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## Lead Essay

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### This Elemental Requirement



In his *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Walter Brueggemann reflects on the importance of the first commandment that Israel is to have "no other gods before me" (Deuteronomy 5:7) for understanding Israel's historical experience. He notes that God established a covenant with the people of Israel, one that required mutual loyalty to each other. Speaking particularly of the Book of Judges, he writes, "The tales that follow in the book of Judges make clear that disobedience to this elemental requirement of covenant is the clue to the endless cycle of disaster that now is to be narrated." (page 123). It is clear from what he writes, furthermore, that Brueggemann is convinced that the struggle between obedience and disobedience to the first commandment is a central theme in Old Testament holy history. It is the struggle between the people who hold to the promises of God and those he calls the "antipromise peoples." The antipromise people, according to Brueggemann, pose two dangers to the people of Israel: oppression and seduction.

A case can be made that the first commandment is a key to understanding the history of Thai Protestantism as well. In the context of the Thai church, the "antipromise people" are all of those who are not Christians in general and Buddhists (convinced or nominal) in particular. The relationship of Thai Christians to the "non-Christian" other is a complex and highly important one. From the beginning down to the present, foreign missionaries have focused on this relationship and tried to regulate it ostensibly for the sake of Thai Christians themselves. Thai churches, consequently, have what amounts to a fixation on their relationship with people of other faiths. They exhibit considerable anxiety as they try to figure out how to manage the conflicts (real and apparent) between the expectations of their faith and their culture.

How do those of us who are not Thai make theological sense of the struggle over the first commandment as a central dynamic in Thai church history? If we take the historical interpretation of events found in the Old Testament as normative for the Thai church, there is a clear mandate for separation. The church, that is, necessarily has to look at Thai culture and society with suspicion and fear, believing that the antipromise people are potential sources of oppression and seduction now as they were then. Historically, Protestant missionaries have largely, although not entirely by any means, taken seriously the Old Testament attitude (as especially mediated by the King James Version) that people of other faiths are heathens or infidels. They have taught the churches to maintain their distance from the larger society and culture, seeing them as being inimical to true Christian faith.

My personal theological approach is to take Christ and the gospels as normative and to measure the Old Testament approach to people of other faiths by Christ. Jesus saw in Samaritans a good that other Jews could not see. His attitude towards women ran counter to that of his society. He disagreed with the "righteous" who believed that wealth, power, and status were marks of the favor of God. The early church imitated his example when it decided that Gentiles did not have to become circumcised, re-culturized Jews before they could be followers of Christ.

From Christ's perspective, that is, people of other faiths or no faith are not antipromise people. They are the church's neighbors. They are people Christians are called on to love. It is extremely difficult to love your neighbor when you build high, hard walls of prejudice and judgment against them.

Herb Swanson  
Ban Dok Daeng  
July 2006

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## Articles

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### The War in Iraq & the American Heritage of Thai Protestantism

Herb Swanson

#### Introduction



Thai Protestantism is not just one thing, and there is not one "right" way to understand it. One intriguing and helpful way to view it is to see it as an exercise in problem solving. The challenge Thai Protestants have faced historically is how to combine international Protestantism, a product of the West, with a Thai religious consciousness. This is not to claim that Thai Protestant Christians spend their waking hours trying to work out their religious faith and cultural identity in light of their Protestant-Buddhist heritage. It is to maintain that many Thai Protestants realize to one degree or another that to be Thai and Protestant poses certain religious and cultural challenges to them especially in their relationships with their Buddhist relatives and neighbors.

Most Thai Protestants know, for example, that "traditional" Protestantism teaches that people who do not profess Christianity are condemned to eternal damnation. They also know that morally and behaviorally there isn't all that much difference between Buddhists and Christians apart from their religious allegiances. They know that they have been taught to refrain from participating in religious ceremonies that break the First Commandment, but they frequently are not sure precisely which ceremonies and what degree of participation is proscribed. They also realize that their Buddhist neighbors and relatives have no sympathy with those who refuse to take part in Buddhist ceremonial life. Some Thai church leaders realize that most missionaries think that the Thai churches flirt with syncretism too much, but they also know that missionary evangelism is markedly ineffective in bringing Thais to Christ in any numbers.

The problem that Thai Protestants have to solve, then, grows out of significant differences between their Western Protestant and Thai Buddhist-animist heritages. The matter is a complex one, to say the least. Protestantism, for example, values religious faith while Thai (Buddhist) religiosity mistrusts faith and values wisdom. Protestantism (at least in its missionary versions) is actively exclusivist in its attitudes towards people of other faiths while Thai religiosity is

passively pluralistic. Protestantism demands loyalty and the worship of a personal deity, but Thai Buddhism primarily requires adherence to a set of teachings and practices. Thai Protestants have inherited apparently contradictory sets of values, beliefs, and practices from Thai religious consciousness and from them have been constructing distinctive religious consciousnesses of their own (see "Northern Thai Protestant Attitudes Towards Other Faiths").

If it is true that Thai Protestants are working out distinctive faiths of their own from their dual Western Protestant and Asian Buddhist (and animist) heritages, it is important to define each element of that heritage as clearly as possible. This descriptive task is itself difficult since the concepts of "Western Protestantism" and "Asian Buddhism" are massively diverse phenomena each in their own right. There is a vast literature related to each one, and even those mountains of material do not encompass the concepts.

My purpose here is to refine the concept of "Western Protestantism" in its Thai historical context. Until after World War II, "Protestantism" in Siam/Thailand largely meant American missionary Protestantism, most especially American Presbyterianism. Understanding the nature of both is, thus, of crucial importance to understanding the formation and development of Thai Protestantism. This is a point I have made repeatedly and suffuses the work found on this website (see, esp. "Prelude to Irony"). Much of that work, however, has focused on American religious institutions and especially American Presbyterian thought and praxis. There is another way to discover important insights into the role of American missionary Protestantism in Thailand, which is to look at other sectors of American culture.

Somewhat to my surprise, an article on American military operations in Iraq that I found on line some months ago provides one window for viewing the cultural sources of American missionary behavior and thinking in Thailand. The following sections of this essay first summarize that article and then look at a number of parallels between 21st century American military behavior in Iraq and 19th and 20th century American missionary behavior in Thailand. These parallels reveal some key American cultural themes that are part of the mosaic of American culture, which the missionaries took with them to Thailand.

### **The U. S. Army in Iraq**

Writing in the November-December 2005 edition of *Military Review*, Brigadier General Nigel Aylwin-Foster provides a penetrating analysis of certain doctrinal and operational weaknesses of the U. S. Army's occupation of Iraq in the years 2002-2004. His article is entitled "Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations". The author is a British army officer who spent a year in Iraq working in close cooperation with the American army.

General Aylwin-Foster commends the U.S. Army for the way in which it swiftly defeated the Iraqi army and established control of the nation. He is much less complimentary of what has happened subsequently, arguing that the army has been "notably less proficient" at what American military officials term "Operations Other than War (OOTW)" (pp. 2-3). His paper is an attempt to come to grips with the "apparently paradoxical currents of strength and weakness" that he "witnessed at close hand over the course of a year" (p. 3). In coming to terms with the U.S. Army's failings in OOTW in Iraq, the author states,

"My overriding impression was of an Army imbued with an unparalleled sense of patriotism, duty, passion, commitment, and determination, with plenty of talent, and in no way lacking in humanity or compassion. Yet it seemed weighed down by bureaucracy, a stiflingly hierarchical outlook, a predisposition to offensive operations, and a sense that duty required all issues to be confronted head-on...Moreover, whilst they were almost unfailingly courteous and considerate, at times their cultural insensitivity, almost certainly inadvertent, arguably amounted to institutional racism." (p. 3)

With some minor changes in wording General Aylwin-Foster could just as well be describing the work of most of the American Protestant missionaries in Thailand from 1828 up to roughly 1920-not all, certainly, but most-and many since.

The author points to several failures of the U. S. Army including the failure to implement an effective counterinsurgency [COIN] strategy that is, first, "able to see issues and actions from the perspective of the domestic populations" and, second, understands "the relative value of force and how easily excessive force...can undermine popular support" (p. 4). He feels that the American military in Iraq was too often too willing to use excessive force to destroy the insurgency and failed to see how such force undermined its ultimate goals. He charges the Americans with being too "offensively minded" (p. 4).

The General argues that the problem with the American army is partly a strategic one. He readily admits that individual American soldiers frequently display deep levels of compassion towards the Iraqi people even when it is dangerous for them to do so. The U. S. Army as an institution, however, follows a general strategic policy that renders their compassion ineffective because it is fixed on the use of violent means to destroy the enemy. In pursuit of the objective, American soldiers are frequently insensitive to Iraqi cultures, especially newly arrived troops that have not yet adjusted to Iraq's complex cultural landscape. Only 6% of American military operations in Iraq from May 2003 to May 2005 were involved in activities aimed at improving local Iraqi security. The author quotes a document from the U. S. Department of Defense, which states, "There was a strong focus on raiding, cordon & search and sweep ops throughout; the one day brigade raid is the preferred tactic. There was a 'preference for large-scale kinetic maneuver' and 'focus on killing insurgents, not protecting the population.'" (p. 5) The American military focus, in sum, is on the use of force and the destruction of the enemy at the expense of local populations. It creates an environment of violence.

The American soldiers' sense of "moral righteousness" serves to reinforce their frequent insensitivity to Iraqi peoples. He writes, "This sense of moral righteousness combined with an emotivity that was rarely far from the surface, and in extremis manifested a deep indignation or outrage that could distort collective military judgment." (p. 6)

It is important to understand that General Aylwin-Foster litters his prose with qualifications to his generalizations. As a military officer, he appears to appreciate the very real strengths of the American military, but his thesis clearly is that there are substantial flaws in their doctrinal, strategic, and cultural approaches that undermine those strengths. The U. S. Army's strengths on the open battlefield, in short, become weaknesses in the realm of COIN.

He goes on to argue that even the "can do" attitude of the U. S. Army has its limitations and can, at times, actually be a weakness. It sometimes creates an atmosphere of optimism that tends to reject bad news as being defeatist. Such optimism can be misleading, and it discourages junior officer from passing negative assessments to their superiors.

Still another characteristic, a cultural one, has imposed limitations on the American military efforts in Iraq, namely dualism, or what he calls American perception of the "binary nature of war" (p. 9). The American military expresses this cultural strain in two ways. First, it takes "an uncompromising approach to conventional warfare that is particularly ill-suited to the nuances of COIN" (p. 9); that approach, as we have seen, is aggressive and violent even at the expense of local populations. Second, the American military believes that there are only two states, war or peace, and it therefore has trouble adapting itself to situations like Iraq that are something in-between. While the author does not tie the matter to dualism, he goes on to note the U. S. Army, like all military organizations, finds it extremely difficult to adapt to changing circumstances for cultural reasons.

It has to be repeated and emphasized that the author does not issue a blanket condemnation of the United States Army. It is an unrivaled conventional fighting force marked by a generally high degree of professionalism. He is impressed by numerous individual U. S. Army officers who are willing to be self-critical and to listen to the criticism of others. Still, its very success as a conventional fighting force as well as traits inherited from its mother culture have made it almost impossible for the army to adapt to the difficult exigencies of counter-insurgency and peace-keeping operations in Iraq. The result has been that inadvertently the U. S. Army has fanned the flames of insurgency. In some ways, it is its own worst enemy in Iraq although the ultimate victims of its failures to adapt are the Iraqi peoples.

### **The Parallels with Missionary Behavior & Thought**

I did not pick up Aylwin-Foster's article expecting to find anything relevant to Protestant missionary history in Thailand. My goal, instead, was to gain a better understanding of the tragic quagmire of the Iraq War. Yet, as I worked my way into the article, what I found was a British general providing a succinct, cogent summary of the historical experience of the Presbyterian (and other Protestant) missions of Thailand. The parallels go like this:

*One.* While the two historical Presbyterian missions (Siam Mission and Laos Mission) did not swiftly "defeat" Thai Buddhism-animism, they did overcome enormous financial, logistical, and sociocultural obstacles in the course of establishing their work. Their pioneering successes in a range of fields, particularly medicine and education, have been widely described and gained them much praise in their own day. They, like the American Army in Iraq, were "imbued with an unparalleled sense of patriotism, duty, passion, commitment, and determination" (quoted above). And also like the American Army these fine qualities proved to be a two-edged sword-the foundation of both initial success and long-term failure.

*Two.* Protestant missions in Thailand have also been plagued by precisely those problems that have also dogged the U.S. Army in Iraq as described by General Aylwin-Foster in the quotation above. [1] It created a cumbersome administrative mechanism that hampered it from responding

to changing conditions or momentary opportunities (see *Khrischak Muang Nua*, Chapter 4, beginning at "Mission Structures," pages 71-73). [2] Virtually all of the Protestant missions operating down to the present long insisted on missionary control in what amounted to a hierarchy where the overseas missionaries ruled from the pinnacle. An early, crucial example of the reality of missionary control is found in the Laos Mission's insistence that Christian converts had, first, to publicly declare their faith whatever the price and, second, to refuse to work on Sundays even in defiance of a patron's legal demand that they do so (corvée labor). The converts themselves proposed a less confrontational approach, which was rejected out of hand by the mission (see "Prelude to Irony," Chapter Five). [3] Most missionaries also shared the trait that Aylwin-Foster described, above, as "a predisposition to offensive operations, and a sense that duty required all issues to be confronted head-on." Until well into the 20th century, the members of the Laos Mission (with a very few notable exceptions) believed that they were at war with Thai culture and society. They believed it necessary to take an aggressive stance, which emphasized evangelism as its key weapon in conquering heathenism (see "This Heathen People," Chapter Three).

*Three.* Aylwin-Foster suggests, somewhat tentatively, that the American army's cultural insensitivity to the Iraqi people may well amount to unintentional "institutional racism." A generation ago, Coleman examined the role of racism in Presbyterian missionary thinking in their work with American Indians, and he concluded that the missionaries were not racists as such. That is, they did not treat the Indians as racially inferior. Although the subject requires more systematic study, the missionaries of the Presbyterian Laos and Siam Missions were also probably not racists in a formal sense. They believed that with proper training and given a Christian environment converts could become their equals in every way-eventually.

Aylwin-Foster, however, raises a slightly different point, one worth pondering in light of missionary history in Siam-Thailand. He's not accusing the individual soldier of racism but the U.S. Army of institutional racism, in other words a form of racism embedded in Army operations as such. Though not the language I used then, *Khrischak Muang Nua* is largely an argument for looking at the history of the Laos Mission as being, if not covert institutional racism, certainly overt and blatant institutional ethnocentrism. The line between institutional racism and institutional ethnocentrism is fuzzy at best and in terms of the practical results is probably not meaningful anyway.

One of the best examples of the pervasive and toxic nature of missionary ethnocentrism is found in the history of the Phrae churches. Those churches were long known for their lack of capable indigenous leadership, which defect the missionaries attributed to the churches themselves. Historically, however, it is clear that actions taken by the mission itself frustrated the emergence of that leadership (see *Khrischak Muang Nua*, Chapter 6, starting at "The Self-Governing Church in Phrae," p. 109-113; and Chapter 9, in the section "1930s," p. 157 and "The Poor Lost Sheep at Phrae and Revisited" [HeRB 5](#)). By whatever term we label it, missionary prejudices towards Thai Buddhist culture and society continues to be a central issue for the study of Thai Protestant church history and for the life of today's Protestant churches.

*Four.* The U.S. Army in Iraq, Aylwin-Foster argues has been too "offensively minded." At first blush, the charge seems almost absurd. What is any army supposed to do, after all, if not carry the battle to the enemy? On a classic battlefield, it is probably still true that "the best defense is a good offense," but Iraq today is even less of a classic battlefield than was Vietnam. Cultural sensitivity is as much a part of a winning strategy as is having sufficient ammunition and proper equipment. Knowing when not to shoot and relying on less rather than more violence are crucial to winning the people.

Precious few Protestant missionaries in Thailand even down to the present have learned the lesson that the American Army in Iraq also needs to learn, namely to be less offensively minded. The Laos and Siam Missions certainly engaged in aggressive evangelism that was often offensive to many of their auditors. Eventually, some (probably most) of the Presbyterians did learn that strident attacks on Buddhism are counter-productive, to say the least, but well into the 20th century some, at least, continued to practice a forceful, strident form of evangelism. In 1935, for example, the Rev. Kenneth Wells, a leading member of the United American Presbyterian Mission, complained that some Presbyterian missionaries continued to publish pamphlets and books that were derogatory towards Buddhism (see Kenneth E. Wells to Paul A. Eakin, 4 March 1935, Records of the American Presbyterian Mission, Payap University Archives).

As briefly reported in [HeRB 11](#), the participants in the Wiang Pa Pao "Consultation on Evangelism in the Northern Thai Context" generally agreed that evangelism in the northern Thai context requires an approach very different from the one taken by earlier generations of missionaries. It needs to be more patient, less overtly aggressive, and based on establishing personal relationships. While some missions and groups continue to promote Billy Graham-style evangelistic crusades, these working evangelists felt that such crusades do little if any good. They seem to have learned the lesson that General Aylwin-Foster believes the U.S. Army has to learn, namely to approach matters in ways that will win over local sentiment rather than be offensive to it.

*Five.* The General willingly admits that U.S. soldiers have shown impressive levels of compassion to the Iraqi people, but he argues that U.S. Army overly violent strategy renders that compassion inoperative. Although many Thais have converted to Christianity because of missionary compassion, especially in the form of medical care, missionary ethnocentrism and their aggressive evangelism have rendered that compassion less effective than it might otherwise have been. As in the case of the U.S. Army, Protestant missionaries have a long history of caring humanitarian service in Thailand. They have historically played an important subsidiary role in Thai modernization, especially in earlier generations. We cannot say with certainty whether or not that compassion would have led to a greater rate of conversion if they had carried out a less abrasive, ethnocentric strategy; but it is clear in retrospect that their strategy forestalled any such possibility.

*Six.* Aylwin-Foster's observation that the U.S. Army has a "binary" understanding of war almost exactly parallels what I have called missionary "dualism" in *Khrischak Muang Nua* and other pieces that I have written. In both cases, these American institutions have been unable to compromise at times when compromise and a less abrasive approach might have better served

their purposes. Both have historically shown an inability to adapt to changing circumstances because they see things only in terms of dualistic absolutes: right versus wrong, true versus false, and good versus evil. The U.S. Army, according to the General, seems unable to comprehend a situation where war and not-war ("peace" is a term we can hardly apply to Iraq today) intermingle and coexist. The Siam and Laos Missions, similarly, generally could not accept their "neighbors of other faiths" as anything other than adversaries. They taught their converts to think of people of other faiths as *khon nawk* (literally, "outsiders" - "gentiles") and to erect religious, social, and cultural boundaries between themselves and their neighbors. Christians thus frequently formed separate communities or gathered themselves into Christian quarters on the principle that it is not "appropriate" for Christians to live with outsiders (see [HeRB 4](#), "Religion and Community Formation in Northern Thailand: The Case of Christianity in Nan Province").

One of the most compelling descriptions of the "dark side" of Western dualism is found in Edward W. Said's classic work, *Orientalism* (1978. London: Penguin Books, 1995), reviewed in [HeRB 7](#). Said argues that Europe has used dualistic thinking virtually since ancient times to formulate a sophisticated, baseless prejudice against Arabs. It has used that prejudice to justify the historical subjugation of western Asia and to maintain domination of Arab peoples down to the present. Although Aylwin-Foster makes no mention of Said, his description of American military dualism and, more broadly, its reliance primarily on war-making force and only secondarily on peace-making alternatives would come as no surprise to Said.

### **Conclusion**

Some years ago I was asked why I did not do some comparative studies of Presbyterian mission fields in other countries with the two Presbyterian missions in Siam. My response then was that there is so much to do in the study of Thai church history that it leaves little time for such studies, which would involve huge amounts of primary research in any event. On further reflection, there is another reason. Broadly speaking, Presbyterian missionaries throughout the world and throughout the 19th century showed a great deal of uniformity in their three-pronged approach: evangelism, medicine, and education. Presbyterian missions in historical Siam, furthermore, replicated patterns long established in the United States for reaching the American Indians, first, and then later Catholics, Mormons, Jews, and most especially the "untamed" Western and Southern frontiers (see "This Heathen People," chapter six).

While comparative studies between Presbyterian missions have their uses and certainly no two missions were carbon copies of each other, more far-ranging comparative studies such as we've explored briefly here seem to me to be more useful. The 21st century American military is not a religious institution. Its mission and goals in Iraq are very different from those of Protestant missions. Its organization, funding, traditions, training methods, leadership styles, and virtually every other aspect of its being differs radically from 19th century Presbyterian missions such as the Laos Mission. Yet, across all of these differences we still find fascinatingly unexpected parallels in underlying philosophy and in the strategies employed by each.

Those parallels reinforce the perception that the Presbyterian missionaries in Siam, as well as American missionaries in Thailand more generally, have pursued their ministries along lines

largely mandated by their cultural background. The gospel they preached was not a simple, uncomplicated Christian one. It was, rather, an American expression of the gospel. In my personal experience, the missionaries of other nations in Thailand have done precisely the same thing in their presentation of the Christian message. They have preached and taught an Australian, a German, or a Korean version of the gospel.

The parallel case of the U.S. Army in Iraq is that it also serves to shed further light on the very human fact that Presbyterian strengths in old Siam were also weaknesses. Those parallels help us to identify still more clearly the particular combinations of strengths and weaknesses in Siam's two Presbyterian missions. General Aylwin-Foster's analysis, for example, lays bare the importance of the underlying passionate commitment of the American soldier in Iraq and how that passion cuts both ways as both a virtue and a defect. Most of the old-time Presbyterian missionaries clearly felt passionately about their religious cause. A fresh reading of the missionary archive for Thailand with an eye to its emotional content would almost certainly reveal hitherto unappreciated facets of the missionary enterprise. It would especially find, I am sure, that missionary passion also created as many (or more) problems as it solved.

The American military experience in Iraq is important to the study of missionary and church history in Thailand for another reason. It points to the fact that earlier generations of Presbyterian missionaries believed that they were on a holy crusade. From time to time right into the 20th century they employed the language of war to describe their mission. They had an enemy, Satan, and they were at war with Satan's agents in Siam (see *Khrischak Muang Nua*, Chapter Three, pages 39-42, starting at "Ideology of Expansion"). While not every missionary expressed herself or himself in such ways, this sense of being at war does potentially help us understanding many facets of missionary work. It may be one element, for example, in the conscious use of mission stations as Christian centers in a heathen land (see the short note, "Archipelagic Isolation," in [HeRB 6](#)).

In any event, comparative studies of other American institutions-their beliefs and strategies-and the American missions in Siam/Thailand will help us to see more clearly and fully the role the missionaries played in the formation of the Thai church. Though now dated, the bibliography in "This Heathen People" points to the literature that describes the common threads that run through American history, ones that "connect" the Laos and Siam Missions and the U.S. Army as parts of a far greater story. Comparative studies of American institutions, such as the U.S. Army in Iraq, offer one good way to explore those common threads and their importance for Thai church history.

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## Short Items

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### **Missionary History in the North: the Cartoon Version**

The local bookstores in Chiang Mai currently carry a little cartoon history of the city entitled, *Chiang Mai History, Cartoon Version* (Chiang Mai: Chiangmai Urban Studies Center,

2000, 2001) written by Isara Guntang. It is published in two versions, northern Thai and central Thai. In both version, page 14 contains a brief description of missionary history beginning with the Rev. Daniel McGilvary's arrival in Chiang Mai in April 1867 (nothing is said about his family). The cartoons include a picture of First Church Chiang Mai, a missionary giving vaccinations, McCormick Hospital, a portrait of McGilvary, and Sophia McGilvary teaching young girls to sew on her front porch (the beginning of today's Dara Academy). The text portrays the missionaries as engaging in three activities, evangelism, medicine, and education.

The story of Chiang Mai is presented as a grandfather telling his granddaughter about the history of the city, and in the last frame of page 14 the girl summarizes missionary history by saying, "Wow! The farang caused our community to progress, really."

Ach. Isara is to be credited for accurate research. The booklet uses proper Christian wording and gives accurate dates. Giving the missionaries a full page in the 28 pages of text is fair, and I have to confess that I was a little surprised to see mission work mentioned at all. If the summary is simplistic, it is surely not wrong, although it is interesting that the summary frame credits all farang with introducing progress into the city rather than just the missionaries. Still, it is heartening to see the role of the missionaries acknowledged in this brief popularized version of northern Thai local history.

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### **Soul Rentals**

The on line edition of Bangkok's second-ranked English newspaper, *The Nation*, for July 28, 2005 carried the following brief item on its front page:

"A student asked one of his former teachers at Thammasat University after the latter was named deputy prime minister: 'Sir, have you sold your soul to the politicians?' The academic-turned-deputy premier replied: 'No, I haven't sold my soul. I just rented it out.'"

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### **Gutzlaff after Siam**



Those who know anything at all about the history of Protestantism in Thailand know that Karl Gutzlaff was one of the first two Protestant missionaries to conduct evangelism in Siam, arriving in 1828. As was often in the case in the early days of Protestant missions in Siam, Gutzlaff was not all that interested in Siam itself. He saw it, rather, as a step towards China and devoted his work in Bangkok exclusively to the overseas Chinese in that city. His time in Siam bore little fruit and cost him the life of his wife. He soon left Bangkok to pursue his goal of evangelizing China. Gutzlaff, thus, quickly passes from the stage so far as Thai Christian history concerned, leaving little if any direct legacy to be passed on to the churches of Siam.

Karl Gutzlaff, it turns out, went on to have a long and controversial

career as an independent, part-time missionary in China, a career that causes one to wonder what might have happened if he had stayed on in Bangkok. In 1834, he accepted employment in China as an interpreter and official of the Department of Trade of the British Government, a position he held until his death in August 1851. On the side, he conducted independent missionary work and seems to have gained more evangelistic success than most full-time missionaries working for denominational mission boards. That success, however, generated a great deal of controversy and opposition because his approach contradicted the common wisdom of other missionaries in China. Gutzlaff believed that the Chinese churches would have to evangelize China themselves and that missionaries should work only as teachers and supervisors of Chinese evangelists. He also believed that Chinese converts did not have to "complete" their conversion by acquiring theological instruction before being baptized. In 1841, he established the Chinese Union in Hong Kong to carry out his goal of Christianizing all of China, and within a short time he began to report impressive successes by which dozens of evangelists were gaining hundreds of converts a year. He trained the evangelists and then sent them to the interior to evangelize particular localities. As an independent missionary, he depended on overseas funds to support his work, and he sent back a stream of optimistic, enthusiastic reports to Britain and Europe, which reports generated considerable funding for his work. He also took a tour of Britain and Europe that also won him numerous supporters and substantial funding.

The Chinese Union is a remarkable example of a conscious attempt to contextualize the Christian message. Gutzlaff did not engage in a great deal of theological training, thus encouraging the Union's evangelists to interpret the Gospel in Chinese ways. He employed a patron-client approach based on a deep sense of mutual trust between himself and the evangelists. He encouraged the evangelists to take a leading role in the Union on the premise that if he treated Chinese Christians like children then they would behave like children. He also thought that the missionaries should dress, eat, and live like the Chinese themselves.

Gutzlaff, inevitably, created a major stir among Protestant missionaries in China with this approach. Other missionaries, including colleagues working for the Union, criticized him for being naïve about the Chinese and for failing to ensure that they understood the Gospel correctly. Many of the Union's converts lapsed and some were habitual opium smokers. His critics also charged that Gutzlaff inflated his figures of converts and created a false impression in his correspondence with overseas donors. These critics were eventually able to undermine much of the confidence those donors had in Gutzlaff, who faced serious opposition by the time of his death. His problems were compounded by his own personality. He was a strong, dynamic person, but he had no tolerance for criticism or opposition. He wrote off his critics as enemies of the Gospel.

His later career in China sheds some light on the personality and perspectives of one of the first two missionaries to Siam. He was a highly dedicated visionary who seems to have had the courage of his vision. He was also arrogant and self-assured to a fault.

That career also anticipates an important controversy in the nineteenth-century histories of the both the Baptist and Presbyterian missions in Siam, namely the stance that missionaries took in their relationship to the converts. One set of missionaries in both denominations tended to trust

the converts and wanted to give them a major role in church life. This group of missionaries also tended to form personal patron-client relationships with the converts. They were, invariably, the most successful evangelists of the overseas Chinese and the Siamese. A second set of missionaries opposed the first set, voicing the same set of arguments against them as Gutzlaff's critics used against him. The tensions created had a major impact on Baptist work in Bangkok and on the Presbyterian Siam Mission, an impact that seems to have severely limited the number of converts gained by both missions. Had Gutzlaff stayed in Bangkok, he surely would have been just as controversial a figure there as he was in China.

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### **Getting the Past Straight**

Last November (2005), I attended a one-day conference on the subject, "What is Gnosticism?" held at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. During one of the "break out" sessions, which discussed diversity in the early church, a participant claimed that the sudden discovery by academics of diversity in the early church sounds much too convenient. It is, he argued, nothing more than a postmodern armchair reading of our own age back into the past. He also observed that whatever "the academics" think, "History is what happened." We can't change it.

Wrong. Several participants, including my humble self, quickly jumped on the errors of these sentiments. First, history is decidedly not "what happened." The past is what happened and cannot be changed. History is what historians write about the past, and it changes all the time. Second, it is normal for historians to change their views of the past as their own societies and cultures change because that change opens up new perspectives on all of reality including our understanding of the past. A prime example in American history is the history of American slavery, which before the 1950s and the rise of the civil rights movement was thought to have been largely beneficent. Third, as our discussion leader pointed out, since the 1940s discoveries of large amounts of new documents from the early church provide concrete reasons for reinterpreting early church history and the understanding that it was a much more complex phenomenon than earlier generations of church historians realized.

Finally, it has to be said that people who do not understand the past almost invariably think of the past as being one thing. The fact is that the past was just as complex and varied as is our present. Whether we're talking about the churches of Thailand, Australia, the United States, or any other nation, there are vast and rich differences in how Christians think, worship, and behave. The early church was no different because it was no less human.

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### **Identifying Core Theologies in Thailand & America**

An article posted on *The Christian Post* website on 9 June 2005, noted that it is difficult to identify an evangelical core group in the United States because only relatively small numbers of "evangelicals" display all of the key markers of evangelicalism. The Gallup Organization conducted a poll in April 2005, which sought to identify the percentage of evangelicals in the United States. It used three central beliefs to discern who are evangelicals including a literalist view of the Bible, engagement in evangelism, and having a born-again experience. While fairly large numbers of Americans agreed to one of these three, only 22% held all three. The Gallup

Organization concluded that while many Americans identify themselves as evangelicals only a relatively smaller number adhere to those tenets that evangelical leaders most frequently identify as being essential to evangelicalism.

My own more modest investigation of evangelical and ecumenical perspectives in CCT churches in the North found a situation in those churches similar to the Gallup Poll findings. Most people do not hold to a rigidly consistent perspective that can be identified clearly as being ecumenical or evangelical. Of the CCT participants involved, core groups of less than 10% each answered consistently as evangelicals or ecumenicals. Evidently the situation in the United States is not actually so different.

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### **Canadian Decline**

On 6 December 2005, the Presbyterian News Service (PNS) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) posted a news item entitled, "Researcher says membership losses pushing Canadian churches to brink of 'extinction'" According to the data reported in the article, the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) lost 53% of its total membership between 1961 and 2001. In the same period, the United Church of Canada (UCC) lost 39% of its total membership. Even the Pentecostals are reported to have lost 15.3% of their membership, although the period of loss was not clear.

One of the researchers quoted, Keith McKerracher, projected the extinction of the ACC by mid-century. Such predictions have become common in many Western nations, especially in Europe, although other researchers point out that most denominations like the ACC and the UCC have enough strong, growing congregations and higher judicatories to avoid actual extinction. That is, statistical decline will come to end-but not before denominations are significantly smaller still.

The question, as raised frequently on this website, is whether the churches of Thailand, esp. the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) face a similar future. While the picture is mixed, it is possible and even likely that within a decade or two the CCT will begin to show some statistical decline. Like virtually all mainline denominations around the world, it is almost certain that the CCT will not be able to find ways to reverse the decline when and if it begins.

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### **The Power of Church Music**

Years ago, a long-time convert to the Christian faith told me that before he became a Christian himself he hated the sound of Christians singing. It sounded alien. He now feels very different about singing in church and, like most Christians, finds both power and comfort in the music of the church.

These thoughts came to mind as I was reading Doran & Troeger's book on modern-day worship in the United States, *Trouble at the Table: Gathering the Tribes for Worship* (Abingdon, 1992). In arguing for the importance of church music to the life and work of the church, they write, "A church that neglects music will eventually find its powers for outreach and justice eroding." (page 58) In the Thai context, we might add to this sentence another that reads, "A church that neglects music will also eventually suffer a loss identity and a diminished integrity."

Putting aside for the moment the question of whether Thai churches should sing and use more identifiably Thai music or not, the very fact that Thai Christians sing together (in good times and bad) is an all but indispensable part of their faith and their identity in the Thai context. It is a gift from the missionary era, one that churches today continue to emphasize to the benefit of the church and its neighbors. It is true that Thai churches would do well to develop a more widely used "indigenous" hymnology. It is also true that they do equally well to incorporate praise music into their worship life. But, it would be sad if the churches stopped singing the songs they have inherited from the "old days," songs that have been an important element of their very identity as Christians. There is still power and meaning in those hymns.

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### **And the Power of History**

In an article on the interpretation of the history of India published in the 26 January 2006 on line edition of the *Christian Science Monitor*, the author writes, "Communities use history to define themselves - their core ideals, achievements, and grudges. Small wonder, then, that history is frequently reevaluated as political pendulums shift, or as long-oppressed minority groups finally get their say. History, and efforts to revise it, have touched off recent controversies between Japan and its neighbors over its World War II past, as well as between France and its former colonies over the portrayal of imperialism."

Sometimes, one wishes history weren't taken so seriously. It would be easier to write histories that more accurately reflect the actual events of the past and to propose historical explanations on the basis of the realities of the past rather than the politicized exigencies of the present.

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### **Shocking Pink**

Another example of the power of history described in #5 (above) also comes from the *Christian Science Monitor*, this time in its 12 May 2006 on line edition. The article is entitled, "Backstory: Cry over a Hue." It describes the historical restoration of an old southern U.S. mansion, once owned by one of the South's leading spokesmen for slavery and the Confederacy during the American Civil War era (1860s). It turns out that the mansion was originally painted a garish shade of pink, which strikes modern eyes in the South as ridiculous. Many, including a descendent of the original owner, insist that such a distinguished gentleman would never paint his home such a color. It turns out, according to the article, that such bright colors were common in the earlier and mid-19th century in the U.S. The evidence that this particular mansion really was painted pink is solid, and there is even a portrait painting of the owner's daughter with the building in the background, painted in pink.

This is just one more case of the public (well, a portion of it) imposing their personal tastes on the past while railing at historians for offending their sensibilities. It's not that historians get it "right" all the time, because they don't. It's just that they're more likely to be closer to the reality of the past more often-whether that reality offends them or not.

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## News & Notes

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### Church & Culture Among the Karen

On July 22-25, I had an opportunity to visit Thra'mu Esther Danpongpee and Thra'mu Chitlada (Ann) Kankaeo, former colleagues who continue to do church based research with the Thailand Karen Baptist Convention (TKBC). Their work was formerly conducted under the Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand. Ach. Esther has shown herself to be particularly creative in finding ways to promote the use of Karen tribal culture in the life of local Karen churches.

Ach. Ann completed a short course on church & community sociological research methods at Ban Nong Ched Nuey for 13 individuals (8 women, 5 men) that is quite impressive. She started with a five-day orientation course that taught the rudiments of conducting interviews and preparing questionnaires. Her students then carried out their own research projects on a range of subjects related to church and community life. Nearly all were acceptable and a few were very well done.

Ach. Esther, meanwhile, continues to pursue her vision of a Karen church firmly grounded in its own tribal culture in a number of ways. Under her guidance, the Ban Nong Ched Nuey Church and the Musikee Association continue to hold annual church & culture camps. These camps involve young people in a wide variety of activities aimed at teaching them to know and value their ethnic heritage. Ach. Esther has recently initiated a program for teaching Karen literacy to young people and adults. She trained some dozen or so individuals to be teachers, and those teachers are now teaching classes and tutoring individuals in learning to read and write Karen.

Both Ach. Esther and Ach. Ann are preparing a project proposal to be submitted to the Baptist Union of Sweden that, if accepted, will allow them to continue their creative and fruitful work for another three year period. Ach. Esther, meanwhile, has been invited to be a resource person at a conference on ethnic peoples in Southeast Asia to be held in Hong Kong this November.

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### Finally: A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume II

The first volume of Samuel Hugh Moffett's *A History of Christianity in Asia* appeared in 1992, and immediately took its place as a key source for the study of Asian Christianity. In that volume, Moffett told the story of the Asian churches from their inception up to 1500, when the Christian movement had all but died away on the Asian continent. It has been a long wait for volume two, which was finally published this year and brings the story up to the year 1900. A cursory look at the table of contents and the index suggests that Siam has received its fair share of attention, which means that Moffett's volume two now becomes one of the most widely available and therefore influential portraits of the history of Christianity in Thailand. See my review below.

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## **Wiang Pa Pao Church History**

In its early years, the Office of History produced a number of professional historical studies of local churches. While useful for the historical study of local Thai church history, local church members found little value in these long detailed studies, and eventually the CCT administration refused to fund the printing of longer studies. In later years, the staff of the Office began to work with local churches to write shorter historical sketches at the time of celebrations of local church histories. They are contained in memorial volumes of varying lengths. The latest of these studies has been produced by Janram Chaisri on the history of the Samakitam Church, Wiang Pa Pao. This is one of the oldest churches in the North, and it is good to have a description of its past however brief it is.

The historical narrative section of the memorial volume amounts to 24 of its 48 pages. It is largely descriptive and not intended to be critical in nature. However a substantial amount of research went into the preparation of that narrative so that it represents something more than the usual five page mis-remembrance of the past so often associated with local church historical memorial volumes. The volume itself is handsomely printed.

Citation: Samakitam Church, 123 Years of the Gospel in Wiang Pa Pao (A.D. 1882-2005): Samakitam Church. Wiang Pa Pao: Samakitam Church, 2005.

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## **Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia (CSCA)**

I came across this website in November '05. The CSCA is a part of Trinity Theological Seminary, Singapore, and it aspires to become a research center for the study of the church in Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia. It contains some resources, notably back issues on line of the journal Church and Society in Asia Today (begun in 1998). A quick look through found nothing specifically on the church in Thailand, but this looks like it will be an increasingly important resource for the larger study of Asian Christianity. The website can be found ([here](#)).

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## **International Youth Religiosity Project**

Under the direction of Dr. Philip Hughes, the Office of History of the CCT is conducting a two-year study of "young people and religion" (the age span is 15 to 25) in conjunction with the Religious Studies Department of Mahidol University and the Christian Research Associates, based in Melbourne. The project has a number of goals. It intends to provide data to the CCT on the attitudes of its young people towards faith. On a larger scale, it is studying the similarities and differences in religious outlook of Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian young people in Thailand. Finally, at the global level, it will do a comparative study of Thai and Australian young people using comparable data from a major study of youth religiosity now being conducted in Australia.

The project will be completed in 2007, and the results of the study will be available through all three of its participating agencies. It may well be that a summary of those findings will appear in

a projected HeRB 14 that might well appear in about July 2007.

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### **The Payap Archives is Moving**

The Payap University Archives will be moving from its present location at the Kaonawarat Campus of Payap University to a much larger and, it is to be hoped, permanent home on the main campus. It will take over most of the old main library building now that the library has moved into its new facilities. The move may begin as soon as this coming August or September (2006). Those who intend to go to Chiang Mai in the near future to use the archives should be in touch first in order to be sure it will be open to them.

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### **Herbswanson.com User Statistics July 2006**

I'm no longer checking user statistics for herbswanson.com on a regular basis. The last time I reported on user stats was two years ago in June 2004. At that time this website had just over 27 hits per day. By way of contrast, for the week of July 4-10, it had 871 hits for an average of just over 124 hits per day. As of the 10th, it had received a grand total of 48,442 hits since its inception in March 2003. The actual number is somewhat higher because a technical glitch wiped out the original counter early on.

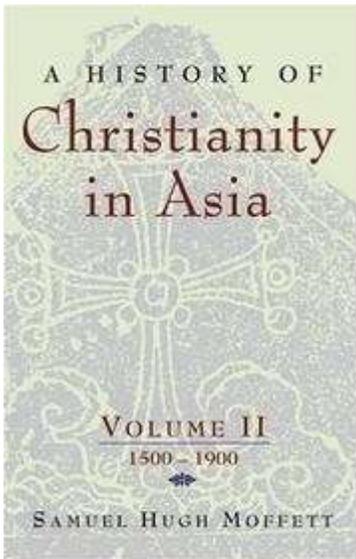
Users include scholars & other researchers, those interested in the church in Thailand, and the descendents of former missionaries. The pages users most often visit are: (1) HeRB; (2) Bibliography of Materials Related to Christianity in Thailand; and (3) "Prelude to Irony." While there are undoubtedly many extraneous hits, this level of use is more than ever motivation to maintain and, when I can, update the contents of the website.

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## Book Review

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**Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 2. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005.**



What follows is a review only of Moffett's sections, totaling 23 pages, on the history of Christianity in Thailand. The publication of this second volume of Moffett's all but monumental history of Asian Christianity is an important milestone both in the historiography of Christianity in Asia generally and in Thailand in particular. As noted in the brief news item above, Moffett's account of Thai Christianity now becomes its most widely available description. Students, researchers, and casual readers in Asian church history will use it to understand the history of Christianity in Thailand; and instructors will rely on it when they teach about the Thai portion of the Asian Christian story. Moffett's second volume will be read by audiences the humble historians of Thai church history can never hope to reach, which makes it an important work in Thai church historiography.

Moffett must be given credit for having done an admirable job so far as including Thailand goes. Thai church history is widely ignored in the standard world and regional histories of Christianity (see "Thai Church History: A Measure of the Field" in [HeRB 11](#)), but Moffett has devoted, as mentioned above, some 23 pages to the Christian story in Thailand. This compares very favorably with its neighbors: Burma is given only 17 pages and Vietnam just 6. Even vaunted Korea is treated in 32 pages. I'm not even quite sure that Christianity in Thailand deserves this level of attention, but it is exciting to see the field gain that attention.

The fact that Moffett's actual description of Thai Christian history is largely inadequate is not by any means his fault—at least not entirely. I do not know why the second volume was delayed so long; its publication has been expected for a decade. The delay in publication, in any event, has created a rather serious problem in terms of the book's Thailand sections. While Moffett's bibliography contains a number of more recent works, in the case of his Thailand material it is clear that he wrote it up years ago and did not follow up on more recent sources. This means that he presents an inadequate account of Thai church history based on a knowledge of that history that is some 15 to 20 twenty years out of date. With just a couple of exceptions, he relied on the old missionary historiography to tell his story; and he can hardly be faulted for that because at the time he evidently did his research that was nearly all that was available. The fact that volume two was published with a bibliography that includes more recent books leaves, however, the impression that the material contained therein is up to date. For Thailand, this is a false impression.

One cannot really fault the author, however, for presenting out dated material in an ostensibly recent publication. Unless he had made a serious effort to include more recent studies, even today he would have probably relied mostly on the same sources he used twenty years ago. For one thing, a significant part of what has been published more recently is found only in Thai. This includes what I feel is a fairly important history of pastoral care that I wrote a decade or so ago, which includes the history of Protestantism in central Thailand (Baptists as well as Presbyterians). For another thing, there has been very little work done on nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century church history in central Thailand in any language. The history of the early missionaries, surprisingly, has been almost entirely ignored by Thai historians as well as those in the West. Still another issue is that most of the work that's been done more recently is either specialist studies or focuses on twentieth-century church history, which history lies beyond the scope of Moffett's second volume.

Yet another problem Moffett would face in using more recent sources is that many of them are hard to find in the United States. Maen Pongudom's pioneer study of missionary attitudes towards Buddhism, which was available when Moffett did his research, is a case in point. Dr. Maen did his studies in New Zealand, and I'm not sure if a copy of his dissertation can even be found in a public repository in North America. It remains true today that if a researcher is going to "really" dig into Thai church history he or she has to visit Chiang Mai and the Payap University Archives. There is so much now that is only available in Thai that a reading knowledge of Thai is also important for the study of twentieth-century Thai church and missions history.

Even so, Moffett did overlook at least one key work in missionary history in Thailand that available to him, namely Donald Lord's better than adequate biography of Dan Beach Bradley (see my review in [HeRB 11](#)). Moffett's rendition of early Thai Protestant history would have benefited greatly by using Lord. Moffett also includes my short study of missionary in Phet Buri, *Towards a Clean Church* (1991), in his bibliography, but he does not refer to it in the text. One wonders if he actually saw the book, as his citation for it is incorrect.

The problem Moffett faced in sources is seen even more clearly in his brief descriptions of Catholic history in Thailand. They are much more brief and limited in large degree to the doctoral thesis of Dr. Surachai Chumsriphan, completed in 1990. Moffett's skimpy treatment of Catholic history in Thailand reflects the totally inadequate state of our knowledge of that history. It is to be hoped that at some point the Catholic Church in Thailand will develop a much larger body of historiographical works than exists at present.

Moffett can be faulted, however, for his entirely inadequate grasp of Thai history generally. His description of the historical background of the Thai churches is inept. It is particularly regrettable that he chose to feature Anna Leonowens' work in his introduction to later nineteenth-century Thai history (page 595). In his description of Thai Christian history, Moffett also makes a few errors that he should have avoided. For example, he confuses the relationship of the two Presbyterian missions in Siam with the presbyteries found by those missions and suggests that the founding of the North Laos Presbytery resulted in the establishment of the Laos

Mission-not true at all (page 603). More generally, Moffett makes a series of small mistakes that reflect his lack of familiarity with Thai culture, history, and even geography. He several times refers to central Thailand as "the south" (see. esp. page 356), which is an interesting blooper as it implies a northern Thai perspective. At another point he seems to confuse two chao luang ("princes") of Chiang Mai, Chao Intanon with Chao Kawilorot (page 596). One has to expect such mistakes in a work as broad as Moffett's two volumes, but they do detract from his overall description of Thai church history.

At still other points, Moffett simply does not do a good analytical job. One glaring example is his description of the Buddhist reaction to Protestant missions in Thailand (pages 598-599). The sum total of his description is, first, to mention King Mongkut's reforms of Buddhism, which he does not link to the missionaries at all; and, second, to relate an anecdote taken from *Khrischak Muang Nua* about a young boy's avowal that he was a Thai, not a Christian. This is all the evidence he cites to make his point that Thai Buddhist national culture "was an almost impermeable wall against the penetration of other religions from foreign cultures." That generalization is not without truth, but the facts he marshals to back it up are totally inadequate. Otherwise, in that section on Buddhist reactions he devotes a fair amount of space to the work of Dr. Samuel R. House, which has no bearing on the subject heading of the section at all.

Given the sources he used and his constraints in terms of space, it is difficult however to quibble with Moffett's interpretations of Thai church history. He does capture a number of key themes, and his critical analysis is adequate generally. Overall, however, his 23 pages on Thailand are not all that helpful. It's as if all of the work done over the last twenty years doesn't even exist. Furthermore, knowledgeable historians of Thailand will have trouble taking Moffett seriously because his general understanding of Thailand and Thai history is seriously flawed. In sum, while we can be glad that Dr. Moffett has given Thailand a prominence it seldom receives, one still wishes the final product could have been stronger than it is. It too much resembles the outdated historiography it relied on to tell the story.