **HeRD #814 - Owning the Bishops**

From its earliest days, Protestants struggled with how they related to the church's past. Rome, of course, claimed that its offices and its traditions linked it directly to the earliest church, of which it was the only legitimate heir. Protestants rejected those ecclesiastical offices and important elements of the tradition as well. So, what was their link? McGrath, *REFORMATION THOUGHT: AN INTRODUCTION* (p. 143), provides the Protestant answer, "Where catholics stressed the importance of HISTORICAL continuity, the reformers emphasized equally the importance of DOCTRINAL continuity. While the Protestant churches could not generally provide historical continuity with the episcopacy...they could supply the necessary fidelity to Scripture -- thus, in their view, legitimating the Protestant ecclesiastical offices. Protestants argued that since they believed and taught the same faith as the early church bishops, there was an effective continuity between the early bishops and themselves."

Concern for doctrinal matters, for right believing, then, is a "marker" of Protestant identity. What happens, however, when Protestantism is introduced into a religious context--such as the Thai context--that equates "belief" with "superstition" and promotes right action as the only way to salvation? If you insist on promoting belief, you run the very real risk of being considered an inferior religion. But, if you accommodate yourself to the conventions of the culture you run the equally real risk of losing the insights of the Protestant experience, of losing Protestant identity.

By and large Protestantism in Thailand has rejected accommodation as a viable alternative, associating it with that most horrible of sins, syncretism. There is wide-spread agreement, however, that Protestantism has made little headway in reaching the Thai heart with the good news of Jesus of Nazareth. One can't help but wonder if more serious attention has to be given to how Jesus can be good news for the Thai people rather than how we can convince "the Thai" to accept the Western Protestant version of Jesus.

### **HeRD #815 - Conservative Revolutionaries**

It's fascinating how the Thai context so forcefully influenced the nature and presentation of the Protestant message. In Europe, as McGrath, REFORMATION THOUGHT: AN INTRODUCTION (p. 145), notes the Protestant Reformation started out as a thoroughly conservative movement. McGrath writes, "As has been noted, the magisterial Reformation was theologically conservative." It retained, he argues, many traditional doctrines and practices (e.g. infant baptism). He states, "The magisterial Reformation was painfully aware of the threat of individualism, and attempted to avoid this threat by stressing the church's traditional interpretation of Scripture where this traditional interpretation was regarded as correct." By "magisterial Reformation," McGrath means the Lutheran and Reformed (Calvinist) wings of the Reformation. The term excludes the so-called "radical Reformation."

The 19th century Presbyterian missionaries in Thailand fully exemplified this strong preference for the conservative. In seeking to "conserve" their conservative Christian beliefs and practices in Thailand, however, they became radical social revolutionaries. They played a leading role, indeed, in the secularization of Thai society by introducing a competing, alien religious faith that demanded total allegiance. In pursuing their religious goals, they introduced a plethora of Westernizing ideologies, values, ideas, and technologies. They took as their frequently stated goal, the overthrow of Buddhism and the destruction of animism, the religious pillars of Thai society and politics.

Eventually, Thai political leadership came to appreciate the fact that the missionaries were at least as socially conservative as they were and not really bent on the full overthrow of political power. But, early on, Thai governments in Bangkok and in Chiang Mai perceived the missionaries as being dangerous revolutionaries and reacted to them in that framework. It took someone of King Mongkut's insight to transform the missionaries into willing tools of government policies and allies in the drive to transform Thailand into a modern nation-state.

### **HeRD #816 - Hodge on Buddhism**

Daniel McGilvary and Jonathan Wilson were classmates at Princeton Theological Seminary (1853-56), where they attended Charles Hodge's classes in systematic theology. Those classes, apparently, equipped them to deal with what they later took to be the realities of Thai and northern Thai Buddhism. According to student notes taken only a year after Wilson and McGilvary graduated, Hodge taught his students, "Speculative Atheism is a theory that dispenses with a Personal God. Practical Atheism is acting as if there were no Personal God." To the question, "How far is Atheism possible?" Hodge replied, "No farther than a man can lose his sense of right & wrong, and a sense of his own responsibility. Men may satisfy their INTELLECT that the universe excludes God, or be so ignorant or morally depraved as to admit it." Hodge's students took major exams on his lectures. They heard his ideas repeated in a number of venues by all of their professors, who spoke with considerable theological unity on these matters. We have to assume that they heard and learned Hodge's analysis of what it meant to be an atheist, namely to be "godless, insensible, amoral, and irresponsible."

Missionary analysis of Buddhism so thoroughly echoed these same sentiments, that it is likely that Wilson, McGilvary, and their compatriots brought Princeton's analysis of atheism to bear on it. Theoretical Buddhism, for them, was a religion without God. It was atheistic, a category of religious thinking that Princeton's lectures made familiar. Looking around, they saw in their minds and hearts what Princeton taught them (programmed them?) to see, and what they saw confirmed what Princeton had taught them they'd see: an atheistic, immoral society.

### **HeRD #817 - Parallels**

In his book on 19th-century Presbyterian missionary attitudes to the American Indians, Michael Coleman observes several times that in communicating the Gospel to the Indians the Presbyterians could have used sources and ideas from their own culture that had parallels with Indian culture. He argues that their American ethnocentrism blinded them to those parallels. It's worth wondering whether such parallels existed between them and the people of Thailand. There is one intriguing possibility that I offer to you, gentle readers, as pure, carefree speculation. The Presbyterians were notorious among evangelicals for their low key, unemotional approach to worship, conversion, and the Christian life in general. Presbyterian theologians openly and repeatedly argued against emotional revivalism. Charles Hodge, the "dean" of the Princeton circle, wrote in his small book, *THE WAY OF LIFE* (IV.i), that conversion required only a "genuine conviction" of sin, not deep-seated feelings of remorse or a fear of God's wrath.

Thai society discourages strong, overt displays of emotion. The old-time Presbyterians discouraged strong, overt displays of emotion. That seems to be a parallel and maybe not an insignificant one. It's at least worth speculating that the emotionally low-key Presbyterians were better suited for the task of evangelizing Thailand than more overtly fervent missions would have been.

### **HeRD #818 - Composite Congruency**

In observing that the Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century combined secular and religious world views into one system of thought that appears to be self-contradictory, Peter Gay concludes, "All styles of thinking are composite, but they appear congruent to those who live with them--that is why they live with them...But it is not enough for the historian to record what he is pleased to call these contradictions. He must penetrate to the center that made them appear organic parts of a single way of thought in its time." (*THE ENLIGHTENMENT*, p. 124)

The early members of the Laos Mission, in the 1860s and 1870s, held to a theology and world view that had direct links back to the Enlightenment. Their intellectual AND spiritual heritage combined a mix of apparently contradictory elements including an Enlightenment philosophy, a penchant for scientific thought, Calvinism, Protestant scholasticism, and revivalism. The Enlightenment was a bitter enemy of scholasticism and religion in general. Calvinism was always more head than heart while revivalism more heart than head. By the time of the founding of the Laos Mission in 1867, science and religion were becoming spiteful enemies as well. How, one has to ask one's self--how could they put all of this into any kind of coherent system of thought? McGilvary, Wilson, and crew did, however, make out of these disparities "organic parts of a single way of thought." Just as we in our own time weave disparate strands of modernity and tradition into a meaningful whole of our own.

### **HeRD #819 - The Test of Theological Diversity**

From its first moments, the earliest church was marked by a diversity of theological views, particularly concerning the person of Jesus. Those views ranged from believing that Jesus was a holy prophet and the messiah to the sense that he participated in the very divinity of God. Historically, the Christian faith has taken a dim view of such diversity, preferring theological conformity and unanimity. This has been particularly true of Protestantism, which was born out of theological disputation and has yet to eschew the habits of attack and defend acquired in the 16th century.

J. Addison Alexander, Princeton Seminary professor from 1838 to 1860, stood in the Protestant tradition, but he believed that since God controls all of history there must have been a reason for theological diversity in the early church. He writes, "She [the church] was to

surmount all difficulties, but she must first grapple with them. She was to conquer all her enemies, but she must first encounter them. That this was God's providential purpose with respect to the Church, is evident from the whole tenor of his dispensations towards it; and a part of this disciplinary system was the permission of doctrinal diversities, even in her infancy." (BIBLICAL REPERTORY & PRINCETON REVIEW, April 1851, p. 293)

Whatever we think of Alexander's views on theological diversity in the early church, they do have a link to the practice of missions in Thailand. It was just two years after he penned these words that Jonathan Wilson and Daniel McGilvary entered Princeton Seminary and sat in his classes and those of like-minded colleagues. Whether one their professors ever said in some many words that theological diversity is a providential test of the church's orthodoxy, the attitude was surely communicated. They learned that theological differences are a challenge, an opportunity to grapple with difficulties and overcome enemies. McGilvary, at least, learned the lesson well, as we'll see in HeRD #820.

### **HeRD #820 - Daniel Passes the Test of Theological Diversity**

In HeRD #819, we saw that J. Addison Alexander, Princeton Seminary professor, believed that the theological differences found in the early church were God's way of testing the church. Overcoming theological error made it stronger. Daniel McGilvary studied under Alexander, and it will come as no surprise that he later expressed views quite similar to his teacher. In 1893, just 40 years after he entered Princeton, McGilvary attended the Chicago World's Parliament of Religions, which brought religious leaders from all over the world to present the tenets of their faiths to the assembled worthies. McGilvary felt that Christianity fared quite well in comparison with the other religions, but he did air one criticism: "Whatever may have been the thought or the wisdom of the original conception and inauguration of the Parliament, the Protestant churches might have made a much more imposing front, if the ablest men of the different denominations had not stood aloof, either indifferent or hostile to it. It was surely the opportunity of a lifetime for many, who could not hope otherwise ever to address personally the votaries of non-Christian religions, to bring forward their strong reasons to bear on so many of the most intelligent and presumably the most earnest seekers after truth." (A HALF CENTURY, p. 371)

McGilvary saw the Chicago World's Parliament of Religions as an opportunity to engage people of other faith in debate. It was an opportunity to bring Protestantism's best arguments to bear on them. McGilvary's language may be a little more temperate, but his attitude about theological diversity was no different from that of Alexander's. Diversity is a challenge. It's a test. In this case, Protestant leaders failed the test and passed over the challenge. Daniel didn't. He attended. We can assume that he found opportunities to discuss his beliefs with some of the religious leaders at the World's Parliament, just as he so often did in northern Thailand.

### **HeRD #821 - Spoken Like a True Scholar**

The following is for those scholars and researchers among us who may wonder from time to time if the toil, the drudgery, and the bleary eyes are really worth it:

"The sweetest and most inoffensive path of life leads through the avenues of science and learning; and whoever can either remove any obstructions in this way, or open up any new prospect, ought so far to be esteemed a benefactor to mankind. And though these researches may appear painful and fatiguing, it is with some minds as with some bodies, which being endowed with vigorous and florid health, require severe exercise, and reap a pleasure from what, to the generality of mankind, may seem burdensome and laborious. Obscurity, indeed, is painful to the

mind as well as to the eye; but to bring light from obscurity, by whatever labour, must needs be delightful and rejoicing."

- David Hume, AN INQUIRY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

### **HeRD #822 - The Seeds of Westminster**

The colonial experience sensitized later Americans, at least to a degree, to the need for indigenization. The physical environment was different. Politics played out differently. Ethnic groups distant from each other in Europe were thrown together into a disconcerting mix of languages, religious expressions, and cultural styles. The Rev. Andrew Taggart McGill, professor at Princeton Theological Seminary from the 1850s, felt that the Presbyterian Church was a particularly excellent model of American indigenization. In an extended article on colonial Presbyterianism, he noted that the Presbyterians never had their own colony; this, he claimed, was an act of providence that meant Presbyterianism, "...should be indigenous upon American soil, and show here as nowhere else its innate and incomparable force of organization; that no ready-made consolidation should be imported here, with transplanted shape or exotic tradition, to find its genesis in accidents of European history for all time to come." He went on to state, "The seeds of Westminster, wafted hither, as their field is the world, must come like the thistledown, detached from one another and floating individually, as if borne to be dispersed, and growing ripe only to be scattered abroad by every wind that blows." (McGill, "American Presbyterianism," p. 11. In A SHORT HISTORY OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM)

Historically, American Presbyterian missionaries in Thailand showed only a limited sense of concern for indigenization until after World War II. McGill's comments, however, offer the tantalizing possibility that some conservative American Presbyterians were aware of the significance of indigenization much, much earlier than that. We'll follow up on this thought in the next two HeRDs.

### **HeRD #823 - The One True Type**

Andrew Taggart McGill, as reported in HeRD #822, held that colonial American Presbyterianism was a truly indigenous church. It's curious, however, his account of the founding of colonial Presbyterianism stresses continuity with its European origins. He writes of the Rev. Francis Makemie, the founder of the first presbytery in North America, that, "His errand was to plant what he already knew and believed in." (McGill, "American Presbyterianism," p. 14). At the first meeting of the presbytery in 1706, meeting at Freehold, New Jersey, "the record shows that everything proceeded with the same order and the same transaction and the same parlance of the minute as if the Presbytery of Laggan itself had been transported bodily to Freehold." The Presbytery of Laggan was located in northern Ireland, meaning that it was built after the Scottish model. McGill goes on to comment, "To say, therefore, that American Presbyterianism is 'its own type,' different from the system everywhere else, must be either untrue in the light of our authentic annals or a mere truism in historical averment, as much as to say that French and Genevan and Holland and English and Scotch and Irish Presbyterianism is each its own type. There is but one type of what is divinely true, since the Archetype ascended to 'give' a pattern from 'the mount.' And if there be anything peculiar in calling this American, it must be the perfect freedom with which it works of here everything that shaped or constrained it elsewhere by 'the commandments of men.'" (p. 15.)

When McGill claimed that American Presbyterianism is "indigenous" to Britain's North American colonies, we have to understand what he meant. He meant that it was European in origin, the only difference being that it was closer to the true church instituted by Jesus. It was

"free," an important word in McGill's American vocabulary; free that is from human constraints put on it by those same Europeans. Or, again, it was the Scottish kirk made perfect. Most of us will wince at the nationalistic and denominational arrogance implied in McGill's statements. The point here, however, is that his view of indigenization was quite different from a late 20th century understanding. It was entirely conservative and strikingly Eurocentric in spite of its patriotic overlay. It equated its European origins with the archetypal church, claiming only to have taken its origins closer to perfection.

I'd like to pursue McGill's understanding of indigenization in one more HeRD. There are links, possibly, to Thailand in it.

### **HeRD #824 - Relocating the One True Type**

HeRDs #822 and 823 introduced Andrew Taggart McGill's 19th-century conception of indigenization. McGill claimed that colonial American Presbyterianism was a thoroughly "indigenous" faith; it was uniquely adapted to the needs of Britain's North American colonies. By that, he meant that the colonials perfected European models of the church, perfectly adapting them to virtually any social and cultural context. McGill's logic ran as follows. 1. There is only one true Archetype of the Church 2. That Archetype is Calvinist and Presbyterian. 3. European and British Calvinists inherited that Archetype. 3. European and British Calvinist immigrants to the colonies took it with them. 4. In the colonies, they perfected it in the new American environment. 5. The reason Presbyterian Calvinism is so entirely adapted and fitting to the American environment is because it has been perfected. It is the best possible earthly rendition of the heavenly Model.

What does this have to do with northern Thailand? First, indirectly, McGill was an influential voice in the Presbyterian Church who reflected in an uncreative way the beliefs and attitudes of his church. His writings contain no flights of fancy or deeply creative insights that cut across the grain of what American Presbyterians took to be the Gospel. Second, he taught at Princeton Seminary, and among his students were Jonathan Wilson and Daniel McGilvary. There's no way of knowing whether he taught them his views on indigenization, or that they remembered his lessons even if he did. Yet, what they actually did here suggests that it's reasonable to assume that Wilson and McGilvary acquired his understanding of indigenization. They shared, that is, a general 19th-century Presbyterian view of what it meant to export Christianity to "heathen" peoples. That view meant sharing the model of the church perfected in America with those peoples. There was no need for further indigenization, for that model was already thoroughly "indigenized," that is perfected to meet the needs of all peoples in all ages. Indeed, the church had to be protected from the northern Thai environment because it tended to introduce impurities that weakened the American, perfected model. The rest, as they say, is history.

### **HeRD #825 - Momentous Year**

1828 was a momentous year in the history of Protestant missions in Thailand for at least three reasons. First, of course, it was the year in which the first two Protestant missionaries, Gutzlaff and Tomlin, arrived in Bangkok. Second, and a little less obvious, Daniel McGilvary was born in North Carolina. Least obvious of all, but of no little consequence to missions in Thailand, 1828 was the year that Charles Hodge returned to Princeton Seminary to resume his teaching duties after two years of study in Germany.

Why emphasize Hodge and his return from Germany? Just as the Presbyterians by the 1860s had become the key Protestant mission in Thailand, so Hodge had become the premier Old

School Presbyterian and Calvinist theologian in America. He was the dominant voice of the predominant theology of the Presbyterian Church USA. It was his theology and that of his colleagues at Princeton Seminary that was preached in Presbyterian pulpits, taught in Presbyterian schools and seminaries, and meditated upon in numerous Presbyterian homes. It was the theology that the Presbyterians brought with them to Thailand. Hodge's two years in Germany provided him with greater depth and maturity as a theologian without having the least impact on the central themes of his theology. Both points are important. The trip added to his prestige and capacity to shape the theology of others. His own theology didn't change. While the date of his return to the States isn't like to be found in future general histories of missions in Thailand, that event had a lasting impact on Presbyterian missions in Thailand of no little importance.

### **HeRD #826 - Superiority**

D. H. Meyer's introduction to his book, *THE INSTRUCTED CONSCIENCE*, contains a particularly apt insight into the historian's relationship to the past. Meyer is discussing the fact that 19th century Americans, as a nation, sometimes failed to live up to their national ideals and sometimes were idealistic to a fault. He concludes (p. ix), "Such irony as this invites compassion as well as criticism: for we are superior to it only in retrospect."

Three thoughts. First, we ARE in fact superior to the people of the past in the sense we know more now than they did then. We have access to incredible informational resources. In Thai church history, for example, we have far, far more resources to work with than were available when the McFarlands put together the *HISTORICAL SKETCH OF PROTESTANT MISSIONS* in 1928 even though we are 72 years more distant from the events that book records. We can, furthermore, critically evaluate the actions of people in the past because we know the consequences of their actions. Hindsight is more sure and secure than foresight. Second, we have an obligation to use our superior knowledge to the benefit of our own age. Those who whine that historians don't have a right to criticize the people of the past are worse than fools. We are the victims of thousands of years of human stupidity, ignorance, evil, violence, and barbarism; and if we are to find liberation from our past it can come only through a careful, critical, and clear-headed evaluation of it. We are also the beneficiaries of the wisdom of the past. We are equally obligated to rediscover the roots of such wisdom. Third, Meyer, unfortunately, is entirely correct that the ONLY way in which we are superior to the past is "in retrospect." We can all shudder to think about how future historians will treat us and our century and only pray that our children's children will be superior to us in more than just retrospect.

### **HeRD #827 - Indigenization & Secularization**

Meyer, in *THE INSTRUCTED CONSCIENCE*, notes that those pious, evangelical American Protestants involved in articulating a system of ethics in the years before the Civil War did so in ways that were really quite secular. They tried to show how moral behavior is part of the very design of nature. If we act virtuously, we will be happy because that is our nature. While its true that they attributed that design to God, their views moved human nature and concerns to the center of ethics. Meyer sees this as a secularization of ethics and observes (p. 102), "As society becomes more secular, even the man of rectitude and piety-if he is to be heard and understood-must speak in the idiom of secularity."

The Laos Mission was founded in 1867. It's pioneers and leaders were people raised and educated in those years before the Civil War. They took the courses on "moral philosophy" in college and seminary that inculcated the ethical system described by Meyer. They brought that system with them to northern Thailand, and they clearly sought to teach it, in turn, to northern

Thais--particularly northern Thai Christians. What were the consequences? One can answer that question in a number of ways.

On the one hand, it may well be that their ethical views were largely irrelevant to the northern Thai situation. Missionary ethics was nurtured in a very different cultural setting, and it's possible that it was just as irrelevant to the northern Thai setting as was much of the rest of the missionary message. Yet, from the 1860s onwards northern Thailand, too, experienced the forces of secularization. Perhaps missionary ethics had more to say to the people of the North than might seem likely at first glance. Indeed, the idea that virtue is its own reward sounds tantalizingly like the Thai truism that states, "Doing good gets you good. Doing evil gets you evil." It's also possible that missionary secularized ethics actually contributed to the secularization of ethics in northern Thailand. It would be an interesting historical study to see how clearly missionary ethics were taught in the mission's schools and churches and to speculate as to how those ethics might have been received by students and church members.

### **HeRD #828 - Exploiting the Compatible**

Michael Coleman, in his book *PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONARY ATTITUDES TOWARD AMERICAN INDIANS* (p. 82), observes that there were a number of parallels between Native American and white American cultures. He writes, "Yet, ironically, in terms of religion Presbyterians and Indians shared far more than the former would ever have been willing to admit." He then observes, "Had the missionaries been less sweepingly judgmental, they might have exploited such compatible characteristics." And, "But BFM missionaries in the nineteenth century could rarely escape their rigid assumptions to investigate such tactically useful 'common denominators,' or even to provide informative ethnography."

In light of recent HeRDs, there's little need to comment here, other than to note once again that the Presbyterian missionaries who came to Thailand brought with them both strengths and weaknesses inherited from their own cultural context. Among their weaknesses was a massive, deadening ethnocentrism that sorely crippled their ability to shape the church into a force for good in Thailand--and in many other places as well.

### **HeRD #829 - Doctrines Pure & Simple**

In his book on 19th-century Presbyterian missions to Native Americans, Coleman writes, "An absolute Protestantism demanded absolute rejection of Indian heathenism, in its deepest assumptions and in its most seemingly trivial practices. The missionaries rejected any kind of syncretism, or even any expression of Christian truths through Indian cultural forms. In 1838 the General Assembly of the PCUSA instructed its missionaries to communicate the 'PURE AND SIMPLE DOCTRINES' of the Gospel. They were not for a moment to admit the thought 'of accommodating the doctrines of the Gospel to the corrupt tastes' of their hearers or to their 'proud claims and...voluptuous habits.'" (Coleman, *PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONARY ATTITUDES*, 86.)

### **HeRD #830 - Grace and Culture**

It is sometimes supposed that nineteenth-century missionaries had a naive understanding of culture. Coleman, in his *PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONARY ATTITUDES TOWARD AMERICAN INDIANS* (pp. 172-74), indicates that the matter was rather more complicated than that. He writes, "Although the missionaries did not use the term culture in the modern anthropological sense, then, they were certainly alive to the many interwoven ties binding men and women to the ways of their people." He goes on to observe, "Despite this intuitive awareness

of the interrelatedness of cultural traits, and of the power of social conditioning, the missionaries possessed a fundamentally simplistic understanding of the extraordinarily complex relationship between a human being and the culture that gives him or her identity." By this he means that the missionaries to the Indians had an "unquestioned belief" in the power of the Gospel to transform individuals, even to the point of totally changing their cultures. The Individual is distinct from Culture. Coleman states, "Each heathen, then, could be cleanly extricated from his or her corrupting environment, almost like a nut from its shell." The missionaries literally looked on heathen culture as if it were a trap, a pit, a prison that imprisoned the heathens; but "...just as a person can be cleanly extricated from a pit in the ground, so could an Indian be cleanly lifted from the pit of heathenism." Coleman concludes that nineteenth-century Presbyterian missionaries weren't naive in their understanding of culture, but they were simplistic in their expectation that converts could be totally changed right down to and including their culture heritage.

Theological presuppositions are powerful historical factors. We act on our beliefs in ways that may be entirely inappropriate and even counter-productive. There is a natural tendency to confuse what we BELIEVE to be real with reality itself, and those very beliefs keep us from testing and correcting the dogmatic mistakes we make. All of us who take faith seriously, of whatever theological persuasion, are prone to this fundamental mistake--not just Presbyterian missionaries of the last century.

### **HeRD #831 - Princeton & the Karen**

Traditional Karen theology, as we saw last year, teaches that Yua (God) is the beneficent Creator of the universe who has since abandoned the world to its chaotic state of rebellion. Before leaving the world, however, Yua designated certain other spiritual powers to rule over and protect humanity in his stead so that humanity wouldn't be left in chaos. On first blush, such a belief seems to fly in the face of Christian doctrines, particularly concerning the providential role of God in human affairs. Consider, however, the following quotation by Archibald Alexander, the first professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. In a book entitled A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE EVIDENCES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION (1829), he wrote, "Now, that the righteous Governor of the universe may leave men to follow their own inventions, and suffer by their own folly, is certain, for he has done so, but is it not inconsistent with his wisdom and goodness to use extraordinary means to rescue them from a state so degraded and wretched." (p. 46). The methods that Alexander is referring to is the establishment of the covenant of grace by which Reformed theology meant the saving work of Jesus Christ. By that covenant, so the theory goes, God elects some for life and leaves some to their well-deserved fate of damnation.

Traditional Karen thought and the so-called Princeton Theology of Alexander, thus, are interestingly parallel in their view of the divine relationship to humanity. Both see God as abandoning humanity. Both also see Yua making provision for humanity's continued well-being. The Karen tribal view, however, has Yua acting more benevolently, in that he makes provision for the well-being of all the Karen; while the Presbyterian tribal God predestines only some to salvation, abandoning the rest of humanity to damnation. It should be added that Alexander's colleague and theological heir, Dr. Charles Hodge, believed that the great majority of humanity would eventually be saved. Still, Yua somehow seems more humane, if one can use that term with God. What is striking, in any event, is that the mythic and supposedly more primitive traditional theology of the Karen deals with key themes and issues in a way similar to yet distinct from a complex, highly-developed Western Protestant theological tradition.

### **HeRD #832 - Minds Open & Shut**

One has the image from 19th-century Thailand missionary literature and correspondence of a group of people who came to Thailand with their minds firmly and permanently shut, made up, and closed. While there's a lot of truth to that image, the reality behind it is more complex than we might imagine. One of the progenitors of Presbyterian missionary theology, Archibald Alexander of Princeton Seminary, provides an important case in point. In the early 19th century, his native Virginia was a hot bed of Baptist frontier piety; and for a period of time he found Baptist arguments against infant baptism persuasive to the point that he himself refused to baptize infants for a time. His biographer writes, "This question about baptism was for these few years a very pressing personal problem for Alexander, and served as an important stimulus to his critical thinking and to his biblical and historical studies. Although he thus finally returned to his inherited view regarding baptism, he had shown notable open-mindedness and readiness to give the most serious consideration to a quite different view." (Loetscher, *FACING THE ENLIGHTENMENT*, p. 64)

The fact is that nineteenth-century conservative Presbyterian thought wasn't a neat, all-tied-up-in-string bundle even if it sometimes gives that appearance. It involved a number of tendencies and ways of thinking that don't always fit so neatly under the rubric "conservative." It appears, however, that if Alexander is an example Presbyterian actions and behavior tended to be more consistently conservative than their thought was at times. That's particularly true on the mission field.

### **HeRD #833 - And Other Sanitary Laws**

In a twelve page tract, undated, entitled "How is the Sabbath to be Sanctified?", Charles Hodge argued that the Sabbath is a day of rest adapted by God to the nature of his creatures, domestic animals as well as humans. God knows that uninterrupted work is destructive. Hodge stated, "This fact, assumed in Scripture, is sustained by observation. Scientific observers and common experience, unite in teaching that those who refuse to rest one day in seven from either bodily or intellectual labor, soon wear themselves out. The law of the Sabbath being thus founded in our physical constitution, its observance is necessary for the health and physical well-being of society. It is on this ground that some men vindicate the right of the State to enforce its outward observance, as it enacts other sanitary laws."

This quotation reveals some of the basic tenets of the nineteenth-century Presbyterian "Princeton Theology," of which Hodge was a chief spokesman. First, drawing on Scottish Enlightenment philosophy, the Princetonians believed that we can know God not only through Scripture but also by scientific observation of the divinely created order. They also believed that we can know God by looking inward at ourselves, since humanity is created in God's image. Second, drawing on their Calvinism, the Princetonians believed that the American nation had a covenant relationship with God. It was the new Israel. (This idea goes back to English and Scottish Calvinists, each holding the same idea about their respective nations). As such, the nation was obligated to keep God's law, and it was the duty of believing Christians to see that it did. The alternative was to suffer the consequences of God's wrath.

This belief in the Sabbath had momentous consequences for the Laos Mission. In 1869, the mission insisted that its converts refuse to work for their patrons on Sundays, in spite of the fact that patrons had a legal right to demand labor at any time. One of the key reasons Chao Kawilorot moved to suppress Christianity was this threat to the political and social order of his nation. His bloody persecution changed the very course of the church in northern Thailand down to the present.

### **HeRD #834 - The Wrong Calvinist Recipe**

McGrath, in his biography of John Calvin (p. 219) makes the following observation, "The strongly affirmative attitude which under girds the Calvinist outlook on life is perennially vulnerable; the delicate balance between church and world can too easily be disturbed, leading to their radical separation on the one hand, or--and herein the greater danger was perceived to lie--their coalescing on the other. For latent within Calvinism is a purely profane approach to life, in that the failure to maintain a proper dialectic between God and the world leads to the collapse of the divine into the secular."

However we look at the matter, nineteenth and early twentieth-century American Calvinism has had a profound impact on all of Thai Protestantism, and McGrath's comment touches on one important implication of that impact. While overtly hostile to most of Thai culture, it still "engaged" the culture through a variety of modernizing activities and through close contacts with rulers and royalty. Covertly, it actually opened the church's doors to a great deal of unobserved cultural forms and religious norms. My sense is that in some ways it took the worst of two worlds. On the one hand, it acted like an exclusive sect group that most Thais found too alien to be of interest; while, on the other hand, it actually became a "culture religion" that by the 1920s and 1930s had lost much of the dynamic of the Christian faith. The emergence of revivalism in the 1920s and Pentecostalism in the 1950s were both reactions to the latter fact. In other words, Calvinism in Thailand showed both of the latent tendencies of its European heritage--it both denied and affirmed the world--but in a combination that worked against it rather than for it.

### **HeRD #835 - You Are There!**

The Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA) held a major conference/workshop in Chiang Mai from January 10th to the 18th. It included over 40 participants from South, Southeast, and East Asia as well as two New Zealanders and an odd Yank or two. In the next few HeRDs, I'd like to share with you some of the things I heard & observed beginning with Kosuke Koyama's keynote address. Acharn Ko, as he's known in Thailand, shared with the conference a theology of "You are there!" by which he sought to affirm God's presence in all of Creation. Here is what he wrote:

"I go to Asia, 'you are there!' I go to Africa, to the Americas, to Europe, 'you are there!' I visit the New York Harlem Children's Hospital's AIDS ward. Among these suffering little ones, 'you are there!' I go to the Sing Sing Prison north of New York City along the Hudson River, 'you are there!' I sit in the National Mosque in Kuala Lumpur among Muslims, 'you are there!' I sit among the faithful in the Royal Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok, 'you are there!' I visit the graveyard inside the 'township' in South Africa to say my prayer for the little children whose lives were snatched away by the evil apartheid policy, 'you are there!' I go to a Tokyo maternity hospital to say a word of joy to a woman who just became a mother, 'you are there!' Even in the Nazi Auschwitz camp 'you are there!' says the survivor Elie Wiesel (NIGHT). In astronomy 'one light year' means the distance of 6 trillion miles. You are the creator of the universe of many billion light-years. But at the same time you 'formed my inward parts, you knit me together in my mother's womb' (Ps. 139:13). What an awesome surprise!"

Some reactions in our next HeRD.

### **HeRD #836 - The Fullness There Of**

Dr. Koyama's Theology of "You Are There!" provoked some interesting reactions, particularly his affirmation that God was in Aushwitz and similar places of intense human suffering. Some participants argued that IF God was in Aushwitz, God was there only for those

being gassed and emphatically NOT for those doing the gassing. IF God was present at the dropping of the Bomb over Hiroshima, God was there only for those killed. God was emphatically NOT with the crew of the plane.

Dr. Ko himself and other participants begged to differ. God is the God of the killer as well as of the killed. Whether they acknowledged God's presence or not, God WAS with the prison guards at Aushwitz and WAS with the crew of the bomber over Japan. My own sense from the discussion I heard is that God is intensely present in situations of human pain and we can't separate the divine You Are There!-ness of God from every person involved in the pain. Jesus was God With Us just as much for those who resisted him as those who accepted him. He was just as much with Peter in Peter's denial as in Peter's affirmation. Dr. Ko's address, I think, gave new and richer meaning to the biblical statement that the Earth is the Lord's "and the fullness thereof." The fullness includes a lot of hurt.

### **HeRD #837 - God And Space**

In his keynote address to the PTCA conference meeting in Chiang Mai in January, Dr. Koyama introduced the idea of a "spacious God." He said, "I am attracted to the image of the SPACIOUS GOD. The spacious God is the eternal God, and vice versa. God is eternally spacious, spaciously eternal. There can be no conflict between God's spaciousness and eternity. This is the God of holy Sabbath. This is the God no technical civilization can control. The spaciousness of God makes us dance. It inspires us to freedom. It revives our spirit. It is harmonious with the image of the creator of the vast and ever expanding universe who is concerned about the quality of life of the deaf and the blind. God who makes the gift of space is a spacious God. The space of God is not empty, but 'full of grace and truth'. God is abundant in time and space. But we are not familiar with 'the spacious God.' This is an unfamiliar way of naming God. The term does not appear in the Christian liturgy."

He went on to state, "Since the Second World War the image of the spacious God has been implicit in the theologies of the minority people, though they may not be aware of it. Minority theologians have felt that the image of an eternal God has been misused to suggest a status quo God who is more interested in institutional religious stability than in the dynamic movement of the spirit of God in history. The image of the status quo God conflicts with the revolutionary biblical view that all land belongs to God."

Some reactions in our next HeRD.

### **HeRD #838 - Limiting God**

In HeRD #837, we heard Dr. Koyama introduce the idea of God as spacious. One of the participants in the PTCA conference objected strongly and repeatedly that he couldn't accept this image at all. To speak of God as "spacious," he argued, is fundamentally different from saying that God is eternal. The eternal God is outside of time and space. The spacious God isn't. God can't be understood in categories that place God within the limits of God's creation.

Ach. Ko was gentle but firm in his response that he was using the idea of the spacious God to modify our understanding of the eternal God. IF God "is there" then God must appear in some sense within space and time. Space also belongs to God, and our human experience of space is so important, so fundamental to us that it's necessary for us to acknowledge God's sovereign Lordship over space.

As I listened to this exchange, I felt Dr. Koyama struggling to make our Christian understanding of God the Incarnate One as concrete as possible. And in that exchange, we Christians walked up to the core paradox of our faith. We claim, beyond all reason, that God became a man. God took the risk of becoming spacious, of stepping out of eternity and into space and time. It seemed that Ach. Ko's inquisitor was stating yet again the most pernicious heresy found among Christians, namely the effective denial of the reality of God's being in Jesus. Christians constantly seek to keep Jesus so entirely holy as to deny the paradox of Incarnation. The heresy is called "docetism," the denial that Jesus could have REALLY been fully human. The early church fought this thing out and came to the decision that if Jesus wasn't fully human we Christians have no Good News to live by or share with the world. I found Koyama's conception of God as spacious a compelling restatement of God's relationship of risk with Creation.

### **HeRD #839 - Who Is An Asian?**

"Peoples who speak any Asian language are Asians. This is a language-centered definition of Asian. People who speak Chinese are Asians, since Chinese is one of the Asian languages. If your mother tongue is German, you are European. This suggestion reflects the centrality of language in human life. The difference between Asian and European is linguistic, not by physical characteristics. ...This definition suggests the possibility that a person can be both Asian and European if the person is competent in two languages, Asian and European." In sum, "One's identity derives not from blood but from the use of language, not from the color of skin, but from rootedness in a given culture."

- Kosuke Koyama, January 2000

### **HeRD #840 - The Anglicization of Asian Theology**

In his key note address to the January 2000 PTCA conference in Chiang Mai, Dr. Kosuke Koyama stated, "'Theology in Asia' is a theology ENGAGED IN ASIAN LANGUAGES, just as 'theology in Europe' is engaged in any of the European languages. Thus, 'Theology in Asia' means 'theology expressed and communicated in Asian language.' Such theology can be engaged inside and outside of geographical Asia. A Chinese-speaking theologian in New York can work on 'theology in Asia.' Theology can transcend geography."

This comment met with more resistance than might have been expected from a conference of those "doing theology in Asia." One key point of resistance was that the conference itself was being conducted in a European language, English. All of the papers presented to the conference were written and given in English. Did that mean, some asked, that the conference was NOT "doing theology in Asia"? Did Koyama mean to say that all of the books and articles on Asian theology written in Western languages were NOT "doing theology in Asia"? Ach. Ko's response was a fairly general statement that English was obviously necessary to cross-cultural discussions among those doing theology in Asia.

Listening to the discussions and papers after that, I observed that, first, it was clear that most of the participants in this conference were struggling, at one level or another, with having to translate their thoughts into English. Some kept referring back to key words in their own tongue. That is to say, that while we were speaking English the ideas we were working through generally did not originate with English. Second, it seemed to me that as the participants hacked away at English they were to a degree actually claiming the language as their own. That is, they were making of it an Asian language. Koyama himself, more than anyone else, practices the art of "Asianizing" the English language, as those who have read his writings can testify. The key,

in sum, is in Koyama's emphasis that Asian theology must be ENGAGED in Asian languages. The PTCA conference, although conducted in English, was most assuredly so engaged.

### **HeRD #841 - Asian Theology**

In his keynote address to the PTCA conference meeting in Chiang Mai in January, Dr. Koyama insisted that the phrase "doing theology in Asia" should replace "Asian theology." He reasoned that the term, "Theology in Asia" shows respect to a continent containing many different peoples with a variety of religions and cultural characteristics. It affirms that the primary context for theology is where people are. Dr. Ko was taken at his word and the conference as a rule followed his sage counsel.

Still, on further reflection, I would argue that using his phrase in place of the more common "Asian theology" is a case of throwing the baby out with the bath water. There's a lot of theology "done" in Thailand, for example, that is a far cry from what Ach. Ko would consider as legitimate within the Asian context. A great deal of the overt theology "done" in Thailand is more Western than Thai, even when being "done" by Thais. What Dr. Koyama intends apparently is to use a phrase that captures the idea of theology that is done within and is RESPONSIVE to Asian contexts. His phrase doesn't overtly capture that sense any more (or less) than does the more standard "Asian theology." The implication in either is usually clear to those who are concerned with contextualizing theology in Asia.

A final quibble. Ach. Ko also contended that a Chinese resident of New York City could still do "theology in Asia" so long as she is engaged with the Chinese language. He said that "in Asia" should be seen as implying much more than strict geographical location. For him Asia is "located" in Asian languages more than in Asian territory. Within the confines of his address, that's fine; but for those who don't share his understanding or never even heard of it, the phrase "doing theology in Asia" clearly suggests that it is theology done in the actual geographical region known as Asia. Perhaps his phrase could be amended to read, "doing theology in Asian languages," but that introduces other problems and issues. In the end, I think, the more general term "Asian theology" is as clear and useful as any other we might come up with.

### **HeRD #842 - A Tribal Advantage**

The theme of the Programme for Theology & Cultures in Asia conference in Chiang Mai 10-18 January 2000, was "Doing Theology with Creation in Asian Cultures." This theme, as it turned out, exposed a clear division among the participants, between those representing tribal cultures and those representing "national" cultures. By "national cultures," I mean the politically central, powerful, and officially maintained cultures of each nation. They are the capitol city cultures, such as Bangkok Central Thai culture in Thailand. The Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese, among others, struggled mightily to find, let alone treat theologically, stories of creation. They had to go back hundreds of years to find those stories, stories that seemed quite irrelevant to their contemporary cultures. Their analyses were, frankly, strained. The Naga (India), Mizo (India), Sumanese (Indonesia), Bagobo (Philippines), Karen, Maori, and other tribal participants, however, spoke easily and naturally about myths of creation. The stories they told were fresh and full of symbolism that added texture and insights to our understanding of the Genesis stories. In the context of this conference, it seemed to me that the tribal voices spoke in tones that were closer to the "heart" of Asia. They were more authentically Asian, if you will. Or, perhaps, they better represented the old Asia and its rich religious heritage.

This was a learning experience for me personally, to be made aware for the first

time of the diversity and the unity of tribal cultures in Asia. The conference also made me aware of the fact that there are many, many other cultures that share the rich mythic and theological heritage of the Karen in northern Thailand and Burma. That was exciting! On the other hand, it was worrisome to learn that virtually all of the tribal cultures represented were struggling to maintain themselves under massive pressure from the national culture as well as global cultures. In some cases, the tribal participants were more fluent in the national language than they were in their own tribal mother tongue. I felt even more keenly the fact that the nationalization and globalization of cultures is impoverishing our planet culturally in precisely the same way that the destruction of global environments is destroying species after species of plant and animal life.

It was particularly striking to discover that the tribal stories of creation also shared a number of significant themes. I'd like to share some of those themes with you in our next HeRD.

### **HeRD #843 - Sumbanese-Karen Parallels**

One of the participants in the PTCA conference in Chiang Mai is from the Indonesian island of Sumba, and her paper on Sumbanese creation stories contained a number of striking parallels to Karen stories of creation. In both, for example, the primordial chaos existed before God as some form of substance, which is to say that the divine Creator was not pre-existent in either case. Furthermore, God involved others beings, including certain animals, in the process of creation. These beings had important roles in creation, suggesting that creation was a communal effort under the direction of God. The Creator was close to creation and carried out the action of creation in community. In this context, humanity was also created as a part of the creation-community, rather than as the culminating pinnacle of creation. Finally, the created order includes many other spiritual powers, aside from the Creator God; and these spiritual or divine powers interact closely with mundane reality. It was clear from both presentations, that traditional tribal views on the created order, whether on the Island of Sumba or in the Karen Hills, encouraged tribal people to hold a gentler view of the natural world than does modern, global society.

Several of these parallels between the Sumbanese and Karen theologies of creation appeared in the presentations made by other tribal people, notably those from northeastern India. Although widely scattered across Asia, there was a certain unity of thought and expression to the tribal stories of creation--a unity that seemed to take us close, as I said in our last HeRD, to the heart of Asian spirituality. Tribal theologies offer an incredibly rich, valuable tool for doing theology in Asian contexts.

### **HeRD #844 - A Question of Method**

The Programme for Theology & Cultures in Asia has what amounts to an official theological method, called "bi-textual criticism." That method purports to bring the biblical text into dialogue with Asian cultural "texts". Each is to inform and critique the other so that Asian theologies are at one and the same time truly Christian and truly Asian. It sounds good. The trouble is, almost no one seems to be able to do it. Not one of the papers presented to the PTCA conference in Chiang Mai engaged in cross-textual dialogue, the usual form of the papers being one section on Asian stories of creation, one section on the Bible (usually Genesis), and a brief conclusion. One of the chief proponents of the bi-textual approach said privately and publicly, "We're not really doing theology here at all." What he meant was that the conference participants weren't employing bi-textual criticism.

One paper, by a Malaysian Chinese participant, raised this very point. It urged that Asian theology can't rest on just one method. He proposed, as one alternative among others, a thematic approach in which theologians study key "patterns of thought" in their own culture and compare them to biblical ones. This is still a dialogical approach, but it transfers attention from individual texts to concepts and ideas. What's interesting, however, is that in his own paper, this participant still didn't bring biblical and Chinese patterns of thought into clear dialogue. In theory, dialogical methods offer great hope for creating Asian theologies. In practice, most Asian church leaders and theological educators find such methods difficult to use.

### **HeRD #845 - Two Hot Issues**

The participants in the PTCA's January 2000 seminar held in Chiang Mai seriously disagreed over two issues. First, they disagreed concerning the nature of the Bible; and so far as I could tell their disagreements were typically Protestant rather than uniquely Asian. One or two voices stood in defense of Protestant orthodoxy, affirming the entire holiness and factual truthfulness of Scripture. Some others tended toward this position, arguing that Asian Christians have only one truly authoritative voice for theological reflection, the Bible. Others sought to make indigenous sources of equal value, or nearly equal value, to the Bible. They urged a both-and rather than an either-or approach.

The second issue that produced serious disagreement was the role of the missionary past in the life of contemporary Asian Christianity. While all acknowledged that there had been problems, not a few argued that on the whole the missionary heritage is a good one. As one person put it in responding to criticisms of the missionaries, "If they were so bad, how come you're a Christian?" His question is a pertinent one. If the missionary past was so bad, why have millions of Asian families in virtually every country in Asia decided to convert to missionary Christianity? One participant observed, on the other hand, that the key issue concerning that past was not so much the issue of conversion as it was what happened in missionary-dominated churches AFTER conversion.

The positions taken on these two issues by those participants who expressed an opinion were generally rigid. No consensus was reached, and it was difficult to discern a general "sense" of the conference, although it seemed that the majority of participants shied away from orthodox biblicism and tended to be less critical of their missionary heritage. If there is a lesson here, it's probably the obvious one: Asian theology, even when done consciously, takes many shape, conservative as well as liberal, ideological as well as dialogical.

### **HeRD #846 - And One Non-Issue**

While the PTCA conference in Chiang Mai debated a number of issues, the role of feminist theology was the one glaring, unexpected non-issue. The 40-some participants included several articulate feminists who on a number of occasions introduced a "feminist critique" of theological issues being discussed. Almost without exception, their comments led nowhere; and as the conference proceeded, their voices grew quieter and quieter. When the feminist theologians spoke, no one ever took them to issue and seldom pursued the implications of their comments. This is not to say that women's voices weren't heard in the conference. They participated most effectively, however, as individuals who happen to be women, rather than as feminists. One of the key participants is a Filipina who holds clear feminist concerns and yet almost never identified her views as those of a feminist. Still, there was a clear reluctance to engage feminists in dialogue. Some of the males present seemed to me to be clearly sexist in their attitudes, but most seemed sensitive to being inclusive of women; and the majority of women participating in the conference also failed to follow up on issues introduced from a

feminist perspective. The live and let-live attitude when it came to feminist theology was palpable.

It was clear that the vocal feminists, without exception, were Japanese and Korean women. None of the women from South or Southeast Asia spoke from an overt feminist stance. Northern Thai women generally show little interest in women's issue as such, evidently because their societies are less poisonously sexist than are the Confucianist cultures of northeastern Asia. That may be the case more generally, and, if so, one reason for the apparent irrelevance of feminism in this conference may well have to do with the diversity of Asian cultures and in women's experiences in those cultures. There did seem to be significant differences generally between the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean participants on the one hand and those from South and Southeast Asia on the other.

### **HeRD #847 - Thai Theology: Jesus as King**

The Thai church has over the years quietly engaged in the contextualization of Christian theology, doing it so covertly as to have gone generally unnoticed. I'd like to share two examples that I've heard recently. The first comes from a CCT meeting I attended a couple of months ago. The CCT is in the process of implementing a new structure, and during this meeting one speaker outlined the way he felt the new structure should work. Speaking of those employed in the various central agencies of the church, he argued that their job, now, is to get out and support the work of the local churches. The local churches are languishing, neglected, and lacking in effective leadership. It was the task of those employed in the central agencies to visit the churches, encourage them, and give them new ideas and a new vision. They have to take the role of the King of Thailand. The speaker presented an eloquent portrait of the King, who energizes the Thai nation by the kindly, caring way in which he visits his people. He is a people's king, a worthy model for the church's practice of ministry.

Whether or not CCT leaders would agree with the method proposed by this speaker, few would have taken exception to this clear, theological description of incarnation. By incarnation, Thai theology means the visits to his people made by a widely beloved royal figure of prestige and power. An old film clip widely shown on Thai TV has the king kneeling benevolently in front of an elderly woman who is bowed to the ground with an almost beatific smile on her upraised face. That, for Thai Christians, is an image of Jesus. Our speaker, an articulate, theologically trained clergyman used that image for his model of the practice of incarnational ministry. It's a model that is now irrelevant to the vast majority of nations and Christians in the world, but in Thailand it is still a potent, meaningful one.

### **HeRD #848 - Thai Theology: Jesus as Villager**

HeRD #847 reported on one Thai Christian image of Jesus, the Royal and Gracious King, based on the Thai experience of monarchy during the present reign. A sermon preached recently in a rural church near Chiang Mai presented quite a different portrayal of Jesus. Preaching from John 2, the story of the wedding at Cana, the preacher wormed his way past the problem of Jesus turning water into an alcoholic beverage to describe his understanding of Jesus' behavior at the wedding. Preaching in the cadence and with the distinctive lilt of the North, he portrayed Jesus as a good villager who participated in the life and festivals of his time. He was the High God, but he didn't hold himself apart from his neighbors, He showed unity with them. He was concerned with their well-being. The speaker went on to remind Christians that they should act just as Jesus did. They live in a mixed Buddhist-Christian village. As Christians they shouldn't hold themselves aloof from the village. They shouldn't absent themselves from community or even temple events.

The sermon dripped with the rich vocabulary of Thai values concerning communal unity, particularly the oft repeated statement that Jesus RUAM TUK RUAM SUK with his neighbors. He shared, that is, in their suffering and their joy. The fact that the wedding didn't take place in Nazareth or even in a neighboring community shouldn't be allowed to detract from the point, which was that Jesus provides a model for being a good villager in an interreligious setting.

I'd like to reflect on these two HeRDs in one more HeRD.

### **HeRD #849 - Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up**

On the face of it, Jesus the King (HeRD #847) and Jesus the Villager (HeRD #848) seem strikingly different. In the one, Jesus is a distant, powerful figure who lives in the Royal Center and comes into contact with local people only on occasion. According to the other, he is our neighbor who participates in our daily lives as one of us, even though he is also the Mighty King. My own sense is that the first Jesus is the one more commonly believed in by most Thai Christians while the second seems to be somewhat closer to the New Testament portraits of him. It is important to note, however, that both are viable THAI reconstructions of Jesus building on indigenous values and world views, thus suggesting the variety and range of possible Thai theologies.

It's also worth observing that neither the proponent of Jesus the King or of Jesus the Villager assume that Jesus in anyway stands over against Thai culture. This is a striking contrast to the majority of missionary theologies in Thailand which have long emphasized the alienation of culture from Jesus. On the one hand, this would seem hopeful; the Thai church is apparently beginning to more consciously craft a theology fit to its own cultural setting. Still, one can't help but feel somewhat uneasy about the apparent lack of realization that Jesus stands apart from culture as well as within it. The failure of missionary thought, collectively, has been to bring Jesus into Thai cultures; the potential failure of Thai theologies could well be the failure to see that Jesus still transcends and judges culture even as he stands within it. This is really a common failure, one that assumes Jesus must either stand outside of culture or fall under it; Either-Or thinking, we might call it. The New Testament presents a trickier portrait of Jesus that is Both-And: both in and apart from culture.

### **HeRD #850 - Daniel's Word to the Wise**

In an article in the May 1874 issue of the NORTH CAROLINA PRESBYTERIAN (p. 2), Daniel McGilvary urged his readers to support the work of a former colleague in Siam, the Rev. Stephen Mattoon, who was head of the Biddle Institute, a school dedicated to the "uplift" of the former slaves in the American South. The matter of such support was very much complicated both by Southern views on race and by the fact that the Biddle Institute was an institution run by the Northern Presbyterian Church. McGilvary, a Southerner, reasoned that Mattoon himself was a conservative individual who advocated no radical views on race.

McGilvary went on to observe of the "freedman" (former slaves) that, "They will either become intelligent citizens or they will be a sore in the body politic. If allowed to grow up in ignorance, they will have a reflex influence on the whites. We must pay the PRICE of their education in jails and penitentiaries, if not in schools and churches. Neither the church nor the country can afford to neglect the education and christianization of any portion of her population. If they do, providence will in some way work out a terrible retribution." The Ancients, he wrote, called this "fate," and the Siamese term it the law of merit and demerit. "We say it is providence. But there's the FACT. If we neglect to pull the thistles out of our neighbor's field they will spread into our own."

Make some allowance for the passage of 126 years, and that's not bad advice for our time as well. It's advice that may well be as pertinent in Western Europe, Australia, and many other places as it is for the United States. Not bad for a bold-as-brass Calvinist born in 1828!

## **HeRD #851 - Points of Convergence**

The University of Oregon sponsored a symposium on "God at 2000" that brought together a number of leading Jewish, Islamic, and Christian thinkers together to share their personal search for and understanding of God. The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR electronic edition report on the symposium included the following comments on one speaker: "Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian who was forced to leave his homeland when religious fundamentalists took power in 1979, is now a professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University in Washington, D. C. and one of the world's leading experts on Islam. 'All of my philosophical inquiry led back to what I knew as a child - that the face of God shines everywhere,' says Dr. Nasr. 'Whatever I have done in my life, the heart of it has been the quest for God.'"

They would have used different words, but most of the early members of the Laos Mission would have agreed that their lives, too, were a search for God. They believed firmly that divine providence guides everything that happens. They believed, equally as firmly, that God had called them to the mission field to carry out specific work. Thus, it was very important for them to discern how God was acting in their lives and in the events around them; and, again, it was equally as important for them to understand what God expected from them in their personal lives. Their letters and papers are littered with theological commentary describing their sense of God's loving, yet disciplining presence in their lives.

The members of the Laos Mission of the 1860s and 1870s would have rejected the possibility of similarities in their discernment of providence and an Islamic scholar's quest for God. In their later lives, however, it is possible that at least two of them, Daniel McGilvary and Edna Cole (who later moved to Bangkok), would have accepted that possibility. Their long years of service in God's name seems to have softened, gentled to a degree their views on the religious faith of their non-Christian neighbors.

## **HeRD #852 - A Mere Human**

In a book of sermons published in 1850 and entitled PRACTICAL SERMONS TO BE READ IN FAMILIES AND SOCIAL MEETINGS, the Rev. Dr. Archibald Alexander of Princeton Seminary opened a sermon on the person of Jesus by stating, "No greater difference of opinion can exist, than whether our Saviour is a mere man, or the mighty God. As we embrace the one or the other of these opinions, our whole system of doctrine will be modified. Accordingly, it is found, that all who deny the deity of Christ, reject all the fundamental truths of the Christian religion." (p. 91)

Alexander was one of the key exponents of the theology 19th-century Presbyterian missionaries brought with them to Thailand, and in that light his statement is worth careful consideration. It is particularly striking for its absolute dualism concerning Christ. Either one affirms Jesus' divinity or one sees him as a "mere man." In the earliest years of the church, in contrast, there was a whole range of views on Jesus. The vast majority of people who encountered him never thought of him as anything other than a "mere man." Some of those who became his disciples believed he was the Messiah, a man to be sure, but God's chosen as well. Still others saw in the Resurrection affirmation of the fact that Jesus was somehow associated with God in a unique way. He had, that is, divine attributes. Gradually, the view emerged that in a way difficult to comprehend he was both a man and God. Large numbers of those who called themselves his disciples, however, eventually rejected Jesus' humanity entirely. Traditionalist Jewish Christian churches never did accept his divinity at all, finding the idea that a man could be God entirely unacceptable.

Alexander is correct in linking one's view of Jesus to one's general theological orientation. Without charging him with heresy, however, his position is still troubling in a couple of ways. It seems to me that the paradox and the power of the Incarnation rests in the very fact that Jesus was a "mere man." This isn't just quibbling with words. Alexander seems so entirely bent on protecting Christ's divinity that he's in danger of losing touch with the humanness of Jesus. He, for example, never seems to have considered the proposition that all who deny the HUMANITY of Christ, reject all the fundamental truths of the Christian religion. This apparent imbalance in Presbyterian theological thought had consequences for missions in Thailand, something I'd like to touch on in our next HeRD.

### **HeRD #853 - Another Mere Man**

In HeRD #852, we saw that Archibald Alexander, a key figure in nineteenth-century Presbyterian theology, had an apparently imbalanced understanding of the divinity and humanity of Christ. He leaned way, way to the divine side. A survey of Presbyterian missionary literature in Thailand well into the twentieth century indicates that the missionaries reflected a similar understanding of Jesus, the Mighty One and the Great Physician of Souls. This view of Jesus had an evident impact on their view of Thai religion.

Mary Mattoon, writing in the FOREIGN MISSIONARY, 1853 (pp. 62ff), observed that Siam had wandered far from God, who gave her existence and "whose showers of love still descend upon her." She stated that all nations, families, individuals who don't abide in the ark of Christ under the sheltering wing of Jehovah lived in and were adrift in folly. They don't trust in the great I AM but make a "creature man" their god and bow down to images of him. Daniel McGilvary, writing in 1876, picks up on the same thought in his description of a Buddhist ceremony that wraps the Buddha images against the cold. The festival was, he urged, a contradiction. "It shows the inconsistent, incoherent, and contradictory notions that a false religion fosters." If "Buddh" is a god, McGilvary reasoned, how could he feel cold? "The poor helpless annihilated yet cold man-god, dependent on the bonfires of his followers for one morning's comfortable warmth! How can he therefore benefit much less save his sinful worshippers? This is the practical question that comes to us."

The contrast between the Christ and the Buddha was a powerful one in missionary thinking. It contributed to their understanding of Thai Buddhism, which they took to be the false worship of a "mere human." It meant that Buddhism was deluded and idolatrous. These views allowed them to dismiss the wisdom and teachings of the Buddha as being merely human, fine so far as they went which wasn't far enough. In a nation that reveres the Buddha, these frequently, openly expressed views created yet one more gulf between the missionaries and their auditors, for whom it was impossible to conceive of the Buddha as being Bad News.

### **HeRD #854 - A Parting Thought on Mere Man-ism**

Some years ago I shared quotations like those that appear in HeRD #853 in a meeting of Thai Christians. Afterwards, one woman approached me, considerably upset. It turns out that she was a convert of some years and could not accept the demeaning attitudes she had heard about her former religion. She told me something of her story, the details of which, I'm sorry to say, are gone from my memory. What I do remember is her strong sense of respect for Buddhism. Whatever her reasons for conversion were, rejection of the Buddha and his teachings weren't among them. My sense from missionary literature and discussions with modern-day evangelists is that people in Thailand generally don't convert to Christianity out of a rejection of Buddhism. The causes are various, sometimes profound, sometimes superficial; but they usually don't include a critique of their former faith.

The Christian church in Thailand requires clear boundaries between itself and the Thai world, including other Thai religions, in order for it to maintain its theological and institutional integrity. That much is clear. I'd only suggest that we've been drawing those boundaries in the wrong place; and it's a tragedy to the sharing of the Good News that succeeding generations of foreigners affiliated with the churches of Thailand keep on drawing those boundaries in the wrong place.

### **HeRD #855 - Theology is Like Manna**

"Theology is like manna. It must be written for the day. While great theologies of the past can be appropriated by later generations, they cannot be simply repeated without going bad. Every generation must write its own theology for its own time and place."

- John H. Leith, AN INTRODUCTION TO THE REFORMED TRADITION, p. 112

### **HeRD #856 - Backward Scotland**

Smout, in his A HISTORY OF THE SCOTTISH PEOPLE 1560-1830, devotes some space to developments in Scottish farming. Among other things, he notes that the rural money economy was such that better off farmers had little or no ready cash. Their wealth was in land and livestock. It was only the poor, landless rural people who received cash payment for their labor. He comments, "It is facts like this that remind the historian of the depth of the gulf between a society of this kind and one like our own. In many ways there are much greater similarities between the peasant culture of seventeenth-century Scotland and those of the more backward tribes of Asia and Africa than between that culture and that of the modern rural Scotsman who were their direct descendants." (p. 125)

Ignoring Smout's politically incorrect and historically inaccurate reference to backward tribes, his point is well taken. The experience of Europeans or Americans in past ages weren't all that different from those of people in the rest of the world. My sense is that, relatively speaking, missionaries living in Chiang Mai a hundred years ago didn't make much more in the way of "sacrifices" than do ones living here now. The key words are "relatively speaking," because the old-time missionaries did make more sacrifices in an absolute sense. They were sacrifices, however, based on distance and the slowness of communications--they lived in a slower world and made sacrifices in coming to Thailand thereby. We live in a faster world, but there are still sacrifices to be made. They are the sacrifices, moreover, not so different really from those made by committed Christians in their home countries. A 19th-century American Methodist circuit rider could tell tales about rain & roads to rival those of itinerating Presbyterian missionaries in northern Thailand. Indeed, factor in North American snow & sleet, & one might have to say the Presbyterians had the better deal!

One of the things that is endlessly, endlessly fascinating about the past is this very fact of its differences from the present. Bridging the gulf between it and us is an incredible challenge...and pleasure.

### **HeRD #857 - The Double Process**

Protestant theology has traditionally engaged in an almost excruciating analysis of the process of salvation, using such terms as conversion, regeneration, and sanctification to denote the steps of that process. On the mission field, however, the matter of salvation seemed less complex. In a paper that he sent to the Davidson College Society of Inquiry, extracts of which

were printed in the July 1869 issue of FOREIGN MISSIONARY, Daniel McGilvary addressed the problem of bringing the heathen to Christ.

He wrote that those who are discouraged by small statistical results in new missions forget that "...there is a double process to be carried on, a double work to be accomplished-just as if we were to be required to rear an edifice on the grounds occupied by some ancient stronghold, some fortress or palace, which must be rased to the very foundations before the new superstructure can be reared. 'Hath a nation changed its gods?' Yet, difficult as this is, it is the first thing to be done; it is what we demand of the heathen as an indispensable prerequisite towards embracing the gospel. Many of them would love to combine the two-to lift up the hand and offer a flower to the name of Jesus and Buddha-as many in Christian lands would combine the service of God and mammon." McGilvary went on to note that part of the process of uprooting "the deep foundations of old systems more consonant to our fallen depraved nature" involved customs as well as religion.

This quotation is extremely important as it is one of McGilvary's clearest statements on his understanding of conversion as a two-step process. That process involved, first, tearing down Buddhism and northern Thai customs; and, second, then bringing people to Christ. Much of the actual work of the Laos Mission can be understood as aimed to and participating in the destruction of northern Thai culture and religion. It is also important for its passing reference to humanity's "fallen depraved nature" which opens a small window on McGilvary's Calvinistic theological heritage. What is perhaps most interesting in the quotation, however, is the parallel it draws between Jesus and Buddha on the one hand and God and mammon on the other. Jesus/God against Buddha/mammon. It is a parallel that later generations of missionaries would modify, realizing that the Buddha taught selflessness rather than selfishness.

### **HeRD #858 - 1934: A Mission That "Just Grewed"**

In October 1934 the Survey Committee of the American Presbyterian Mission (APM) in Siam presented its final report. The committee was composed of three individuals: Paul A. Eakin, the APM Executive Secretary, Bertha McFarland, General Secretary of the Church in Siam (now the Church of Christ in Thailand), and the Rev. Pluang Suddhikam, Moderator of the General Assembly, Church in Siam. As this is one of the earliest in a long series of reports on the state of missions and the church in Thailand and was written in the same year as the CCT was founded, this report presents a fascinating window on the past. I'd like to give some attention to it over the next few HeRDs, beginning with this one.

The introduction to the "Report of the Survey Committee," observes that APM "just grewed" station by station and institution by institution, without any plan. Each individual did what they thought was right in their own eyes; and in the process the mission became increasingly complex.

This relatively simple, straightforward observation is another one of those topics that deserves a book of its own. So far as I know, there's been no careful examination of the organizational development of Presbyterian missions in Thailand. It's an immense, complex subject, made so in large part for just the reason mentioned in the introduction to the survey committee report. There's a large amount of evidence pointing to the fact that Presbyterian missionaries, down to the near present, have traditionally operated with a great deal of individual independence. The emergence of the major missionary institutions and programs dependent on the charismatic and administrative qualities of a succession of Presbyterian missionary greats. John A. Eakin, Edna S. Cole, Edwin C. Cort. William Harris. James W. McKean. The list could be extended to include dozens of names. There was virtually no

administrative oversight of these individuals, a fact that cut two ways: it allowed considerable room for creativity while it also meant that personal dreams and ideas determined what the mission did or didn't do, more than any sense of a shared ministry and task.

On the basis of personal experience and some research, it seems to me that the contemporary structures of the CCT, even after its massively cosmetic attempt at restructuring, recalls the old APM structures in many ways: a heavy emphasis on and investment of resources in schools and hospitals; ineffectual evangelism; a menagerie of programs that even restructuring couldn't rationalize or provide with a unifying focus; and a strong tendency to allow agencies and institutions to be run as personal fiefdoms. My sense is that what we have in the CCT is a melding of two bureaucratic styles, the one Thai and the other missionary.

### **HeRD #859 - 1934: A Crisis in Leadership**

The 1934 Report of the APM Survey Committee noted that between 1929 and 1934, the size of the missionary staff dropped by 30%, due largely to the Great Depression and mitigated by retirement, ill-health, and death. At the same time, the report noted that the newly formed CCT was in no position to fill the vacuum created by this dwindling of the missionary presence. The report stated of the newly formed church, "...it is far from ready to bear its three-fold task of self-government, self-propagation and self-support. Obviously one of the Mission's imperative duties at the present moment is to train and guide and strengthen its leaders so that they may carry their three-fold responsibility." As it turned out, this was a task that wasn't addressed in any meaningful fashion until after World War II, if then. The lingering affects of the Depression, the controversies surrounding the Song Revival in 1938-39 (which shut the doors of McGilvary Seminary among other things), the massive impact of the war, and then post-war reconstruction of the mission and church pushed serious attempts at leadership development into the 1950s and beyond. Taken in toto, the CCT found itself hard put to face the mounting pressures of competition from the evangelicals and pentecostals in the post-war era, partly because of the many difficulties it faced starting in the late 1920s. The various revivalistic movements that began in 1925 and continued in force into the 1960s failed to address the root causes of the CCT's problems or to develop leadership styles that could respond effectively to the continuing crises in the church's and nation's life.

### **HeRD #860 - 1934: Chiang Mai Domination**

In 1934, according to the APM survey committee report, one third of the CCT's total membership lived in Chiang Mai Province and one fourth of all of the Presbyterian mission's salaries were paid to Christian employees living in Chiang Mai. The CCT reported just over 9,000 communicant members in 1934. The report concluded that the Chiang Mai churches held an important key to the future of the CCT, because of their leadership and their financial resources. One intriguing hint as to whether Chiang Mai was able to assume this leadership is found in the list of CCT officers from 1934 onwards. The first Northerner to hold a top position in the CCT was Ach. Muak Chailangka, who was Moderator 1963-66, taking office nearly 20 years after the CCT was founded. More striking is the fact that the second Northern CCT officer was Ach. Tongkham Puntupongse, Moderator 1977-78. The third Northerner to hold a national CCT office was Ach. Samran Kuangwaen, General Secretary 1979-82. The fourth Northerner was Ach. Boonrattana Buayen, General Secretary 1983-86. Of these four, only two were actually from Chiang Mai.