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CHRISTIANITY IN THAILAND

BY

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"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves
Or lose our ventures."

The present dilemma of Christianity in Thailand is graphically expressed in the ageless wisdom of William Shakespeare. Thai Christians and their foreign co-workers, if they are courageous and adventurous in spirit, have an outstanding opportunity to serve vital needs in a changing nation. Social, economic, and cultural currents are moving swiftly. The choice for Christianity in Thailand, therefore, is to keep its craft close to familiar shores and anchored in protected harbors, or to sail resolutely out into waters that are unmistakably stormy but beyond which lay the ports of fulfillment.

Retrospect.

Roman Catholic missions began their work in Thailand nearly three centuries ago, when the Roman communion engaged itself in extensive plans for the Christianization of south-eastern Asia. Protestant effort was of more recent origin, and had its inception in the eighteenth century when a group of missionaries, at the instigation of the Adoniram Judsons of Burma and the Rev. C. F. A. Gutzlaff, a Dutch missionary, came to Bangkok and began mission work among Chinese people who, even at that time, resided in Thailand in large numbers. Obviously, this work was motivated by the zeal of the nineteenth century Protestant mission organizations to begin the evangelization of the "Celestial Empire," China.

The chronicle of Christian effort in Thailand unfolds a narrative of patient, honest investment of generously given lives and abilities. Numerical results have never been overwhelming. However, there are

many convincing indications of success, and instances where the precept and example of devoted mission leaders have veritably given direction and purpose to national progress. Ultimately, their efforts brought a new national Church into existence.

The quality of work done by various mission bodies serving in Thailand is reflected in the pioneering of medical and secondary educational institutions, and the results of Christian emphasis on personal character and the value and potentiality of human life. Mission leaders have established traditions of sympathetic cooperation with the Government and people in meeting and solving the problems of a sparsely settled, economically undeveloped tropical country. Present leaders can do no better than to adapt the spirit and method of these early missionaries to modern endeavors.

A recent census estimated the Christian population of Thailand at 69,227. A National Christian Council report published last year indicates that there are sixty-eight organized Protestant churches in Thailand, only twelve of which are completely self-supporting. The membership of these churches totals 9,062 communicants.

Agencies at Work.

The following denominational agencies carry on work in Thailand: Roman Catholic, The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., Churches of Christ of Great Britain, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (Anglican), Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the Seventh Day Adventists.

Other Christian agencies in Thailand consist of the American Bible Society, Young Men's Christian Association of Bangkok, and the National Christian Council of Thailand.

The Roman Catholic Mission has churches in about thirty centers of the country and operates a number of secondary schools, hospitals, and orphanages.

The American Presbyterian missionaries have developed the largest Protestant work in Thailand and have excelled in their introduction of modern hospitalization, secondary schools, and rural churches in nine general areas of the kingdom.

The Churches of Christ of Great Britain Mission concentrates its work to Mon people residing in Nakon Pathom and west central Thailand.

The work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Mission confines itself to the city of Bangkok where it has expressed itself through secondary education for boys and girls and to ministering to members of a growing mission church.

The Christian and Missionary Alliance is the newest mission. Its representatives are engaged in developing indigenous Christian groups in six strategic centers on the high plains of north-eastern Thailand.

The Seventh Day Adventist Mission carries on medical, educational, and church work in Bangkok, and has a second center in north-eastern Thailand.

The American Bible Society has served in the Thailand and Lao areas for many years, translating the Bible into native languages and dialects, and printing and distributing Bibles and tracts in cooperation with other agencies.

The Young Men's Christian Association of Bangkok was founded in 1932 with the cooperation of the International Committee of the Y. M. C. A. s of the United States and Canada. The developing of a self-governing, self-supporting, and indigenous fellowship and youth service is still in its initial and experimental stages, but the undertaking gains headway as experience and resources increase. The Y. M. C. A. endeavors to complement and supplement the work of other Christian agencies through its programs of recreation, boys' work, religious emphasis, employment service, personal counselling, training for service, and vocational education in evening schools. Thus far the Y. M. C. A. has been intensive rather than extensive, but as its methods and purposes are more widely understood, it is hoped that its ministry can be extended to student, industrial and rural fields.

The National Christian Council functions in Thailand, as in other countries, as a body made up of various Christian agencies and designed to coordinate their purposes and efforts into a unified, synchronized Christian movement. Organized twelve years ago, the Council's

first task was to bring the National Church into an organizational entity. From its beginning the Council has directly or indirectly benefited all units of the Christian movement. The National Christian Council hopes to continue to serve by refreshing and strengthening its constituent agencies, and by integrating them into a more adequate working force for the new era that is dawning in Thailand.

The New Era.

Past accomplishments of Christian missions among the Thai people can be considered prologue. Yesterday's achievements are monuments only to themselves and have no power to solve the problems of the new era save through an emulation of the pioneer spirit. The structural form of any organization—religious or secular—is effective only to the extent that it can be functionally adapted to changing needs. Christianity in Thailand, if it is to survive as a vital force, will be compelled to devise new strategies for the future.

In the first place, Thailand is in the grip of an intense nationalism. This fact should not be viewed with dismay, but with hope and confidence. When a nation is overtaken by new forces, interests, and enthusiasms, nationalism is a natural phenomenon. A nationalistic spirit precipitates actions and changes which quicken a nation's life and generates creative powers within her.

Unfortunately, a nation often finds herself dominated by these new forces long before she can understand them. As a result, subversive and reactionary elements appear, which tend to defeat the nobler potentialities of the new spirit. Therefore, the new energies born of nationalism may cause violence and suffering before they can be analyzed and directed into constructive channels. Nationalism gives birth to the resourcefulness and initiative so indispensable to the progress of a people, but the skilful and sacrificial citizenship of competent men and women is required to direct these forces into the most useful channels.

A Challenge.

The Christian church, even though it is a minority group, is veritably "On ... a full sea" in transitional Thailand, and has reason to rejoice in the clear and compact opportunity for service to the nation.

Thailand is caught in the "crisis in ideas" which affects the whole Far East, and Christians cannot fail her in her hour of need.

The Chinese character for crisis is a combination of words meaning danger plus opportunity. This definition has significance in Thailand. The passage through stormy seas of nationalism, however dangerous, must be risked if complete fidelity to the nation's highest interests is sought.

The "current serves," and unless Christians in Thailand are content to "lose ventures" they must make comprehensive changes and adjustments in methods of approach.

New Strategies.

If Christianity in Thailand is to move closer to midstream in national life it will have to concentrate upon an interpretation of itself through increasing the range and volume of Christian literature. The old plea of low literacy is no longer a valid one. A few years ago it was authentically stated that one hundred fifty titles would account for all the books on Christian subjects in the Thai language. This is poor equipment with which to capture and hold the interest of a nation which is rapidly becoming education conscious, and eager to master new techniques of living.

Another important aspect of interpretation is in the realm of public relations. To-day, government in Thailand rests largely with a new and younger group of leaders, many of whom have had limited opportunity to know or to understand the role that Christian missions have played in Thailand's development during the last century. An interpretation of the motivation, purposes, and objectives of Christian movements to the new official group is therefore necessary, and this task demands Christian statesmanship of the highest order.

The second task confronting Christianity in Thailand is the orientation of its organizational and institutional life to primary needs growing out of rapid national transitions. The patterns and approaches of the past are no longer effective. The rapid strides made by the state and private agencies in education, medicine, and methods of organization tend to diminish the prestige of Christian institutions

engaged in these services. Thailand's Christian movement must therefore seek to pioneer in the development of the spiritual resources of the new Thailand.

In education, the main requirement is to provide for the Christian group a national institution of higher learning which can produce leaders capable of taking their places in the life of the church and nation at levels attained by their fellow countrymen who have had advantages of college and university training at home and abroad. This is an increasingly critical problem, and it has been possible under the present Christian educational programme to make very little advance toward its solution.

A second serious problem in the training and development of Christian leaders is the comparatively small number of Christian occupations available to Christian youth. There is as yet little appreciation of the Christian ministry as a profession, or of teaching as a distinctly Christian service, and there are few other Christian vocations open to young people. The Christian community in Thailand certainly has very definite vocational and economic, as well as numerical, limits. However, the negative factors of the general situation make it all the more necessary to lay stress on a small but well-trained Christian ministry and a trained and enlightened laity. *Education for the future, then, should be intensively directed to producing stronger Christian leadership.*

Finally, in the process of orientation, the individual Christian in Thailand must *re-discover himself in relation to the tasks and the ideals of his country*. It is a period of change and movement which can reach stability only through the courage and clear thinking of a devoted citizenship. Having accepted democracy in principle, Thailand's next task is to produce men and women capable of instituting and developing democratic processes in community and national life. Christianity has had an important part to play in such enterprises in many countries. Thailand should be no exception.

This article will conclude with the mention of one other strategy which is of supreme importance if the Christian church and its complementary and supplementary agencies are to play a vital role in Thailand's new day. We refer to the necessity for a greater *sense of community*

among Christian groups themselves, and for a more ecumenical concept of the world Christian fellowship. Christianity combines many different nationalities, cultures, and organizational emphases, and unites them by their common acceptance of Jesus Christ. This integration of Christian forces we define by the term World Christian Community. This concept contributes influence, prestige, and power to younger churches, and emphasizes the universality of the Christian Gospel, the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all mankind. The idea of World Christian Community is startlingly new, but it has already become a criterion for all Christian churches and movements.

It is, therefore, very important that the Christian movement in Thailand has access to the spiritual resources of a world church which, while it cannot prevent pain and suffering, assures the witnessing of Christian faith throughout the world to-day, to-morrow, and forever.

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