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Lead Essay

Introducing HeRB



The acronym HeRB stands for "Herb's Research Bulletin." It is, I suppose, an act of considerable conceit to name an academic journal, however modest in scope and intent, after oneself. But, then, why not? HeRB picks up where my email diary, HeRD (Herb's Research Diary) left off when I stopped sending it out in 1999. I used HeRD to share a wide variety of ideas garnered from my own research, the work of my colleagues in the Office of History, and from other places. The press of other work and the tedium of putting out 20 HeRDs a month finally brought that enterprise to an end—first to my utter relief and later to my lingering regret. Over the last few months, a number of recipients of HeRD, six in number to be precise, have told me that they'd like to see HeRD start up again. With that encouragement, I've decided to launch a related but different venture, a research bulletin that will come out two or three, maybe four times a year. No subscription rates. No commitments by reader or writer.

Egotistical or otherwise, there is a role for HeRB. Since the beginning of the Payap University Archives (then known as the Payap College Manuscript Division) in 1978, I've played a continuing role in developing the study of the history of Thai Protestantism. That role means that I frequently have opportunities to learn things and be involved in research, my own and that of others, that should be shared more widely. HeRD allowed me to do that. But, the HeRD entries were always short, seldom more than 400 or 500 words at the most, frequently only 200 or so words. Not all the recipients enjoyed having HeRD constantly turning up in their inboxes. There is no question but that some people were dumping them right into the trash, unread. So, I'm going to try this format for awhile and see what happens. My goal is to do three or four HeRBs this year and then decide if it is worth continuing on a long-term basis.

The purpose of HeRB is to inform you about the history of the church in Thailand—and other things that seem worth passing along—as well as to be something of an English-language clearinghouse for church-based research in Thailand. There is a need for such a clearinghouse, and I'm hopeful that HeRB will help to fill that need.

From the outset, it should be emphasized that HeRB is a personal research bulletin. It speaks for no one but me. That's one good reason for the name of the bulletin, rather than one that might imply an official connection to the Church of Christ in Thailand's Office of History, my employer, or to the CCT itself. I prefer it this way because I do intend to use HeRB, as I used HeRD, as a "bully pulpit" to press home my perspective on the past, present, and future of the church in Thailand. Those of you who know me already know what that perspective is and those who don't will know it soon enough. There will be, however, room here for disagreement and rebuttal, dialogue and discussion for those of you who seek these things. Letters to the editor will be gratefully received and, where appropriate, included in following HeRBs.

As for this issue, most of it is self-explanatory. The article on history and local churches in northern Thailand represents some of my own thoughts on the experience of the Office of

History in its first twelve years (1988-2000); it's a good article for this inaugural issue of HeRB. I would like to thank my colleague at the Office of History, Thra'mu Esther, for allowing me to reproduce her paper on Karen creation stories. Nothing like it has been produced by the Karen churches in Thailand before this, and I understand that it has been circulated among and favorably commented on by Karen church leaders in Burma. With these comments, you're cordially invited to wander through HeRB 1. Let me know what you think. Peace.

Herb Swanson
Ban Dok Daeng
March 2002

Articles

Reflections on History and the Local Church in Northern Thailand

Herb Swanson

Introduction



The Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) established its Office of History in January 1988 with a variety of goals and tasks in mind, first among them being the study of local church history. Since the Office of History has just completed its first cycle, this meeting of the History Association of Thailand on the subject of "Local History and Local Wisdom" provides an appropriate opportunity to reflect, briefly, on the Office of History's experience with local church history, particularly among the lowland and highland people of northern Thailand. We have been in search of a process, a search that is still going on, and I hope that the experiences we have accumulated during that search will be of some value to others.

The Office of History currently has a staff of five employees, including three working in its office in Chiang Mai, one in Amphur Mae Chaem, Chiang Mai Province, and one working in Uttaradit Province. Now, we also have one short-term assistant, also working in Uttaradit. Since 1988, the Office has conducted local church history research in several churches in Chiang Mai Province, conducted a major, five-year project among the churches of Nan Province, carried out a smaller project with a group of Karen churches in Amphur Sangklaburi, Kanchanaburi Province, and is currently supervising and staffing two projects, one among Karen churches in Chiang Mai Province and the other among the churches of Uttaradit Province. All of these projects have been done with churches belonging to the CCT. Through necessity, all of these projects have emphasized collecting data through oral history interviews, although we use such documentary materials as are available. The Office has carried on a wide variety of other research, teaching, and publishing work, but most of our work has been ultimately aimed at supporting and supplementing our local history research.

Foundational Concepts

One hesitates, frankly, to introduce fundamentally religious concepts into a meeting of academic historians and to introduce Christian concepts into a meeting of people of other faiths or no faith. For many academics, religion is a matter of superstition, and for many Thais, Christianity is an alien, intrusive religion that seems to have little respect for the faith of others. Yet, the Office of History's experiences in the conduct of its local history research have been guided from the beginning by religious values and ideas that have to be explained if that experience is to be understood.

First, although an agency of a national Christian organization, the Office has always emphasized the study of local churches and desired to use historical research to strengthen those churches. Strong local Christian communities, centered on churches, are important to the life and work of the Christian faith in every country. They are especially important when the church is a very small minority group, such as is the case in Thailand.

Second, the Office of History sees its own work as a form of religious work, or "ministry," in Christian terms, and it conducts its research according to religious values. These values include attitudes of concern for others, humility, and self-denial. In our research, we have especially emphasized the importance of listening to the life experiences of people in local churches. Listening is a difficult skill, one that requires close attention to the other person. Religious attitudes, based on the example of Christ (or the Buddha, for Buddhists), are especially important in working with local church people, because the Office of History staff are all "acharns," and there is a temptation to take a superior attitude or treat local people with little respect.

Third, the Office's motivation to serve and strengthen local churches has also encouraged it to emphasize high standards for its own research, standards as high as possible in our situation. We are convinced that there is no contradiction between being individuals of religious faith and professional historians. We are "believers," but we also realize how important it is to set aside our religious beliefs in evaluating and interpreting data. It is important to be self-critical of our own theologies and ideologies. It is especially important not to confuse religious doctrines with actual historical events. As Christians, we are believers, but as historians, we are agnostics. This situation is not any different from other historians, even those who claim to have no religious beliefs. All historians have ideologies, political orientations, and prejudices. All competent historians are both believers and agnostics.

In sum, it is the Office of History's ministry to use the best historical methods possible to the benefit of the churches of the Church in Christ in Thailand. We have to maintain a balance between religious and professional values. And, we have to always keep our ultimate goal of using our professional skills for the benefit of others as the central focus of our work.

Experience

The Office of History began its work in 1988 with a misconception, namely that it would do research for local churches, tell the churches what it had learned, and help the churches to discover new directions for their lives from the results of the research. The approach was a failure. Local churches were happy to have the Office study their histories, but they were unable

to use the results of its research in a meaningful way. In one case, a church rejected the major conclusions we reached concerning its life, but even in those cases where they accepted and understood the meaning of our research for them, they could not of themselves move from historical understanding to programmatic change. The Office became aware of this problem within less than two years of its founding, and attempted to deal with the problem by initiating the study of a whole district rather than individual churches. We hoped that districts could make use of historical data, interpreting it to its churches. We chose District Five, Nan, as our field, and during the early 1990s invested a great deal of time traveling to Nan Province to study its 18 churches and organized Christian groups. This approach was also a failure, in spite of the heavy investment in time made by the staff of the Office of History. At the end of the study, we presented a series of conclusions and recommendations that suggested the need for important changes in district thinking and strategy. Some important leaders rejected some of our conclusions. Others did not really understand their importance. In any event, the district leadership showed little inclination to make the changes we suggested. The fault was not theirs. It was ours, for using a research process that did not involve local people in the study of their own histories enough so that they could appreciate the data we presented and experience for themselves the lessons we had learned about them.

It took us several years, but the Office of History finally learned that we could not achieve our goal of using historical research to strengthen local church life by doing that research ourselves. We had to find ways to involve the churches in the research process. To that end, we initiated a project studying the Karen churches of the CCT's District Sixteen, located in Sangklaburi, and employed, part-time, a pastor from that district to carry out the research. The Office trained him in Chiang Mai, and staff members made several visits to Sangklaburi to support, encourage, and supervise his research. Our hope was that a local researcher could become the channel for making use of the data collected on the field and the lessons learned from that data. Although the Office collected a great deal of material and did publish the results of this project, we failed in our primary goal of "empowering" local churches through historical research. The part-time researcher was not able to divorce himself from his many other duties sufficiently to complete the project or participate in the interpretation of the project to the churches. Sangklaburi is too far away from Chiang Mai for the Office of History to carry out those tasks itself.

Since 1997, the Office of History has entered a third phase in our search for a way to involve local churches in the study of their own lives and use that study to strengthen them as religious communities. We are employing two related strategies that offer increased potential for the use of historical research for local church life. First, we now employ two full-time field researchers, each researcher working with a cluster of churches of which she herself is a member. As indicated above, one researcher works with CCT churches in Uttaradit Province and the other works with CCT Karen churches in Amphur Mae Chaem, Chiang Mai Province. Second, the Office now sponsors two-month, hot season historical training and research projects for seminary students preparing to become full-time Christian workers. To date we have sponsored two such projects with the Karen churches and one in Uttaradit. Together, the projects have involved 21 seminarians from theological schools in both Chiang Mai and Bangkok.

The Karen church history project and training of Karen theological students has proven itself especially fruitful in unexpected ways. During the 1998 hot season, we trained 9 Karen seminarians in our first hot season project, having them spend several weeks in actual historical research in a number of local churches. Both the students and our Karen field person soon became especially interested in traditional Karen culture and religion. As Christians, they'd lost contact with a great deal of traditional Karen life and were extremely excited as they talked with older Christians, converts who still remembered and cherished the older life of the Karen. The students began to rediscover for themselves their ethnic identity and to see how important it is for Christian churches to preserve and enhance, rather than ignore, traditional culture and beliefs. During the 1999 hot season, a second group of students studied traditional Karen religion more directly and spent time living with and interviewing traditional Karen. Thus, our work with the Karen has taken new directions, emphasizing the study and reclamation of Karen culture and religion for the contemporary life of Karen churches. To a limited extent, our field staff person has been able to involve some local people in this task, and, in November 2000, she led her first consultation on using traditional Karen religious beliefs to interpret and enrich Christian theology.

In the meantime, the Office has become directly involved in the training of theological students, both in the study of Thai church history and in research methods. For some five years, two members of the staff have been adjunct instructors at the McGilvary Faculty of Theology, Payap University. While this instruction is not aimed specifically to the study of local church life, much of it is intended to encourage theological students to gain a better understanding of that life through the study of its history. During the 2000 hot season, six students engaged in a history research project in Uttaradit Province that was fashioned after the Musikee Karen projects. Although these students did not become particularly interested in local culture as such, they did learn a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of local churches and came away with a much deeper respect for the wisdom of local church people. The project emphasized the idea that the local people know their own situation best; in their communities, they are the "acharn" and theological students, though better educated formally, must be their students. They must respect the local people as their teachers.

The Office staff involved in theological training has supervised several masters' theses, most of them directed to topics related to local church life and renewal. They include, among other subjects, study of the current state of religious education in churches, methods for training converts, the financial status of pastors, church assistance for those testing HIV-positive, and the care of the elderly by churches. In most cases, students become quite enthusiastic about what they learn. Our experience is that the interview process is especially valuable to students because it brings them into direct contact with local people. The use of simple questionnaires has also been very valuable.

Lessons & Future Directions

At this time, the Office of History is planning to expand its educational involvement to include a Lahu Bible school related to the Church of Christ in Thailand. Lahu church leaders have asked the Office to help the Lahu churches preserve their histories, and we have together worked out a

three-semester course that will involve the students in studying Thai church history generally (first semester 2001), learning research and writing methods (second semester 2001), conducting research (hot season 2002), and then teaching each other what they learned (first semester 2002). This curriculum will begin this May and will involve about 15 students, if all goes according to plans. The Office of History will also work with the McGilvary Faculty of Theology to assist Masters' students in the research and writing of M.Div. Theses, aiming to make those theses more relevant to local church life and issues. Still another possible project under discussion would involve the Office in training local church pastors to use basic research skills to improve their work, learn to know their church members better, and collect data for solving specific local problems. We should note and emphasize that all of this training will be directed to providing present and future local church leaders with research skills. The goal is to help them learn the value of local wisdom and participate in preserving and using that wisdom in the daily life of local churches.

The Office of History also plans to expand and make permanent its consultations on the relationship of Karen culture to the Church of Christ in Thailand's Karen churches. These consultations could include, eventually, churches in Burma as well as Thailand. The Office's goal is to encourage Karen churches to learn, preserve, and actively incorporate traditional Karen values and beliefs into the life of the churches, while adapting Karen culture to modern realities. One important aspect of this work is the collecting of traditional Karen religious poems and tales, which comprise an important repository for traditional Karen beliefs. In Uttaradit Province, meanwhile, the Office's field staff person has become a key figure in developing better religious educational programs for the local churches, acting as a liaison between national church agencies and the local churches. The Office's work in Uttaradit is also encouraging national and regional leaders to reflect on the problems faced by tiny Christian groups, which lack leadership skills and resources for maintaining a viable Christian community.

Since its founding in January 1988, the Office of History has slowly shifted its emphasis from original research to training others to do research. While the Office still engages in research, it increasingly sees itself as an agency for teaching research skills and attitudes that reflect its central concern with strengthening the lives of local churches and Christian communities. It has shifted its operational focus from its Chiang Mai office to placing full-time researchers in the field. That is to say, it is involving itself more directly and closely in the lives of local people, primarily through employing qualified local people to carry out research and training in their own places. At the most general level, the Office of History began its work with a vision of doing research to provide data for local churches and church leaders. It now believes that its ministry is to provide skills to local church people and leaders so that they can gather and evaluate data for themselves. In the Age of Information, this shift in focus is an important one. It aims to "empower" local churches and leaders by giving them access to informational skills so that they can become independent information producers and knowledgeable, capable information consumers within their own contexts.

Our experience, in sum, has moved us away from doing research for local people to equipping those who are and will be local leaders with research skills. The original goal of using the study of church history and research for strengthening local church life has remained. It is clear,

however, that we cannot achieve that goal through our own research. Our task has become to support and encourage local leaders to carry out those tasks. Our two field workers have begun to make important contributions to the churches they work with and are the focus of much of our efforts at the moment. It may be possible to add a third field worker within the next two years, although it is not clear whether we will be successful or not in doing so. In the long term, however, the Office of History has begun to create a pool of local leaders with some training in research methods and understanding of how to use them for local church life. It is our hope that they will be agents for the preservation and adaptation of "people's wisdom" in the years to come.

Conclusion

Thailand has become a noisy nation. Advertisers shout their message. Politicians shout their message. Loudspeakers blare out everywhere. Televisions and CD players inundate us with sound. The wisdom of the people was born in an earlier, quieter age, one where materialistic values did not dominate and where local voices had authority. While we cannot go back to that simpler time and would not even want to, it does have much to teach us. It is worth listening to, preserving, and adapting to our so-called modern world. Religious values can be an invaluable aid in achieving the goal of preserving and adapting local wisdom in the modern world. Those values teach us to approach local people with humility and a desire to serve them without dominating them, to assist them in gaining a voice in this noisy world. Those values encourage us to listen effectively and to learn truly. The experience of the Office of History over the last thirteen years has reinforced the importance of our fundamental values to our work with local people.

Note: This article was originally presented (in Thai) to the annual meeting of the History Association of Thailand, Chulalongkorn University, 17-18 February 2001.

Karen Stories of Creation

Esther Danpongpee

Introduction



Before this I never gave much thought to Karen Theology, and I did not understand very clearly what the term might mean. My lack of understanding, in fact, led me to disparage the traditional theology of my own tribe. It caused me to misunderstand the original beliefs of our ancestors.

During the hot season breaks of 1998 and 1999 (March and April) a number of young Karen seminarians, studying in Thai-language seminaries in Bangkok or Chiang Mai, joined with me to study our traditional Karen beliefs, culture, and social organization as well as the history of our Karen churches. During this study they also had to spend time learning to read and write Karen more fluently. From our study, our hearts and minds have been opened as we came to know the

actual theological beliefs of the Karen people. We discovered how precious those beliefs are, and we feel a deep urge to preserve the beliefs of our people. In addition to all of this, I personally have come to realize that my Christian beliefs are one with the original beliefs of the Karen. We can agree in almost everything, and our differences are very few.

Among our many beliefs, we Karen also have creation stories and an understanding of creation that is very similar to that of the Christian faith. I feel motivated to write on this topic of creation stories so that Karens, both Christian and non-Christian, will know that we share one understanding about God and about God's creation. The original Karen concept of creation is that everything in this universe does not come about on its own. Everything has come about through God's plan and work, and everything is His handiwork. Knowing the creation stories of the Karen and what our ancestors believed traditionally demonstrates that all of us together worship the one God.

All of the resources I've used and interviews I've conducted with both Christians and non-Christians prove that the Karen people have a concept of God who is the creator of everything in this universe. The greatest difficulty I've faced in discovering the original beliefs of the Karen concerning God and creation is that traditional Karen don't have people who write down their beliefs. We have to rely on Christian writers, but for the most part it is clear that these Christian writers have spent a lot of time with the non-Christian Karen and worked with them. Through their writings we can get new insights into what the traditional Karen people actually believe about God and creation. In fact, there are enough similarities between us that it is easy for Christians to share Christ with traditional Karen, because they already have the basic concepts they need to understand Christ. Sharing becomes difficult only when traditional Karens mix their beliefs with those of other religions. Then it is difficult to bring Christ to them. Even so, however, when we interview those who are influenced by other religions, we can still see that they have a concept of God as creator.

I know that most Karen people at present do not know the original beliefs of our tribe and do not care about them. This is the way that may lead our tribe to perish. So, I want to write on this theme to share my concern with all Karen. I hope that this may encourage the Karen people to awaken and preserve our own beliefs.

History of the Karen

The Karen people have a history that mixes Christian with traditional materials. While modern historians have largely rejected this history, it is still worth telling here. Many of us still believe that it is true. That history states that the Karen is a tribe that has descended from Noah's son, Shem, and were originally located in modern-day Mesopotamia. According to this history, the Karen people migrated away from Mesopotamia before Abraham left there and before Jacob and Isaac were born.¹ Hser Ti states that the Karen people moved from Babylon in 2234 BC and arrived in Mongolia in 2194 BC. They then departed from Mongolia in 2017 BC and arrived in Turkistan in 2013 BC. Again in 1866 BC, they moved from there and reached Tibet in 1864 BC. After a period of 476 years they left Tibet in 1388 BC and arrived in Yunnan, southern China in 1385 BC. There they divided themselves into two groups for the continuation of their wanderings. The first group contained 99 families and they left Yunnan in 1128 BC and arrived

in Burma in 1125 BC. The second group contained 33 families, their departure from Yunnan was in 741 BC, and they arrived in Burma in 739 BC.²

Many historians hold that the Mon and the Karen once had a very close relationship. During the reign of the Burmese King Alaungpaya, Burma made war on the Mon and defeated them in battle. So, they fled and as they had good relations with Karen, they came to Karen to escape. When Burmese troops followed the Mon, the Karen became very concerned about the danger that they faced, and some of them left Burma and came to Thailand. The mass exodus of Karen people at that time was recorded as the greatest one in the history of the Karen. After that there were other reasons that caused Karens to move to Thailand. One of the greatest problems they faced was economic hardship. This and other problems weren't found just among the Karen. Other hill-tribes faced them as well.³

Some historians claim that the Karen actually entered modern-day Thailand before any of the Tai peoples arrived, although the Karen were few in number at first. The people who were already in Thailand when the Karen arrived were known as Lwa. Today, the Karen are the largest of the hill tribes living in Thailand. At first they settled in northern Thailand, but due to the many problems they had to face they soon became scattered over much of the country.

The Karen People

The Karen people mostly love to stay in mountainous and forested places and want to stay by themselves, living calmly in and with the natural world. Karen homes are mostly made of wood and bamboo and the roofs are made of leaves, wood or bamboo. Karen men and boys traditionally wear the Karen shirt that we call the hse plow, red with stripes of other colors, and hse mo xo, brown with stripes of other colors. Karen girls and unmarried women wear a white long dress and married women wear black or blue seed blouses or embroidered blouses with red skirts. The middle of the skirt displays the python pattern. Ornaments for females include embroidered turbans, seed necklaces (red, yellow, and white), silver necklaces, and silver earrings.

The whole group of Karen tribes can be divided into four divisions, according to their dialectical differences. These are the Sgaw, Pwo, Bwe, and Tounghu. The Sgaw and Pwo groups are the largest and most widely scattered. Each group of Karen has their own language which is very different from the rest to the extent that they do not understand one another easily. Sgaw Karen is the main language that almost every group can use. There are two Karen written languages, Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen. Each group has different cultures, but the differences are not great. The main elements of the cultures are the same.

Originally, all the Karen people held entirely to their own traditional religious practices, known as *aw xae*. Thra Kwaw Htoo, writing under the theme of "Tha Our Precious Heritage," states that the traditional *aw xae* Karen were a people who believed in the Only True God who is the Lord of heaven, earth and all creation. We know this because of the *tha* (traditional poems) that our ancestor left for their children as commandments. Even today, there is a group of Karen people in Burma who still preserve this kind of belief and continue to live according to the commandments of their ancestors and to worship the only true God.⁴ The *aw xae* Karen of

Thailand, however, today mostly do not live according to the old commandments. They do not know or understand very clearly the traditional teachings of their patriarchs. Their worship is largely directed to the *thi ko mu xa*, the lords of spirit-beings and of heaven and earth, as well as other spirit-beings.

Thus, we can see that the Karen are a people with a long history and with traditions that go back many, many generations. They have a distinctive language and culture. The Karen also have a distinctive religious consciousness which includes a clear conception of God as creator.

The *Tha* & Karen Religious Consciousness

The Karen do not have formal histories as such, and the only way we can discover the traditions and ancient culture of the Karen is through the *tha* which is a kind of oral literature. In ancient times there was a large quantity of *tha*. Marshall, in his study of the Karen people in Burma, writes that the *tha* were a "bard literature" comprising tales, legends, and mythical stories that were handed down from generation to generation for the instruction of later generations.⁵ He writes,

A large proportion of these are in the nature of beast tales or fables, such as are found in India, Europe, and Africa. Some of the myths and legends are in the forms of verse and were formerly recited at length at funerals and on other festal occasions, or were sung to the accompaniment of the harp. There are also the epics containing the "Y'wa" legends. Finally, a considerable amount of wise instruction is contained in the numerous short sayings, proverbs, and riddles that have survived.⁶

We can see, then, that the *tha* are an important part of the life of the Karen people. They should not be separated from their *tha*. It is not worthy for them to be separated.

Than Bya, a learned Karen Christian clergyman, states that the Karen people are distinguished by the fact that they are a tribe that chants *tha*. He says that when one listens to the sound of Karen words and their voices as they chant the *tha* one hears a fluent, poetic language that takes on the nature of an epic. Than Bya claims that among those peoples who don't have their own written language, there are few that have access to a wealth of knowledge such as is found in the *tha*. Karen elders in the past were illiterate, but they were still learned men, speaking the oral, poetic language of the *tha*. Down to the present traditional Karen use the *tha* every time they celebrate a special occasion. They speak to one another, that is, in the language of *tha*. These *tha* contain wonderful and beautiful words, soft and tender words, good and true words. Those who read these *tha* don't lose wisdom; they get more wisdom. It was said that in the old days those adept in chanting the *tha* could continue their chants for seven days and seven nights and still not recite all the *tha* there were to recite. Whenever the Karen chanted their *tha*, they always began with an especially beautiful *tha* just as their ancestors taught them to do. The *tha* are the narrative sources for the Karen's understanding of God, His creation, the ancestry of the Karen, and their descendants down to the present. Traditional Karen greatly enjoy hearing about these things.⁷

The *tha* are very important to the Karen for several reasons. First, they are the precious, invaluable inheritance of the Karen people. Second, they contain and exemplify the beauty of Karen culture. Third, the *tha* tell us about our ancestors, their descendents, and our history. Fourth, the *tha* contain prophecies about future things. Fifth, they reveal the character, quality, and attitudes of the Karen people.⁸ We can see, then, that our Karen ancestors use *tha* on every occasion and everywhere in their lives. The language of the *thawas* used by the wise elders of the people, women and men, as part of their daily language as well as in their teachings, stories, and riddles. They were used in worship and in the traditional ceremonies of *aw xae*. We can't understand how the Karen understand God or creation without using *tha*.

The Karen Understanding of God

The *tha* show that from their beginnings the Karen have had a concept of God. Htoo Hla E, author of a collection of *tha* entitled *The Golden Book*, states that the *tha* contained in that collection were collected entirely from traditional Karens in the Karen Year 2673 (ca. 1934).⁹ The *tha* that the Karen seminarians collected during the past hot season break (March-April 1999) were also taken mostly from interviews with traditional Karen. All of these *tha* describe the person of God, how God came to be, God's creative work, why God left creation and returned to heaven, and what God prophesied about His return.

The One True God of the Karen is known as Y'wa (pronounced u-wa with a short a sound). According to one *tha*, there is only one Y'wa, who is the real and true God. Even though people may claim that there are many gods, still the real and true God, Y'wa, is the one true God. Fate lies in his hands. He can never die. More than this, what other people know and worship as god are nothing more than the handiwork of Y'wa, the one real and true God. There is another *tha* which describes the becoming of Y'wa. It teaches that Y'wa has His becoming in and of Himself, just as the dew falls in and of itself. Y'wa was present at the very beginnings of the world. No one else created Him. He is above the world as the air and wind are above us. He will never sicken, never die. He is the everlasting One, and as such Y'wa is full of good things. Although this world may pass from age to age, Y'wa will never die.

In his book, *Karen History*, Saw Aung Hla summarizes the teachings of the *tha* as follows:

The elders say, dearest children, that Y'wa is not so far from us. But, because of the unfaithful and disobedience of human beings, we cannot see Y'wa anymore. The earth is His footstool and heaven is His throne. When we stay on this earth, Y'wa is looking down upon us quietly. Y'wa will never sicken, die, spoil, or be lost. He is everlasting, never wavers, and is unchangeable. He becomes by Himself. He does not depend on anything. He judges according to His will. He created everything. He has authority and power over everything. He is full of power, might, grace, love and mighty attributes. He can do everything. He is omnipotent, omniscience and omnipresent. He is Holy and He is the best of all. He is the only God."¹⁰

From all of this, we can see that the Karen is a tribe that has had a concept of God since its very beginning. We can also see that Y'wa, the Karen God, has attributes similar to those of the Christian God. The *tha* emphasize that He is above everything and the source of everything that exists. We see that the *thas* sometimes use images from the forest and mountains, such as the dew or the wind, to explain the attributes of Y'wa. One hears also a feeling of pride in Saw Aung Hla's words that it is the Karen who know who Y'wa is.

A term for Y'wa favored by Karen Christians is *ker sa y'wa*. Htoo Hla E mentions this title in *The Golden Book*.¹¹ The words *ker sa* are a term of respect and reverence which can be translated as "lord" or "Lord." Y'wa, we have already seen, means God. Thus, *ker sa y'wa* means the greatest, highest Lord, who is Lord of the earth and the heavens. He is the almighty God, the only true One God, who cannot be compared with other gods. It is unworthy to make such comparisons. If we go a step further, however, to examine the root meaning of the word *y'wa*, we find that it means something that is flowing, such as wind or water in a stream. In that sense *ker sa y'wa* can mean the "Flowing Lord." Y'wa is the Lord whose kindness, grace, and love flows for us always.

Y'wa is the Mighty, Undying God. Y'wa is the Flowing Lord. And Y'wa is the Lord of Creation.

The Karen Understanding of Creation

As we stated above, aside from the *tha* it is impossible to discover Karen religious concepts. Those concepts are found only in the *tha* that our ancestors have chanted in the past. We face the same situation when we want to understand how the Karen viewed creation. It is through our study of the *tha* that our ancestors chanted that we also discover their faith and understanding about creation. The following is several sections of a *tha* that speaks about creation:

ywa keh ywa ter oh ker law	God is God who does not remain unoccupied
ywa keh ywa ku taw pa law	God is God who arranged and planned
ywa keh ywa ter oh ter gar	God is God who does not stay alone
ywa keh ywa ku taw pa ma	God is God who always planned

Tee ther bwaeh ywa haw nay aw	God took the foam of water
Keh taw weh ler kler ah paw	It becomes banyan's flower
Tee ther bwaeh paw ywa haw nee	Foam of water God's taking
Keh taw weh ler kler ah klee	It becomes a banyan's seed

Keh taw weh ler kler ah paw	When it is become banyan's flower
Thu law aw tee ther bwaeh paw	He planted it in the foam of water
Keh taw weh ler kler ah klee	When it's become banyan's seed
Thu law aw ler tee waw wi	He planted it in a whirlpool
Thu law aw tee ther bwaeh paw	Planted in the foam of water
Meh taw weh ler kler ah taw	It became a kind of banyan
Thu law aw ler tee waw wi	Planted it in whirlpool

Meh taw weh ler kler ah ti

It became a tree of banyan

Ywa tay per oo gar kler day
Haw koe per oo aye saw nay
ywa tay per oo gar kler sot
Haw koe per oo aye soe aw

God made termite, crawled on banyan's branch
Termite bite and brought the dust
God made termite, crawled to tips of banyan
Dust was brought by the termite

Haw koe ywa tho pgaw mat mat
Ywa tho pgaw doh taw ter set
Haw Koe wya tho pgaw mot mot
Ywa tho pgaw doe taw ter sot

Earth was molded and slapped** by God
Till it become still greater
God molded and slapped**** the earth quickly
Till it become still greater

Haw Koe keh thaw ther bwae paw
May mer tha tay mer tha bgaw
Haw Koe keh thaw ther bwae pa
May mer tha tay mer tha mar

The earth at first was only foam
Who created it? who built it?
The earth at first was only foam
Who created it? who made it

Haw koe keh thaw ther bwae paw
May ler Ywa tay ler Ywa bgaw
Haw koe keh thaw ther bwae pa
May ler ywa tay ler ywa mar

The earth at first was only foam
Ywa created it. He built it
The earth at first was only foam
Ywa created it. He made it.

This *tha* shows us that after God became by Himself He did not live a free and easy life without doing anything. He planned how to create each thing. Our ancestors, thus, stated that before God created each thing, He thought, planned and fixed it permanently and exactly (precisely). The elders said that for His creative work, Y'wa sat to think till seven chairs were broken. He stood to think till seven pairs of shoes were worn out. He laid down to plan till seven beds were destroyed. After thinking and planning precisely, Y'wa took foam of water into the palm of His hand and shaped it with His fingers till it became a banyan seed, and He planted it in the middle of a whirlpool. Its seed sprouted and grew until it became a large tree, the banyan. After that, God created a termite and put it on a banyan tree. That termite went around over the tree and ate the bark and the tip. Then it came back and excreted in the crook of the banyan tree. Y'wa took that excreta and molded it into a round shape, like a ball, and shaped it and it grew bigger and bigger till it became a great earth.

Yet another *tha* insists that once Y'wa created the earth as a round ball, He then put this earth in the universe and rotated it! The *tha* states,

Haw koe pler ree di maw keh
Hpo tha o hpo tha loh kwe
Haw koe pler ree di sohkwaw
Hpo tha o hpo tha kwah kaw

The earth is round spinning like a top
Like children playing with it all day long
The earth is round and spins like a wheel
Like children looking on all day long

The *maw keh* is a kind of nut that is thick, flat and round. It is the nut used in a game played by children as well as adults throughout Burma and in other parts of Asia. When the game is played, the *maw keh* nut turns like a

top. A *sohkwaw* is a spinning wheel, and *haw koe pler* means the round earth, The word *ree* means turning round and round or spinning.¹² Thra Loo Shwe observes that,

Of all the Karen poetry, the one that tells the earth is round and rotates on its axis is the strangest one of all. The great scientists and astronomers came to know that the world is round and rotates on its axis only not more than 400 years ago. Yet, the Karen *tha* has told us that the earth is round and rotates, and this knowledge has been handed down from generation to generation among a wholly uneducated and illiterate people who lived in a very dark corner of the earth far away from civilization.¹³

If they knew about this Karen *tha* Galileo and Copernicus would probably turn over in their graves! We see here again how the Karen take everyday objects from the world around them-such as trees, termites, and nuts used in games-to express their understanding of Y'wa. God fits very easily and naturally into the way the Karen understand their world.

Yet, the Karen always returned to the power of Y'wa over His creation. There is a *tha* that states,

Haw koe ler pler may ywa tay	The earth of yore was made by God
Ywa thu ei thay thu leh thay	God could easily make it narrower or wider
Haw koe ler pler may ywa bgaw	The earth of yore was established by God
Ywa thu ei nyaw thu leh nyaw	God could easily make it narrower or wider

The *tha* affirms that in the very beginning God created the earth. He, thus, can make narrower or broader according to His own will. Y'wa, that is, rules and judges the earth.

Other *tha* shed still further light on God's relationship to creation. One of them explains,

Haw koe per oo aye rat law	Termite ate and arranged the earth
Toe klu ko tay ywa ko bgaw	Edolius tried to make it, God tried to form it
Toe klu tay tay ywa tay tay	Edolius made and God created
Teh toe klu keh taw ter thay	The work cannot be done just only by Edolius
Haw koe o di naw maw keh	When the earth was the size of a nut
Toe klu tay ywa pgaw mat mat	Edolius tried to built it, Y'wa gave it a slap
Haw koe naw ther be ah kee	When the earth was the size of round table
ywa ko tay toe klu ko ri	God tried to create and Edolius tried to cut.

This *tha* tells us know that when God created the world, He did not do it alone. He created Termite and Edolius first and used them as His helpers to create the world. God used Termite to eat the branches and tips of the banyan and void feces used by Edolius¹⁴ to fashion the world. We can conclude from this *tha* that Y'wa is a God who is close to His creation and gave other beings an opportunity to take part in creation. The distinction between Creator and created is less clear for the Karen than it is in traditional Christian theology.

After God created the earth, He then turned to the creation of other things. The Karen have *tha* that describes how He set about creating those other things. The following *tha* is one illustration, telling about the creation of humanity:

When the earth was newly formed,
It was without form and without void.
When the earth was newly made,
It was formless and empty.

When the earth was newly formed,
Man was created by God first.
When the earth that made at first,
Two persons were the first things created.

God created humans before anything else.
Gave them the names Naw and Saw.

God first created two human being,
naming them Naw and Saw.

Everything that God created
On this world is entirely perfect.
God created everything
Since the very beginning.

From this *tha* we learn several important things about the Karen understanding of creation. After God created the earth, there was no life of any kind, including plant life. So, it was very quiet, empty, and formless. God saw that this was not good, so He planned to create the living creatures and plants to beautify this world. For this cause, God needed someone to look after and take care of the earth and everything in it. So, God created two humans and gave them the names, Naw and Saw. Naw stands for female and Saw for male.

It is interesting to note that in this last *tha* there is no distinction between the creation of Man and of Woman. They were created at the same time with, apparently, the same status. Aung Hla in his book, *The Karen History*, provides another version, based on another *tha* and that has a suspiciously Christian ring to it. According to him, Y'wa created heaven and earth, and when the creation of heaven and earth was finished Y'wa created the sun, the moon, and the stars. When that was finished, He created humanity. He created man first and from the earth. Y'wa then created a woman by taking a rib out of the man and creating the woman. Then *pah sa ywa* (God, the Father) said, "In respect to my son and daughter, I love them so much, I will give them my great life." He took a little piece of His life, breathed into the nostril of the two persons and they came to life and were real human beings. The creation of life was finished.

Aung Hla goes on to describe how God then created food and drink. He created rice, horses, elephants, birds and every kind of animal. After that Y'wa said, "My son and daughter, your father will make and give you a garden. In the garden there will be seven kinds of trees bearing seven different kinds of fruits. Among the seven, one kind of fruit is not good to eat. Eat not of that fruit. If you eat of it, you will fall ill, grow old, and die. Do

not eat it. All else that I have created, I give to you. Once in seven days I will visit you. All I have commanded, observe and do. Forget me not. Pray to me every morning and night."¹⁵ Although this version may or may not show Christian influence, there are still differences between it and the Christian understanding of creation, which will be described later in this paper.

The following *tha* continues the themes described by Aung Hla:

The earth of yore was set by God
with food and drink He created it all
The earth of yore God created
Everything He gives is perfect
All these things that God created
Show us the greatness of His grace

Father will make a place for you
Filled with perfect drink and food
Seven kinds and sorts of trees
seven different fruits there will be
One kind of fruit is not for eating
You will die when eating this

Everything that I create
Everything that I have made
All I have mentioned to you
All I have given to you
By yourself carefully eat
Once a week I'll come to meet you.

Listen to my commandments
Observe to my words well
Be sure, don't forget me
Don't fail to remember me
Think of me every morning and night
Pray to me every morning and night

Here, again, we see that Y'wa is a loving God but also a God who expects humanity to respond to His love in obedience. He creates all that humanity needs, but at the same time He sets limits and warnings. This last *tha* also explains the two ways that the Karen understand Y'wa and His creative powers. On the one hand, God is a perfect and a powerful God. As we've seen above, Y'wa is the one true God and has His Being from before the rest of creation. Y'wa is also, on the other hand, a kindly God, close to His creation. He cares for humanity.

Genesis & Creation¹⁶

It will help us to understand the Karen stories of creation if we compare and contrast them to the stories found in Genesis. In Genesis 1:1, we can see that there was nothing before God has created the earth. In the very

beginning, there was nothing in this universe, and God created the earth from nothing. After creating this earth, it was still formless and empty. Genesis 1:2 says that there was darkness over the earth that God created. There was no light. After that God created light, and God separated the light from darkness. God called the light, "day" and the darkness, "night". These acts comprised the first day of creation. It is not clear just how God created the earth itself, whether it was by His hand or word. But, it is clear that God created the light and darkness (day and night), by His word. The Bible says, "...God *said*...and there was..."(Gen. 1:3).

Genesis tells us that God did His work of creation in six days and describes for us exactly what God created on each day. Genesis 1:1 informs us that on the first day, God created earth and after that He created day and night (Gen. 1:1-5). The second day, God created the firmament, and He divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament (Gen. 1:6-8). The third day, God created land and seas, vegetation, rice, plants and trees that yield seed (Gen. 1:9-13). The fourth day, He created the sun, moon, and stars (Gen. 1:14-19). On the fifth day, living creatures in waters and birds flying above the earth were created (Gen. 1:20-23). On the sixth day, God created wild animals, livestock, all creatures that move along the ground, and all creeping things. Finally, God created man (Gen. 1:24-25). As soon as God finished His creation, He saw all that He had made was good. In Genesis the words "God saw that it was good" are repeated seven times, and the last time in Genesis 1:31 is special or different from the others. It says, "it was very good". It seems that as soon as God finished His work of creation, everything that he had created was holy, beautiful and lovely. Creation satisfied God, and He enjoyed it.

As Genesis describes God's work of creation, the things that we need to notice are as follows. First, when God began to create the earth, it seems it was dark and the earth was in deep water (at the bottom of water) (Gen. 1:1-2). It looks like water was there as soon as the earth was formed and it covered the earth. The earth that we called "land" where we are living now was exactly formed on the third day of creation. Another thing that we should notice is how God went about the work of creation. At some points it is not clear just how God went about creating the things He created, but in general we're told that God created everything by His word. But, He created humanity from earth (dust) and breathed life to their nostrils (Gen. 2:7). More than this, Genesis tells us that God created man in His own image, male and female He created them (Gen. 1:27-28). Moreover, it also tells us that man was created before woman and that God created woman in a slightly different manner from man, because He created her from a rib (not from many ribs) taken from man (Gen. 2:21-22).

From all of this, we know that God created everything with an exact and clear aim and purpose. He did not create things carelessly or haphazardly. God had exact goals or purposes for every aspect of creation. God created light to divide day and night (Gen. 1:1-5). He created the sun and moon to divide time, years, months, days and for separating the seasons (rainy, summer, and winter) (Gen. 1:14). He created grass for the food of animals, He created animals, fruit, rice, trees as food for human beings and for using in their work. He created man to rule and take care of everything on this earth. God loves humans, blesses them, trusts them, and gives them power and authority to rule over the rest of creation.

Another thing that we need to notice is that God created each thing in an orderly way, step by step. As the first step, He created that which does not have life such as the earth, heaven, firmament, seas, sun, moon, stars, light and darkness. In the second step, God created those things that have life but cannot move, including grass, rice and trees. With the third step, He created the creatures that have life and can move, such as birds, fish, wild animals, livestock, and creeping things. Finally, God created man who He kept in the highest position. He created humans in His own image and gave them life and souls, so they can move, work, provide themselves an

education, and gain wisdom. God also gave them power and authority to rule and take care everything on this earth.

A Comparison of the Karen & the Biblical Stories of Creation

Although we saw that some Karen *tha* sound very much like the Genesis story of creation, it is clear that there are some important differences between the Karen and biblical stories. This is shown through a comparison of the similarities and differences between Genesis and the *tha*. We'll look at the similarities first.

First, both creation stories involve water. Genesis 1:1 tells us that when God first created the earth, and before the earth (land) appeared, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters. The Karen concept of creation also begins with water. There is a *tha* that says,

God took up foam
It became a banyan's flower
Foam was what God took up
It became a banyan's seed

In other words, according to Karen tradition there was at first nothing besides water. To form the world, Y'wa took foam from the water and rubbed it on every side until it became a banyan seed.

Second, God created the earth. Genesis 1:1 states this clearly. A Karen *tha* says that,

When the earth was firstly formed
It was void and without form
When the earth was newly made
It was formless and empty.

Third, everything on earth and heaven is made by God. Genesis 1:31-2:1 says that "God saw everything that He had made...Thus the heaven and the earth were finished, and all the host of them." The Karen elders' lore says,

"Everything God created
On this world is all perfect
God created everything
Since the very beginning"

Fourth, man was made of dust (earth). In Genesis 2:7, it says, " And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground." Saw Aung Hla writes that the Karen elders' taught that, "He created man at first from the earth."¹⁷

Fifth, according to both Genesis and Karen poetic traditions, man was created before woman. This can be seen in Genesis 2:18 and 2:21-22. The Karen elders taught that Y'wa, " created man at first from the earth."¹⁸

Finally, in both cases, the woman was made from a rib taken from the man. We can see that fact in Genesis 2:22. Saw Aung Hla quotes Karen tradition as stating about Y'wa that, "He created a woman by taking a rib out of a man and created again woman."¹⁹

These six similarities between the Book of Genesis and the traditions of the Karen show that Karen thinking and the Bible reinforce each other in many ways. The traditional creation stories of the Karen are relevant to Karen churches. They form a bridge between Karen thinking and identity and biblical Christianity. These similarities seem so striking, in fact, that some wonder if they don't show that they were really taken from the Bible and then claimed as "traditional" stories of the Karen. But, there are important differences between Karen stories and Genesis that show that these old creation stories are not just taken from the Christian Bible. These differences include the following points:

First, the story of creation in Genesis 1 doesn't tell us anything about how God actually created the world. Karen *tha* do. They tell us clearly that God created the earth by taking the foam of water in the palm of His hands and rubbing it alternately till it became a banyan seed and planted it in the middle of a whirlpool. The seed grew to be a big banyan tree. After that, God created a termite and let it crawl around on the tree and eat the branches and tips. When the termite excreted in the crotch of the banyan, God took the feces and molded it to a round shape and then gave it quick slaps till the earth was completely formed.

Second, in Genesis, God created everything by himself, alone. The Karen elders say that He did not create things alone. He had co-workers that helped Him, such as the termite and the edolius. One *tha* states that, "Termite ate and arranged the earth. Edolius made it, God formed it."

Third, the story of creation in Genesis clearly tells us that after God created the earth, He created everything else before creating human beings. Humanity was His final creation. The Karen elders, on the other hand, say that after God created the heaven, sun, moon and stars, He created man first and the creation of everything else followed. One *tha* says,

When the earth was newly formed
Man was created by God first
When the earth was firstly made
Two persons were first created.

Fourth, Genesis 1 and 2 tells us that God created the world in an exact order. The things that he made each day are clearly mentioned, step by step. There's no indication in the Karen *tha*, however, that God created the world in an orderly way. The *tha* just say generally that God created everything.

Finally, Genesis 2:7 tells us that God created man and breathed "the breath of life" into the man's nostrils. The woman received life only afterwards and indirectly through the man. It's interesting to note that Genesis 1:27 seems to be different from Genesis 2:7. There the man and the woman seem to have been created and given life at the same time. That's the way the Karen elders tell the story. According to them, Ywa said, "In respect to my son and daughter, I love them. I will give them my greatlife." He took a little piece of His life, breathed into the nostrils of the two persons and they came to life and were real human beings. As we saw before, there are also *tha* that state that the woman was created from a rib of the man. Even so, it seems that they both gained life at the same time and in the same way.

Theological Reflection

Karen theological reflection begins with the thought that the Karen people have had their own theology from the very beginning. Our theology gives attention to the creation of the world, and through the *tha* about creation we can know something of that theology.

First, Karen theology emphasizes the greatness of Y'wa, God who created everything in this universe, except for the primordial water that He used in creation. Second, we know that Y'wa is a God who plans carefully and fixes everything permanently and exactly before acting. Y'wa is the One who loves to do everything in order. Third, Y'wa is a good example to the people, because He is the One who loves to work hard. Y'wa does not love to live a free and easy life without anything to do. Fourth, Y'wa is a wise, clever God who loves to use small things to make bigger things. Y'wa, thus, is the One who loves to do things practically, not theoretically. Fifth, Y'wa is the One who loves cooperation. We see this when Y'wa had Termite and Eudolius join Him in actually creating the world. We should also remember that the Eudolius is the bird that the Karen consider to have the greatest wisdom.

If we ask how the Karen version of creation adds to our Christian idea of God the Creator, the most important point is that Y'wa was very close to the world He created. He created the world like a craftsman, using his hands instead of "the Word" as is the case in Genesis. He gave careful thought to how he wanted to create everything in the world. He worked closely with others. If we recall that the full name for Y'wa, *ker sa y'wa*, can mean the "flowing Lord," then we will see that God flows into creation, takes part in its life.

In my own life, I have felt that God is very close to me; and I think that other Karen Christians often have this same feeling. One reason we feel God's closeness and love so clearly may be our Karen heritage and our Karen *tha*. God is more a part of creation, not just the distant Creator. We still emphasize the holy greatness of God. That is never lost among the Karen. But the Karen are a hill people with a simple way of governing themselves, and so Karen power is close to us. Our rulers, our elders were traditionally our fathers, uncles, and even brothers. So, we feel that Karen "rulers" are close to us, just as Y'wa is close to us.

Conclusion

If we look carefully with an unbiased minds into the *tha* and folk tales mentioned above, we will see that *tha* share certain essential ideas of the creation which are found in the biblical story. If we would make more use of our Karen heritage, our religious experience and understanding could be enriched. Our theologians, ministers, and teachers would be enabled to do more contextualized and indigenized theological reflection. Our reflection would be more understandable and acceptable to Karen audiences, especially since we all share a common religious and culture heritage.

Presented to the Regional Theological Seminar-Workshop on "Doing Theology with Creation in Asian Cultures," Programme for Theology & Cultures in Asia, 13-18 January 2000, Chiang Mai.

Endnotes

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- ¹ The 2000 AD Culture Committee, *Cultural Handbook* (Karen Baptist Convention, 1996), 21. [in Karen].
- ² Hser Ti, "God Does Great Things for Us (2)," *Rangoon Yearly Magazine* (1998), 92-93. [in Karen]
- ³ Kajad Pai, Hill-tribes, chap. 4. [in Karen]
- ⁴ Kkaw Htoo, *Home Magazine* 4 (1997), 67. [in Karen]
- ⁵ Harry Ignatius Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (1992, reprint. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997), 33.
- ⁶ Marshall, *Karen People*, 34.
- ⁷ T. Than Bya, *The Origin and Culture of Karen*. [in Karen]
- ⁸ Kkaw Htoo, "Tha, Our Invaluable Heritage," *P'hi P'gaw Magazine* 34, 4 (October-December 1997), 67. [in Karen]
- ⁹ Htoo Hla E, ed., *The Golden Book* (1955, Reprint. Chiang Mai: Thailand Karen Baptist Convention, n.d.). [in Karen]
- ¹⁰ Aung Hla, *The Karen History* (n.p., KE 2678 [1939]), 228.
- ¹¹ Htoo Hla E, *Golden Book*, 28-29.
- ** "Shaped" would be an inaccurate translation of the Karen, *pgaw mat mat*, which means to slap with quick or rapid strokes. The Karen image is that after God shaped the world into a round ball, He then slapped the ball lightly and rapidly to make it expand
- ¹² Loo Shwe, "The Karen People of Thailand and Christianity" (unpublished typescript, 1962), 6.
- ¹³ Loo Shwe, "Karen People," 6.
- ¹⁴ According to Marshall, "the *edolius paradiscus* is a black bird, a little smaller than a crow, with two long tail quills having tufts at the ends. Why this bird should have been given a part in the work of creation does not appear." Marshall, *The Karen People*, 212.
- ¹⁵ Aung Hla, *The Karen History*, 228
- ¹⁶ Based on *The Annotation of the Annotated Paragraph Bible: The Old Testament, vol 1 Genesis to Esther*, trans. D. A. W. Smith, 5th ed. (Rangoon: Baptist Board of Publication, 1956).
- ¹⁷ Aung Hla, *The Karen History*, 210
- ¹⁸ Aung Hla, *The Karen History*, 210
- ¹⁹ Aung Hla, *The Karen History*, 210

Short Items

Christian Relativism

"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:9, NRSV)

Many Western Protestant Christians lack epistemological humility. They are convinced, that is, that they know The Truth, and altogether too frequently they consign to a fiery fate those who disagree with their version of The Truth. In the past, this attitude regarding Christian knowledge fit in very well with the way their world generally acted and thought; being aggressively self-confident in one's beliefs and values was contextually "appropriate" since everyone else was convinced of the Absolute Truth of their beliefs. The West, however, is undergoing something of an epistemological revolution. It is learning that knowledge is a relative thing. What we know depends on perspective, circumstances, contexts, attitudes, and other factors that shade meanings in a grand variety of ways. Knowledge is not what the Enlightenment tried to make it, a static treasury of facts to be accumulated and defended. It is a shifting rainbow of colors that meld into each other and cannot be owned. The best we can do is "borrow" what we know until it transforms, mutates, goes through a phase-shift, a paradigmatic shift, or otherwise changes. Yesterday's fact is today's myth.

But many Western Protestants, especially the really Protestant ones, don't very much like this world. They see it

as an enemy to faith and to theology. How, they ask, can one talk about God or have faith apart from Absolute Knowledge?

That was a good question in the old age; the new age has made it irrelevant. If we are going to live in the world, share Good News with the world, and not wall ourselves off from the world, we are going to have rediscover, reinvent, and restate our faith in ways that make sense to the world. We're going to have to learn to see our knowledge of God in contextual, relative, and non-static terms. Isaiah 55:9 is one good starting place on that epistemological journey of faith in a relativistic world. It teaches us to have a less high opinion of our theologies, a more humble attitude towards our opinions. Enlightenment Christians, indeed, became so absolutely sure of the rightness of their beliefs about God and their (unsaved) neighbors that those beliefs became ideological idols. They did not really live by faith at all, being as ideologically sure of themselves as they were. One of the things we'll have to learn in this Age of Relativism is to live by faith in God, whose ways truly are Higher.

Theses Topics at McGilvary

The Office of History has recently compiled a list of all of the student theses produced at the Thailand Theological Seminary and McGilvary Faculty of Theology currently held by the Faculty of Theology library. The list extends to 93 theses dating back to 1965. The following is a break down of the topics covered by these theses:

New Testament	26 theses	Contextualization	6 theses
Pastoral Care	17 theses	Social Witness	5 theses
Christian Education	12 theses	Evangelism	5 theses
Theology	8 theses	Church History	4 theses
Old Testament	6 theses	Ethics	3 theses
		Worship & Liturgy	1 thesis

That is to say, over the last 35 years the students at TTS/MFT have devoted the bulk of their attention to two fields: biblical studies (Old and New Testament), 32 theses, and nurturing ministries within the church (Pastoral Care, Christian Education, and Worship & Liturgy), 30 theses. Theological issues (Theology and

Contextualization) total some 14 theses, while outreach ministries (Evangelism and Social Witness) account for 10 theses. This is an admittedly rough break down and not entirely accurate-and potentially misleading if taken too seriously. Some of the biblical theses, for example, discuss contextualization of the Gospel in Thailand in light of Scripture. Still, this analysis does reveal some insights regarding what these CCT theological students are concerned about and interested in:



First, it is particularly evident that their attention is largely focused on the internal life of the church and its faith. Only about one thesis in ten is devoted to outreach ministries.

Second, these students reflect a clear commitment to the Bible. They see the Bible as an important source for Christian understanding. It will surprise no one who knows the Thai church that they are generally more focused on the New Testament (26 theses) rather than the Old (6 theses).

Third, it is painfully clear that these students are not interested in the Thai church's past. There were only four church history theses (one person wrote two of them), and of these four two were written by tribal students (one Karen, one Lahu).

Finally, it is interesting that issues of contextualization have received relatively little attention. Where contextualization is the dominant issue for most of the foreigners working with the Thai church, it would seem that the seminarians have not been particularly concerned about the issue-not, at least, to a great extent. These students, by and large, seem far more concerned to understand the Bible and strengthen the inner life of the church. In light of this observation, it is somewhat surprising (and troubling) that only one thesis was devoted to the topic of worship and liturgy, which implies that the students do not see strengthening worship as an avenue for strengthening the church.

Globalization Defined

Drawing on discussions at the conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) held in the USA last October, Philip Hughes offers the following definition of "globalization." "It," he writes, "refers to the extent to which wars, trade, culture, and many other aspects of life, are becoming globally interrelated. 'Globalization' also refers to a change in consciousness. People in business, culture, sport, and many other activities are thinking and acting in a global world. Within that process, the significance of territoriality is decreasing. The core of globalization is increasing interdependence. What happens in one part of the world affects what happens elsewhere." Philip argues that globalization is not simply an expansion of Western influence and power over the rest of the world; at the same time, however, many cultures deplore the spread of certain Western values, such as personal choice, to the detriment of traditional and family values. In some ways, then, globalization is as much "deconstructing" our world as it is creating a new world order, and there are those who feel that it is more correct to say that globalization is creating a new world disorder.

From *Pointers: Bulletin of the Christian Research Association*, December 2001.

Paul & Daniel

"My rough guess is that Paul in Athens had an easier assignment than McGilvary in Chiangmai. The Nineteenth century American McGilvary speaking in the northern Thai dialect to Thai peasants encountered more difficulties than the Mediterranean Paul speaking in Greek to the Mediterranean audience."

Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 1970

Theology from Below

Dr. Kosuke Koyama taught theology at the Thailand Theological Seminary from 1961 to 1968. As an instructor, he frequently visited rural churches with teams of students, and it was there that he discovered a new attitude about theology. He writes,

"I decided to subordinate great theological thoughts, like those of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth, to the intellectual and spiritual needs of the farmers. I decided that the greatness of theological works is to be judged by the extent and quality of the service they can render to the farmers to whom I am sent. I also decided that I have not really understood *Summa Theologiae* and *Church Dogmatics* until I am able to use them for the benefit of the farmers. My theology in northern Thailand must begin with the need of the farmers and not with the great thoughts developed in *Summa Theologiae* and *Church Dogmatics*."

Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 1970

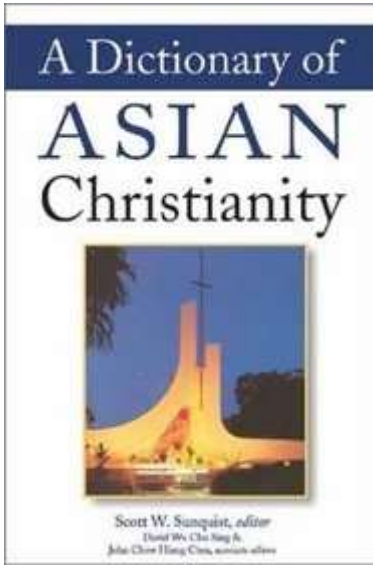
The 8th International Conference on Thai Studies & Religion

The 8th International Conference on Thai Studies was held in Nakon Panom under the sponsorship of Ramkhamhaeng University on January 9-12, 2002. Although I didn't attend personally, a member of the Office of History staff did, and he brought back with him the CD containing the papers from the conference. A survey of those papers reveals that of the 120 papers contained on the CD, only 8 (6.67%) are on topics related to religious subjects. Looking back six years to the 6th Conference, held in Chiang Mai in 1996, 28 of a total of 366 papers (7.65%) were on identifiably religious topics. In 1996, there were four papers on Christianity in Thailand; at this last conference, there were none.

HeRD #288 (27 October 1996) wrestles with the possible implications of the relatively small number of papers dealing with religious themes. It doesn't reach any conclusions, but on further reflection it would seem that the apparent lack of interest in religion shown by this conference has more to say about the importance of religion to the international academic culture than it does about the role and significance of religion in Thai cultures. Without particularly lamenting the matter, it does appear that scholars of religion work largely on the fringes of academia where their voices are seldom heard and their work carries little weight. It may well be, also, that scholars of religion assist in this ghettoization of religious studies by choosing to display their work in other venues. One wonders, finally, if the drop in the number of papers on religious topics by 1% from 1996 to 2002 is an indication that the marginalization of religious studies is accelerating.

News & Notes

At Last! The DAC Arrives



A copy of *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* has finally come to hand after many years of patient waiting. It is a monumental piece of work, spanning the whole history of the Christian movement in Asia, although concentrating on South, Southeast, and East Asia exclusive of Mongolia and the nations and regions that formerly comprised the Soviet Union. While the labor of many, many people, Dr. Scott W. Sunquist (now at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary) and Trinity Theological College, Singapore, deserve the lion's share of credit for its completion. The DAC is an invaluable addition to the resources available for studying and teaching Asian church history.

The Office of History was involved in producing articles on Protestantism in Thailand and gave some advice on who to contact for assistance with Thai Catholicism and for some of the other articles on Protestantism. The DAC editors did an excellent job of pushing, prodding, and pleading with those of us in Thailand. The result is that Thailand is well-represented, especially considering its relatively minor place in the Asian Christian constellation. The article on Thai Catholicism ("Thailand, Roman Catholic Church," pages 834-37) is particularly important since so little information is available in English (or Thai!) on the history of the Catholic Church in Thailand.

An hour's time spent leafing through the DAC indicates both the grand scope and the inevitable limitations involved in such a project. Information on the churches of Thailand found in some general articles is less than accurate. In one case, the information on Thai Protestant seminaries in the article on "Theological Education" is fine, but the article puts an asterisk (*) to the "Laos* Mission" (page 840), indicating a related entry. While "Laos" in the theological education entry refers to the five principalities of historical "northern Siam," the linked entry is, inevitably, an introduction to Christianity in the modern day nation of Laos. The fact that the Laos entry acknowledges our own Rev. Daniel McGilvary as the first Protestant missionary to visit and do work in what is now the nation of Laos (page 469) only adds to the confusion. Admittedly, the matter is a minor one. What it suggests is the vast complexities and difficulties that faced the editorial team in trying to squeeze a hugely multi-faceted Asian Christianity into 937 pages (plus maps). Some mistakes, inaccuracies, imbalances in presentation, and misapprehensions are inevitable. The editors explain and acknowledge some of the many problems they faced in collecting the entries for the DAC. (Another minor error that I don't want to pass up here is that in the entry for Ach. Lek Taiyong, his name is consistently misspelled as "Lek Talyong." Fortunately, Thai names are alphabetized by first name.) These inevitable mistakes in detail must be weighed in the balance of the DAC's larger positive achievement.

Bibliographic Citation: *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*. Edited by Scott W. Sunquist. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2001.

A Malaysian Church Survey

In January, I received a complimentary copy of the "NECF Survey of Churches, Pastors, and Christians, 2001" published by the Research Commission of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia (NECF).

This is a preliminary report of the survey's findings, containing mostly the percentage responses (frequency distribution) to each question on the survey. Included is a section entitled "Snapshots of Results," which highlights some of the findings in categories of positive and negative factors. The survey is handsomely produced and shows that a great deal of care was taken to proceed in a professional, academically credible fashion. The survey itself included only NECF churches, which evidently comprise about 30% of the total Christian community in Malaysia and is made up largely of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. A number of the questions reflect that ecclesiastical "culture," such as the question asked of pastors regarding how long they have been "Born-Again Christians."

This preliminary description of the survey's results is hampered only by the fact that a copy of the survey questionnaire is not included, making it difficult at some points to tell precisely the wording of the questions. Still, all in all, the NECF has done an excellent job and sets a standard for the rest of us in Southeast Asia.

McGilvary Reprint

The mails also delivered a freshly minted copy of the White Lotus Press reprint of McGilvary's autobiography, *A Half Century Among the Siamese and the Lao*, which includes an Introduction and annotated bibliography prepared by yours truly. White Lotus has made an important contribution to the study of the church in Thailand by reprinting a number of older missionary works, including most recently McFarland's *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam 1828-1928* and a compilation of the missionary journals of Gutzlaff, Tomin, and Abeel printed under the title of *Early Missionaries in Bangkok*. This reprint of McGilvary's autobiography is obviously an important addition to the list.

Bibliographic Citation: McGilvary, Daniel. *A Half Century Among the Siamese and the Lao*. 1912. Reprint. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001.

A New Project

In January, the Office of History (meaning yours' truly again) joined a new research project headed up by Dr. Don Swearer, Swarthmore College, studying "Christian Identity in Buddhist Thailand." Funded by the Luce Foundation, this three year project will explore issues in the formation and expression of Protestant Christian identity in Thailand, focusing largely on northern Thailand. In the project's initial stage, Don is looking at the story of the martyrdom of Nan Chai and Noi Sunya, two of the first seven Christians in northern Thailand, in 1869 and how that story has been used by the Christian community in the formation of its own identity.

Book Reviews

Mäkelä, Jaakko. *Khrischak Issara: The Independent Churches in Thailand, Their Historical Background, Contextual Setting, and Theological Thinking*. Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2000.



Mäkelä's *Khrischak Issara* is an important contribution to understanding the complex and little studied phenomenon of Thai Protestant independent churches and lays the foundation for an historical understanding of the independent church movement that emerged in Thailand after World War II. Mäkelä estimates that as of 1998 the independent churches accounted for just over 10% of the total Protestant membership in Thailand and roughly 25% of all Protestant church members in Bangkok. The independent churches, that is to say, are an increasingly significant segment of the total Protestant church community in Thailand. By their very nature, however, the independent churches are fragmented and hard to bring together under one interpretive umbrella-which fact makes this book a significant venture.

Chapter One introduces the reader to the topic of the book, which is actually the final, printed version of Mäkelä's doctoral dissertation. Chapter Two comprises the requisite background chapter, including an introduction to Thai society, the history of Thai Protestantism up to World War II, and the development of the Protestant churches in Bangkok. Although the author has surveyed independent churches throughout the country, his attention is focused on the independent churches of Bangkok. In Chapter Three, he describes the pre-history of the independent churches and then recounts their histories, according to four categories. In his final chapter, Chapter Four, the author considers the independent churches' understanding on a whole range of theological issues. The book includes numerous lists and statistical tables and a sizeable, important bibliography.

The study's accomplishments

Independent churches are not always easy to locate or contact, and sometimes they are unwilling to cooperate with outside researchers, so that simply bringing together so much information on such a confusing subject is in and of itself an important accomplishment. Beyond that, one of the book's most important contributions is that it puts the independent churches in their larger context. Mäkelä urges the importance of American evangelicalism (along with Finnish Pentecostalism and the Korean mega-churches) to the development of the independent churches. He also reminds his readers on numerous occasions that "mainline" agencies including especially American Presbyterian missions and the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) have also been important to the history of the independent churches. The independent church movement began as a protest against the CCT and the Presbyterians, and many of the earliest leaders of that movement began their journey of faith in the CCT. At the same time, Mäkelä is sensitive to church history themes and patterns going back to the first century. Overall, then, he is able to show that the independent church story in Thailand, fragmented and intricate as it is, is still one story and has clear connections to the total Thai Protestant historical experience.

Mäkelä also makes some progress in bringing order to the chaos of independent church fragmentation. He provides a useful classification of the churches based on their origins and historical development (page 46). He relies on their membership in the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT) to further underscore the fact that these churches share a certain commonality. The author also identifies common patterns and themes and a general structure of historical development that further strengthen the sense that the many stories of these churches can be told as one story (pages 78-79).

The study also sets the historical record straight on important matters. This is particularly the case regarding the relationship of the independent churches to the famous Chinese evangelist, Dr. John Sung, who conducted a series of revivals in Thailand in 1938 and 1939 that have had an impact on the course of Thai Protestant church history down to the present. Mäkelä demonstrates that the independent churches are not as historically tied to

Sung as they have thought, especially in Pentecostal circles. He argues that Ach. Boonmark Kittisarn, the virtual founder of the independent church movement, is a figure of far more consequence; Song's influence has been mediated through Boonmark and a few other key church leaders (see page 152).

The book contains many insights. Two examples will have to suffice here. First, Mäkelä observes that the theological position that Wan Phetchsongkram, a key Pentecostal figure, holds regarding the church shows strong parallels to the Catholic understanding of the church. The church, Ach. Wan thinks, plays a key role in the divine plan of salvation (page 187). Second, another intriguing insight is the author's contention that the development of the independent church movement in Thailand shows parallels with developments in Thai Buddhist revivalist and reform movements, such as Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke (pages 138-139). Unfortunately, he does not make the parallels as clearly as we might have wished. It is an insight that deserves a great deal more elucidation. .

Problems & Issues

The most pressing problem facing the reader of *Khrischak Issara* is the lack of an overall, unifying historical chronology. One does not gain a clear sense of the historical development of the independent churches as the author tells their stories in distinct, unrelated sections, church by church. The book does much better in dealing with the historical background to the independent church movement than it does with the churches themselves. Although Mäkelä makes it clear that the many individual church stories comprise one greater story, he himself has not integrated those stories into the single story. As one example, the study introduces the founding of the EFT in 1969 and carries its story into the 1980s before the author discusses the founding of the earliest independent churches, which were established well before the EFT. The text, more largely, skips back and forth across the decades so that the reader cannot see how the individual histories relate to each other. In Section 3.3 (pp. 88-107), for example, the study treats the individual histories of one category of congregations, called "Evangelical Free Churches." It is not clear from these histories why the selected churches fit into this category or what common elements of historical experience they share. It should be added, however, that the presence of three tables listing the independent churches in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and the rest of the country does help somewhat because they include the founding dates for each congregation. This approach to the history of the independent church movement also means that one of the key events in post-World War II history, the T. L. Osborn revival campaign of 1956, receives much less attention than it deserves. That event sparked the first serious growth of Pentecostalism in Thailand, and while this study mentions it in passing it does not describe either the event itself or its impact on the independent church movement.

One other point at which *Khrischak Issara* needs some further re-working is in its treatment of the CCT. Throughout the study, the CCT receives considerable attention although it is not a part of the independent church movement. While Mäkelä does at times relate his discussions of CCT issues to the independent churches, at other points there is no apparent connection at all. As one example, he starts his section on theological education (pages 159-162) by describing the McGilvary Faculty of Theology, Payap University, the CCT's "flagship" seminary. It is not clear why. In that same section, he goes on to discuss several other seminaries that are not formally related to the independent churches, also without making any connection between the seminaries and those churches.

To return for a moment to the strengths *Khrischak Issara*, one of those strengths is its fair-minded critical assessment of the independent church movement. By-and-large, that assessment is cogent and helpful. As is

almost inevitably the case, however, at some points Mäkelä's comments are not as helpful as is generally the case. His claim, for example, that the CCT constitution's use of the word *khrischak* (church) demonstrates a weakness in Thai ecclesiology is unsubstantiated, and it is not clear why he thinks so. (pages 167-168) The proposition seems doubtful in light of his own repeated statement that the independent churches, using the term *khrischak*, focus much of their theological concern on the nature and the life of the church.

There are only a few points at which one would take active exception to the author's analysis. One of those few bears mentioning. The author claims, "Within the CCT, contextualization has especially meant dialogue with Buddhists." He then cites the example of the Sinclair Thompson Lectures as proof of his statement (pages 209-210). One could only wish that Mäkelä is correct on this point; but so far as I can tell he is not. The Thompson Lectures have generated little interest among members of and had very little impact on the CCT outside of a small circle of theologically trained individuals. The contextualization of the Gospel by CCT churches and agencies, rather, has been a largely unconscious effort to adapt the Western religion of the missionaries to the social and cultural realities of Thailand. CCT churches have generally eschewed overt inter-faith dialogue, and those individuals who engage in it are looked upon with suspicion. CCT contextualization has much more to do with the hidden process of taking what has been received from the Western church and reworking it locally.

On balance, we return to the conclusion that *Khrischak Issara* is an important addition to the study of Thai church history and theology. Although it does not put all of the pieces of the independent church puzzle together, it does give us a framework for assembling that puzzle. It is a generally readable, insightful start towards a standard history of the independent church movement in Thailand.

Walls, Andrew F. "From Christendom to World Christianity: Missions and the Demographic Transformation of the Church." *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 22, 3 (New Series, 2001): 306-330.



I've chosen to review this article because it provides a cogent analysis of perhaps the most important trend in the history of twentieth-century Christianity. Walls' subject is what he terms the "demographic transformation of the church" from a religion dominated by Europe to one that finds the majority of its adherents located in Africa, Asia, and South America. He terms this change, "the greatest demographic change within the Christian faith since the conversion of the Western barbarians." (page 315)

Walls opens his analysis by describing two key moments in Protestant missionary history; the first is Dr. James S. Dennis' lectures on missions at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1893 and the second is the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, 1910. Walls notes that Dennis' 1893 discussion of Christian expansion was generally upbeat, and he takes particular note of Dennis' statistics comparing church growth in the United States with churches in Asia and Africa. Those statistics show the Asian and African churches, taken together, were growing much more rapidly than the churches in America. Of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), Walls summarizes Dennis as saying, "And not a single American presbytery could come anywhere near the rate of growth of the Presbytery of Laos [northern Thailand]. Laos was the 'banner presbytery of the whole Presbyterian church.'" (page 310) That is to say, a demographic trend away from the West was already apparent before the turn of the last century. Walls makes it clear that Edinburgh, 1910, shared Dennis' optimism of two decades earlier and planned for an even greater expansion of the Christian faith throughout the world; the conference was not aware, however, of the significance of growth of churches outside of the West. The importance of that growth did not become apparent until after World War I, an event that

marked the true beginning of the end for Western domination of the Christian religion. The rest of the twentieth century, Walls observes, was marked by a "great recession from the Christian faith in the West" and "an equally massive accession to that faith in the non-Western world." (page 322). He notes, for example, that, "A century ago there were hardly any Christians among the aboriginal peoples of North East India, and Nepal was a land closed to Christianity even fifty years ago; now a vast belt of actively Christian peoples extends from Nepal and North East India into South West China, Myanmar, and Thailand-a great unnoticed Asian Christian constituency." (page 323). In the course of his presentation, Walls throws out tantalizing tidbits such as, "There are now far more Muslims in England than there are Presbyterians in Scotland." (page 323)

The author attributes much of this vast change in world Christian demographics to the Western missionary movement, arguing that it could not have taken place apart from that movement. He concludes, "In other words, there has been a century-long process of cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity with the Western missionary as a connecting terminal; and the most curious feature of the process is that during the period in which the Christian faith crossed cultural frontiers into African and Asian communities it lost its hold on much of the West." (page 324) Walls argues that we should not be surprised that this is the case as it reflects a long-standing characteristic of Christian expansion, namely that, "The process by which Christianity spreads is not progressive, but serial." (page 324). It does not, that is, proceed from a single center outward; rather, it has constantly been moving its demographic center and is doing so again.

From its inception, the church has grown through a process of "cross-cultural fertilization" by which that geographical center and location has shifted from the Middle East to the Mediterranean to Europe (and, by extension, North America)-and now has shifted to regions outside of Europe and North America. The process began, he contends, in the earliest church, which was a Jewish church. Judaism generally received Gentiles only as proselytes, meaning that they had to remove themselves from Gentile culture and turn themselves into fully practicing Jews in order to "be" Jewish. The Jewish church, however, decided to accept converts who did not make themselves over into Jews (see Acts 15 and Galatians 2). Converts to Christ remained Greek even as they became Christian. Thus, Walls sums up his argument by observing, "Issues of culture are at the heart of Christian faith." (page 326)

There is a growing body of statistics from around the world that confirms Walls' contention that a global Christian demographic shift southward and eastward is taking place ever more rapidly. His article, furthermore, encourages us to pause for a moment's reflection. Many of us here in Thailand are still in the habit of associating "the church" with Europe and North America-even if we are consciously aware of the fact that only a minority of practicing Christians live on those two continents. That's a habit we have to break. Many of us are also in the habit of thinking of Thai Christianity as being peripheral to the world Christian movement. We have to break this habit, too. It is striking to consider that Thailand falls within what Walls terms, as we saw above, "a vast belt of actively Christian peoples."

There's still another thought that we must necessarily entertain. Many of us have long been inclined to pay attention to the anti-cultural attitudes and behavior of the nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries, the assumption being that their mission must have been a failure because of their narrow-mindedness. But Walls argues otherwise. He all but celebrates the Western missionary movement's success in transporting the faith beyond the shores of Europe and North America. Does the history of Protestant missions in Thailand warrant such celebration?. Has missionary evangelism successfully delivered the Christian faith to Siam/Thailand? Is Thailand in the process of successfully receiving the faith? Was there a successful receipt of the faith in spite of

an inept delivery? Or, does Thailand's apparently successful reception of Christianity reflect the Protestant missionary movement's competent delivery of the faith? Although the history of Protestant evangelism in Thailand has received some attention, no one so far as I know has tried to answer these questions in light of the global statistics highlighted by Walls.

Finally, what does it mean for the Thai Protestant church to see itself as an Asian participant in the contemporary demographic transformation of the Christian faith? For one thing, such a perspective suggests that the Thai churches will do well to stop being overtly dependent on Western theologies and ecclesiastical ways of doing things. "Subterranean" Thai theologies and covert strategies for a variety of church activities already exist, and it is incumbent on the churches to shape the subterranean and the covert into the explicit and articulate. I remember, for example, a paper presented to a seminar on Thai theology on the subject of "making disciples" (*saang sawok*) that took exception to the generally positive, biblically informed treatment of the topic among Thai church educators and leaders. The paper argued, rather, that in a Thai context the term "making disciples" can be taken to mean something like "creating a personal entourage." Discipling in the Thai context can be a dangerously self-serving activity, and pastors should be warned away from making disciples in this cultural sense rather than commended for doing so! There are dozens and hundreds of questions that need to be asked anew from within the cultures of Thailand, using the languages and the thought-ways of Thailand to seek answers to them.

If the Thai church is one of the churches of the future, it would seem to be only wise for it to begin to work out concretely and theologically where it is and where it wants to go. Being the church of the future is not a privilege or a matter of self-congratulations. It is a matter of making good on the movement of the Spirit, which seems bent on this journey eastward and southward for many decades to come.