

The Incarnation and Communication in Thailand

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This paper begins by illustrating the contention that understanding generally involves the assimilation of what has to be understood to concepts and categories with which we are already familiar. It will be argued that the understanding of God in Thailand reflects such a process of assimilation to concepts and categories found in the Thai culture. The third part of the paper will reflect on this contention in the light of the Christian affirmation of the incarnation. It will be argued that the incarnation involves the idea that God has used cultural categories to communicate to human beings, leading to the conclusion that this is necessary for effective communication. However, the process of communication should be seen as a continuing, dynamic one in which we constantly seek a deeper and better understanding of that which is infinite.

Suppose one person said to another, "Aren't hipsiduddles wonderful!" The reply, in thought, if not in speech, would probably be, "What on earth are you talking about?" We may ask what sort of explanation would be necessary in order that "hipsiduddles" be understood?

Generally, a good explanation would relate what was problematic to what was already familiar. For example, "hipsiduddles" would need to be related to a more general family or class of objects, actions, qualities, or whatever, with which we were already familiar. Secondly, the characteristics of this particular thing which distinguish it from other members of the family or class would need to be identified.

Suppose we do not have the chance to ask for such an explanation. The other person has continued talking, "I saw five hipsiduddles on the television last night". That tells us something more about the unknown object. It is something that can be seen, and which is countable. There are at least five of them in existence. "They come from Australia, you know." That suggests that the object in question is moveable. It could still be an animal, a group of people, perhaps a musical group, or a kind of gem stone, or something else. Once it has been determined which family or class of objects "hipsiduddles" belong to, one is well on the way to understanding what they are. One then only needs to discover what are the distinguishing characteristics of these animals, people, gem stones, or whatever.

Missionaries to Thailand from the West have faced the problems of explaining the concepts and ideas that they have seen as being essential to the Gospel. In what ways could they relate them to the linguistic categories and concepts of the Thai people? In general, the missionaries have seen Buddhism and Christianity as being independent religious systems, and they have generally avoided using Buddhist terms for Christian concepts.

Sometimes the missionaries did find Thai concepts that they considered were sufficiently close to the Christian ideas for the Thai words to be used.

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Such was the case with the idea of sin. Yet, even in the case of sin, many missionaries have complained that sin cannot really be understood in terms of the Thai concept, but must be defined within the Christian circle of terminology as "rebellion against God".¹

In other cases new words were concocted from various Thai roots which might give some clues as the meaning, but which the missionaries could fill with their own content within the context of the Christian system of ideas. An example of this is the word for "righteousness". In other cases, the missionaries used common every-day words, and gave them special religious meanings, such as the words for "salvation" and "faith". In such cases, they avoided comparable words from the Buddhist religious vocabulary. Since the Thai Christian religious vocabulary is still different from the Buddhist religious vocabulary, the problem of communication with those not familiar with Christianity still remains.²

The communication of the Christian meaning of the word "God" involves particular problems. It is part of the meaning of the word that there is no class of objects into which "God" fits as one of a kind. We cannot say that God is like this or like that. Indeed, it is part of the nature of God, so the Christian theologians have said, that God is essentially different to everything in His creation, or to anything that we have experienced. He does not fit into the basic co-ordinates of time and space in terms of which we understand our experiences. God is beyond anything we are capable of comprehending. Some theologians have maintained that we can only define God negatively, in terms of what he is not.

There is another possible way of explaining something to another person apart from explaining it in terms of what they already know. This other method is that of ostensive definition. One can learn the name of an experience or a set of sensations, and learn to re-identify the experience without necessarily relating it to another family or class of objects with which one is familiar. Some theologians and philosophers of religion have argued that ostensive definition of God is, to some extent, possible in terms of religious experience.³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the problems which this suggestion raises, particularly since the missionaries who brought Christianity to Thailand did not try to explain God in this way.

The missionaries did not want to identify the Christian God with any of the spiritual or divine beings which the Thai people already knew. God was certainly not the Buddha; nor was He like the spirits, which the missionaries regarded as evil. Nor was God to be identified with the class of Hindu gods. In talking about God, they avoided the words used for the Buddha, the spirits, and the Hindu gods.

John Bowring, a British ambassador to Siam and contemporary of some of the first Protestant missionaries, described the problems that the early

1. For example, Herbert Grether, *To Friends Under the Bodhi Tree from Those Under the Cross*, published in Thai, (Bangkok: Church of Christ in Thailand, 1975), p. 32; and L.J. Curtis, *The Laos of North Siam*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1903), p. 184. A similar comment is made in *Brief Manual on Buddhism*, prepared by the language committee for the use of Protestant missionaries to Thailand, 1918, p. 29.
2. This is amply illustrated in Wan Petchsongkram *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, translated and edited by Frances E. Hudgins, (Bangkok: Thai Gospel Press, 1975).
3. For example, as in Rudolf Otto's classic, *The Idea of the Holy*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1924).

missionaries had in communicating their understanding of God. The word that was used for God was "pra-caw", made up from the prefix "pra", and the word "caw". The prefix "pra" had the idea of sacred power,⁴ and was used of Buddhist monks, and in terms referring to Buddha images and the king. The word "caw" was the word most close to the British feudal concept of "lord". It was used for such people as the aristocratic land-owners, senior spirits,⁵ and again in the terms used for referring to the king and the Buddha. Bowring said that this word for God was the cause of some confusion. It could be mistaken as applying to the Buddha.⁶ However, that mistake did not persist long. It was soon evident that the missionaries did not respect the Buddha or Buddhism.

In order to explain the new religion, some missionaries, particularly in the north of Thailand, used the idea of the Ariya Mettaya.⁷ The Buddhists had a tradition of one who was greater than Gotama who would come and supercede Gotama. However, the idea of the Ariya Mettaya was not well developed in terms of content among the Thai people, and the reference to this idea did not give much content to the concept of God or explain much about who Jesus was.

The missionaries insisted that everyone who wanted to worship the Christian God first had to leave Buddhism and animism. There was no room for fitting in Christianity alongside other religions. Christianity soon came to be understood as a different and alternative religion to Buddhism. Its God was to be understood in terms of its own system of doctrines.

Nevertheless, the Thai word used for God, and the ways in which the missionaries spoke about Him, suggested certain characteristics and ways of relating to Him with which the Thai people were familiar. God was called "Lord". He was conceived, therefore, as a living, personal being who was a potential patron. Indeed, the assertions made about His love and grace fitted the Thai conception of the ideal patron, as might be found in the ideal king. Some of the characteristics of the ideal patron are described in a study of Thai social relationships.

Thai patrimonialism is paternalistic; its rulers are viewed as fathers. For example, the king is the father of "his" people, while the village leader is the father of the villagers. Ideally, the paternal father punishes his wards when they are naughty and rewards them with prebends when they are upright; he receives obedience and respect in return for dispensation of tangible, material benefits . . .

Thai patrimonialism is benevolent; the patrimonial leader, above all else, must be compassionate and understanding to those below him because the client's fate is in the grace of his hands.⁸

4. For an analysis of the concept of "pra", see Michael A. Wright, "Some Observations on Thai Animism", *Practical Anthropology*, 15:1, 1966.
5. For the use of this word in relation to the spirits, see Gehan Wijewardene, *Monks, Mediums, Cities and Sema: Religious Behaviour in Northern Thailand*. (Typescript, 1979).
6. John Bowring, *The Kingdom and People of Siam*, Volumes I and II. 1st edition, 1857, (re-printed Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press and Bangkok: Duang Kamol Book House, 1977), p. 338.
7. For examples, see John H. Freeman, *An Oriental Land of the Free* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1910), p. 40 and William Clifton Dodd, *The Tai Race*, (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: the Torch Press, 1923), p. 334.
8. Norman Jacobs, *Modernization without Development—Thailand as an Asian Case Study*, (New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 27-28.

According to the teaching of the missionaries, God was indeed benevolent, compassionate, and understanding. He was a "father" to his people. He punished them when they did wrong, and rewarded them when they did right and obeyed His commands. In these respects, the great Jehovah Lord, as they called Him,⁹ could be considered as a member of the class of patrons, a class which included the king, aristocratic noblemen, great and powerful spirits, and the Buddha himself. Such a classification would at least help the Thai people to know how to relate to God, what language to use when speaking to Him, how to approach Him, and what sorts of responses they might receive from Him. Such an identification of God with other patrons was not necessarily made consciously or explicitly, but was implicit in the ways in which the Thai people spoke to God, using the royal language,¹⁰ and in the expectations they had of him to give them his blessing, for example.

There were certain characteristics by which God could be distinguished from other patrons. He was a spiritual being who could not be seen, but who was present everywhere. In this, He was like some of the spirit lords with which the Thai people were familiar. Unlike them, though, His territory was unlimited, and His power was very much greater. Like the spirit lords, He could cause sickness or cure it. He could give safety in travel, or cause accidents to happen. He was compassionate to those who followed Him, although the missionaries made it quite clear that He was very demanding, and did not appreciate divided loyalties. Since He was so much more powerful than other spirit lords, He could cure sicknesses that others had caused, and command spirits to leave people who were possessed.

It is pertinent that a number of the early Christian converts in Thailand were people who were bothered by spirits. It was believed that if people did not satisfy local spirits to whom they were responsible, those spirits might take out their revenge on other people near-by. Another person might become sick, for example. In the ceremony in which the spirit-doctor tried to discover the name of the troublesome spirit and the person who was responsible for him the sick person would call out the names. The person responsible could then be ostracised from the village and everything connected with him burnt to the ground.¹¹ A number of these people who were so accused became Christians. They turned to God whom they were told had power over all spirits, so that the troublesome spirit would bother them no more.

Other people came to God after seeking the help of the local spirits but failing to find answers to their problems. Some of them were sick, and had not been able to find a cure.¹² Others were beset by famine.¹³ If God proved His power and overcame the sickness or famine, He was obviously greater than the other spirits, and worthy of being a patron of the people.¹⁴

In these ways, God was comparable to the spirits. He was also different from them. One missionary who worked in northern Thailand, John Freeman,

9. See, for example, *Laos News*, III, 2 (April 1906), pp. 25-26.
10. In the Thai language, special nouns, pronouns, and verbs are used when speaking about the king, the Buddha, and some spirits. It is usually referred to as the "royal language".
11. For one description of this, see Dodd, *The Tai Race*, p. 335.
12. Curtis, *The Laos of North Siam*, p. 300; and *Laos News*, II:1, (January, 1905), p. 32 give examples.
13. For one example, see *Laos News*, X:2, (April, 1913), p. 4.
14. For example, Freeman, *An Oriental Land of the Free*, p. 51.

noted the problem of distinguishing God from the spirits. He would point out that God was different in that He was the Creator.¹⁵ Nevertheless, this difference would only identify God as a unique member of the class of spirits.

God also took over the role of the Buddha for those who became Christians. He was the author, through Jesus, of a set of teachings and precepts. Unlike the Buddha, being also a spirit lord, God was able to help His followers to keep these precepts. Those who did good would receive a blessing too. Indeed, the missionaries proclaimed that those who accepted God as their patron (lord), and obeyed His rules, would go to heaven, the place of great and permanent happiness.

In such ways, the Christian faith was assimilated to existing ideas.¹⁶ Yet, it might be argued that the Christians were just accepting what the missionaries were teaching. There were certainly strong similarities between the missionaries' conceptions and those of the Thai people. For the missionaries, God was definitely conceived as a person rather than as an impersonal power, for example. They affirmed the idea that God was ready to give His blessing to those who sought it, and that God's power could be manifest in healing the sick. They rarely mentioned the social conceptions of the Kingdom of God, or the apocalyptic ideas of an immanent Second Coming.

However, there were other aspects of the missionaries' teaching about God and the Gospel which met with little response from the Thai people. These aspects show more clearly how the ideas the missionaries were propounding were assimilated by the Thai listeners in terms of categories of thought which were already present in the culture. In particular, the heart of the missionaries' proclamation was the offer of forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ on the cross. There are a few instances recorded of people responding gratefully to this offer of forgiveness,¹⁷ but these are rare.

Historical evidence on this point is inadequate, and one is arguing dangerously from silence and lack of evidence. However, there is evidence to suggest that this difference between the missionaries' Gospel and what is important in Christianity to the Thai Christians exists today. In a sample collection of thirty sermons from Thai preachers in northern Thailand, delivered in 1980 and 1981, three percent spoke about forgiveness, and ten percent mentioned Christ's death on the cross. The atonement was never explained. For the sake of comparison, in two collections of sermons by missionaries to Thailand, Christ's death on the cross was a significant point in forty percent of the sermons, and forgiveness in twenty-seven percent.¹⁸

In 1981, in over thirty churches in northern Thailand, the question was asked in the course of interviews with church elders, "How do the members conceive of Christianity giving us salvation?" In not one church was any

15. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

16. The word "assimilation", as it is used here, comes from the epistemology of the psychologist, Jean Piaget. He uses the word "accommodation" also to refer to the dynamic process of the changing of concepts in order to fit new ideas. For a discussion of these concepts see Herbert Ginsburg and Sylvia Opper, *Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development. An Introduction*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969), p. 25.

17. One example is given in Hugh Taylor, *A Missionary in Siam*, Two volumes. (Manuscript. San Francisco, 1947), ch. IX.

18. These sermons are from two books printed in Thai. John Song, *Dr. Song Still Speaks*, (Bangkok: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1962); and Paul Mannikam, *100 Sermons*, (Chiang Mai: Yonnokarpim, 1966).

reference made to Jesus or Christ, let alone to Christ's death. Forty-two percent of the responses suggested that salvation was something that God gives out of His love (on the model of an indulgent patron?). Twenty-one percent referred to the necessity to follow the teaching of Christianity and do good. Seventeen percent referred to having faith in God.

In the same year, a questionnaire was given to forty-two missionaries working with the Church of Christ in Thailand and to about two hundred Thai seminary students and other Christian tertiary students. One of the questions asked for the reasons why religion was important to the respondents, and gave a list of ten items to be rated. For the missionaries, the item rated most highly by them was "forgiveness of sin". For the Thai Christian students, this item was rated in seventh place.

The reason, I suggest, why there has been little response to the idea of a sacrificial atonement is that there are no presuppositions within Thai cultural conceptions or religious notions that a sacrifice would be necessary for forgiveness to occur. Hence, while forgiveness through the cross is affirmed occasionally as a formula, it has not been assimilated to Thai conceptions in such a way that it is seen as being necessary and important. Indeed, the idea that God's indulgence is not limitless and that "justice" is required could be considered as a sign of weakness in God, as it may also be of other patrons.¹⁹

For something to be understood, as was illustrated in the first section of this paper, one needs to be able to assimilate it to what one already knows. One must be able to fit it into one's cognitive categories. One must be able to relate it to what is familiar, and also learn its distinctiveness in terms of the characteristics which distinguish it from other members of its class. The significance of this thesis is that it suggests that all new knowledge must be related to existing knowledge. Thus, the assimilation of the Gospel will be influenced by cultural conceptions and presuppositions. "God" and His characteristics will necessarily be understood in relation to other ideas and concepts, even though differences from all other members of the classes and families to which He is related may be recognized. "God" will always be thought of as "like X", even though it is recognized that in many respects He is "not like X".

The Gospel, as it is understood in a particular time and place, will never be "pure" in the sense of being "culturally neutral". The ways in which it is understood will always reflect cultural conceptions, categories, and ways of thinking. But is such a finding antithetical to Biblical principles? It is certainly antithetical to the teachings of some theologians, and does not correspond with methods of many missionaries.²⁰ In this last section of the paper, I wish to reflect on this question in the light of the Christian understanding of the nature of the incarnation, which is generally understood to be the pinnacle of God's acts of revelation in which He has communicated Himself to human beings.

The basic tenet of the doctrine of incarnation is the assertion that God meets us in a person living within certain geographic, racial, religious, and cultural boundaries, at a particular point within history. Such an assertion is,

19. For a discussion of Thai concepts of sin and salvation, see Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, ch. VIII.

20. For a modern example, see James I. Packer, "The Gospel: Its Content and Communication—A Theological Perspective", in John R. W. Stott and Robert Coote, *Down to Earth Studies in Christianity and Culture*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 97-114.

in many respects, preposterous and paradoxical when compared with other assertions made about the nature of God. That we should meet God in a human being suggests that there has been confusion between the Creator and His creation. The idea of limiting God in spatial and temporal terms, in terms of power and knowledge, to human languages and a human frame, would appear to contradict our understanding of God. The incarnation appears to assert that God became something other than Himself, other than the One who is Almighty, Eternal, Omniscient, and Omnipresent. What was infinite became finite.

Even if one takes a less extreme view of the nature of the incarnation, asserting that God did not become other than Himself in Jesus, but that He communicated something of Himself, one is still asserting that God communicated in forms bound by human perceptions and conditions, human language and experience. The incarnation implies that God took the risk of being misunderstood in order that there might be the possibility of communication. Indeed, God's communication was not recognized by many. In John 8.19, Jesus says to the Pharisees, "You know neither me nor my Father." Should not God have revealed Himself more clearly so that there would have been less risk of misunderstanding and so that more people would have believed? If the incarnation was, in fact, the pinnacle of God's communication, perhaps the answer to this question is that there was no better way for God to communicate Himself so that people would respond appropriately to Him, given His infiniteness and our finiteness. There was no way around the risk that was involved.

If there was no way around the incarnation for God, then there can be no way around it for those who would witness to God's communication. God communicated Himself in limited human categories within the context of a human life in a particular cultural setting. He used their words, and their religious concepts and presuppositions. He used the categories of thought with which they were familiar. The implication is that those who witness to Him must also use the categories and concepts with which their hearers are familiar.

While the incarnation of God in Jesus is regarded by Christians as the pinnacle of God's revelation of Himself to human beings, it is not the only revelation. Nor is it the beginning or end of revelation. The incarnation did not complete the process of God's communication. Jesus said to His disciples,

I have more to tell you, but now it would be too much for you to bear.

When, however, the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth.²¹

If God is infinite, then human beings will never be able to understand Him fully or completely. Thus, there is always the logical possibility of understanding God better. The understanding of God should be a dynamic process. We never come to the limits of our understanding, nor to the limits of what we are trying to comprehend. Our cognitive categories are not static fixtures with which we are born. They can be enlarged and developed, stretched and remoulded.

One can see this dynamic process of growth in understanding occurring in the Gospels as Jesus seeks to explain Himself. The Gospels present Him as using the category of "Messiah", with which the Jewish people were familiar. But Jesus uses it very carefully. He is not the type of Messiah people were

21. John 16: 12-13.

expecting. While the category was appropriate for Jesus in that it designated a unique person sent by God, it was inappropriate in as far as the Messiah was expected to be a kingly figure who would have great temporal power. Jesus tries to give the term a new content as it is applied to Himself. While affirming its use for those who know Him most intimately, He seeks to change the conception in other respects. Contrary to the disciples' expectations, it was possible for the Messiah to suffer and be killed!²²

The process of understanding the Gospel is still a dynamic one. Our conceptual categories, in terms of which we conceive God and the Gospel, are limited, human tools. They are products of our culture, and are acquired in the processes of socialization. They are the only tools we have for understanding. The incarnation demonstrates God's willingness to communicate within the context of categories bound by culture and limited by human understanding. If we are to communicate successfully to others, we must use their concepts and categories, despite the risks of miscommunication.

However, we need constantly to revise and expand our conceptions so that our understanding grows. The process of theologizing, the process of developing our understanding of God, has to begin with the concepts with which we presently understand Him. If we are theologizing in order to help others to grow in understanding, we must begin with their concepts. Because concepts arise within human linguistic and cultural settings, theologizing must occur within such settings.

If there is to be a deeper understanding of God in Thailand, there needs to be a critical analysis and reflection upon the conceptual categories which people have used and are using to understand God, such as those of "patron" and "spirit". In the light of the total experience of God, to which the Bible witnesses, and which is found in the records of church history and in contemporary expression of experience throughout the world today, questions need to be asked of any particular theological understandings. In what ways are the present categories that are being used helpful? In what ways are they inadequate to the breadth and depth of the experiences? What aspects of them need to be developed and changed? Within this process, God will continue to reveal Himself.

22. Mark 8:31.

I am also indebted to the following books which deal with the idea of incarnation as a model for missionary communication. C.S. Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction—An Asian Attempt*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1975. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, New York: Orbis, 1979.