

## Creation of Man: Theological Reflections Based on Northern Thai Folktales

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This essay is an example of how Christian theologians of Asia are drawing on common religio-cultural sources to illuminate the biblical narratives, for the mutual enrichment and enablement of different faith communities.

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### THE NORTHERN FOLKTALE, LIU TRADITION: GENESIS

In the beginning came fire and floods on earth. The fire consumed all things, including the mountains. Then the floods came to extinguish the fire. The surface of the earth was perfectly flat, without mountains and hills. Poo Sang See and Ya Sang Sai, a couple who gave existence to mankind, came from above. They wished to meet other beings with whom they could have conversation, but no one was on earth. They made human beings from clay, female and male. They consecrated them with magical power, therefore these two objects became living beings. This couple had sexual relations and gave birth to their children. They multiplied quite rapidly.

Poo Sang See and Ya Sang Sai also made animals. They began with rats, followed by cows and on up to twelve kinds of animals.

It has been told that hills and mountains, after fire and flood, were the heaps of clay by the ploughshares of a giant couple named Poo Liu Herng and Ya Liu Herng. Their bodies were tremendously huge. They used elephants as bait for fishing. It has been told that one day

they fished at Muan Nan (Nan province in the North) and used an elephant as bait. Poo Liu Herng stirred up the water with his penis and Ya Liu Herng opened up her vagina to trap the fish.

The rivers were the products of ploughshare tracts. All trees were planted by Poo Liu Herng and Ya Liu Herng without knowing the real origin of trees. But grass was made by Poo Sang See and Ya Sang Sai.

No one really knows the origin of the wind and rains. However, some animals ate other animals for food because they were made so by Poo Sang See and Ya Sang Sai. It was their design to control the growth of animals.

### THE NORTHERN FOLKTALE, NORTHERN THAI TRADITION: GENESIS

The story of world-consuming fire is an ancient, oral tradition. It is not written anywhere. First of all the earth was on fire. Nothing was left. Then came rains and floods. Nothing else appeared except water and sky. The streams of water swept the pebbles, sand and dirt into heaps in certain places. Thus mountains came into existence. The rains on burned soil made a good smell which evaporated, ascending to the kingdom of giants above. They descended and ate the burned soil. As a result they were unable to fly back.

Once more the heavy rains came and washed away some parts of the mountains from which small hills came into existence.

The burned soil eaten, the naked giants scattered all over and survived. After the floods receded and the earth became dry, these naked giants found a variety of trees, vegetables, and fruits including rice, which they collected. These things came into existence by themselves. No one made them. The naked giants had them for food. Other things that came into existence after the floods were canals and rivers, seas and oceans. The naked giants lived a husband and wife way of life. They dug the earth, making holes as their houses. They used the leaves to cover their bodies before they made clothes from the tree barks. They gave birth to their children. Gradually they learned to develop their way of living and built communities, towns and cities.

## THE NORTHERN FOLKTALE, THAI YAI TRADITION: GENESIS

In the beginning the earth was burned by fire, including rocky mountains. The fire kept burning for millions of years, and was followed by heavy rains for millions of years. When the rains stopped, the fragrance of the burned soil evaporated, ascending to heaven. It reached the head of heaven, named Khun Sig Cha, and proceeded to the realm of celestial beings. The celestial beings smelled the fragrance of the burned soil. Eight of these beings, four male and four female, went to Khun Sig Cha and made a plea to go down to earth.

Khung Sig Cha gave permission, but with a serious warning: 'You may go down to earth, but I warn you: absolutely do not eat the cream of the soil. If you eat it, you will lose your might and will not be able to return to your realm.' They promised to strictly obey his warning.

They came down to earth and roamed around. They walked on the creamy soil, felt its softness, and smelled its fragrance. They could not resist the temptation. One of them ate and was impressed with its sweetness. Others were also persuaded to eat the creamy soil. After they had eaten it, they wanted to return to heaven, but could not fly back. So ever since they have stayed on earth.

All eight celestial beings married. Time passed and they had nothing to eat. Khun Sig Cha came down and, knowing they lacked food, he gave them eight pumpkins. They ate, but kept the seeds for future reproduction. The four couples had children. They multiplied rapidly to a total of eight million within a short time. They were crowded and scattered to the four corners of the earth. Every group grew rapidly.

In the beginning there were three kinds of trees and one kind of grass brought by the celestial beings. Animals in the forest heard about the human beings and came to see for themselves. They saw, and decided to stay with the human beings.

### PREFACE

Justin Martyr believed that everyone is a spermatik logoi of the Logos. Or, in other words, there is a divine element in every human being. Thus, the partial logos in man is a bridge connecting man and God, the Logos. At this point the revelation of the Logos before the event of

'Jesus of Nazareth' was only partially received. Justin Martyr realized and accepted the premise that there is partial divine truth in the system of Greek philosophy. That is to say, God the Logos has revealed Himself of Greeks through Greek philosophy. Put the other way round, God has revealed Himself to Greek people from which Greek philosophy came into existence. In short, God has revealed Himself through other religions and philosophical systems besides the Jewish system. God loved and loves other people besides the Jews. He has never forsaken any tribe of human beings at any moment. Justin Martyr's bold statement that 'Socrates is Christian before Christ', has encouraged many to accept the fact that there are divine truths in non-Jewish-Christian religious traditions. From this basis one would like to explore some of the Northern Thai folktales in the area of the creation of man.

## THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF PEOPLE IN NORTHERN THAILAND

The Northern people have had their own spoken and written language for centuries. When Christian missionaries came to Chiang Mai in the middle of the nineteenth century and introduced the Western type of education, the Northern language was used in school both for speaking and writing. Later, early in the twentieth century the central Siamese government adopted the policy of Siamization or unification by which the Northern dialect was prohibited in the classroom. Fortunately, Northern Thai people were not forced to eliminate it from speaking. The tone of the Northern dialect is very similar to that of the Northeastern people, the Laos. And their customs are also similar. For centuries the people of the North were known as Laos. (In those days the people of the central plateau called the Northern people 'Laos', with a sense of looking down upon them.)

Besides the Northern people in general or the low-landers in the North, there are several hilltribe peoples who live in the mountains.

Each tribe has its own dialect and customs. Both lowlanders and highlanders are in general agriculturalists – peasants and farmers. They are families who plant paddy rice, deal with clay and 'creamy' soil, burn the woods to clear and prepare the land for farming. They all have the experience of smelling the burned soil with the first touch of



the rains. Many pregnant mothers have experienced eating 'creamy soil' when they had morning sickness.

### COMPARATIVE STUDY

Three traditions or versions of genesis from North Thailand have been selected for study, including: the Northern Thai tradition, the Thai Yai tradition, and the Liu tradition.

All these three traditions have a common basic vision: First, that the earth was on fire, and flood came to extinguish the holocaust. Nothing was left in existence.

As farmers, the Northerners are familiar with the cycle of fire and rains. They have experienced the 'consuming or destroying power of fire. The forests are burned into a heap of ashes before their eyes.' Fire has regularly played the role of 'cleansing and preparing'. And their farming is very much dependent on the rains. They have experienced how powerful the rains are, not merely in extinguishing fire, but in softening and enriching the soil as well.

With regard to the creation of man, Northern Thai and Thai Yai traditions are similar. Originally human beings came from heaven. They were fallen angels, formerly celestial beings. They were tempted by the enticing fragrance of the burned soil. When they ate the soil, however, they lost their might and power.

It is interesting that the mothers-to-be experiencing morning sickness still engage in eating 'creamy soil' from the paddy fields, down to the present day.

At this point the Thai Yai folktale has more interesting details. There are ideas of 'the head of heaven and earth', 'temptation', 'command', 'promise', and of 'disobedience', Khun Sig Cha knew that 'burned creamy soil' was dangerous. He commands the heavenly beings not to eat it. 'Whenever you eat it you will lose your might and power and be unable to return!' Nevertheless, one ate it anyway, and starting with that one it was passed on to the others. Finally, all had broken the promise and disobeyed.

Both traditions hold the same view that temptation leads to disobedience, and disobedience leads to 'the loss of primal status'.

In the Northern Thai tradition the disobedient celestial beings are naked and scattered all over the place. They had to forage for food and

use leaves and bark for clothing. They married and gave birth to children.

In the Thai Yai tradition there is concern from the 'head of heaven and earth,' Khun Sig Cha. He came down to visit them and supplied them with food. They built up families and grew up rapidly.

The Liu tradition has a different story after the fundamental vision of the consuming fire and the extinguishing floods. It tells of a couple from above named Poo Sang See and Ya Sang Sai. They needed companions and they made them from clay. They gave them (or rather spelled on them) power to be living beings. It is understandable that their vision of the creation of mountains and hills, rivers and canals, came through the experience of 'ploughshare tracts'. It is also interesting that Poo Sang See and Ya Sang Sai made animals with a design to prevent unnecessary growth.

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Several theological reflections are in order, based on a comparison of these Northern Thai traditions with the Biblical account of the Genesis-creation of man in particular.

#### 1 'As in the beginning'

Even though the Northern Thai folktales have not mentioned 'in the beginning' as clearly as the Biblical account, they also give a definite impression of the 'formlessness' of the earth. There was a real chaotic situation before the existence of permanent mountains and hills, oceans, rivers and canals, before the existence of human beings, animals and other life-forms. The folktales include a vision of 'real creation' after fire and floods.

#### 2 The dual nature of human beings

Human beings have basically two natures. They have a celestial nature with divine elements, either through the process of once being angels themselves, or of being given a celestial nature by a couple from heaven.

And they have earthly natures, either through the process of eating 'the burned creamy soil' or from being made from clay.

In Biblical Genesis we find the truth that 'man is made of dust and of divine breath' (Gen. 2.7).

### **3 Temptation**

Temptation is placed before man. The Biblical story tells that there was an irresistibly charming fruit on the tree of knowledge. It was right before their eyes! In the Northern Thai folktales the temptation was even wafting up into their 'room' above.

Both the Biblical story and the Northern Thai folktales contain the idea that temptation is not superficial, but is a crucial matter dealing with the essential nature of human life.

### **4 Disobedience**

Man yielded to temptation and disobeyed the commandment.

In the Biblical story the Creator knew the strength of the 'tempting fruit', whereas in the Thai Yai tradition Khun Sig Cha realized the powerful fragrance of 'burned and creamy soil'. Man had been warned. Both Khun Sig Cha and the Biblical creator gave the warning in the form of a 'command'. Man, both in the Biblical account of Genesis and in the Thai Yai folktale, was too weak to resist, and consequently has disobeyed. In both traditions there is the idea of disobedience.

### **5 Fallen man**

Both the Thai Yai and Northern Thai traditions have a concept of man as 'fallen angel', as compared to the Biblical concept of man as fallen, but not fallen from a celestial state. However, there is no real conflict between the two cultures if we consider that Adam and Eve before the Fall were perfect beings.

The more important thing is that these different traditions share the idea of 'Fall' and of a rather desperate 'status after the Fall'.

Once Adam and Eve yielded to temptation and disobeyed the divine command, they 'were lost', their strength and confidence to stand before God was lost. They hid themselves when they heard God walking in the Garden. They suffered.

Once the celestial beings yielded to temptation and ate the burned

creamy soil they too 'lost their might and power' and were not able to return to their 'original status'. They suffered.

### **6 Divine concern**

In Biblical Genesis the Creator showed his concern by coming down and seeking the fallen man, Adam and Eve.

In the Thai Yai tradition Khun Sig Cha also came down from heaven and gave help to the fallen angels. In both traditions we can see the truth of the 'unceasing relationship between divine and human'.

### **7 Inclusiveness**

In the tradition of the Liu and in the Biblical story as well, we see the idea of 'we' or 'us' in the creation of man. In the Liu tradition, Poo Sang See and Ya Sang Sai 'made man from clay and gave them power to live'.

In Biblical Genesis there is this expression: 'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"' (Gen. 1.26).

Briefly, if we look carefully with an unbiased mind into the folktales as mentioned above, we will see that men of other faiths and tradition share certain essential ideas of the creation of man, which are found in the Biblical story. Moreover, our religious experiences and religious interpretations could be enriched, and its theologians and ministers or teachers would be enabled to do more contextualized and indigenized theological reflection, which would be more understandable and acceptable to their audiences, in particular in communities with a common religio-cultural root.