

Toward a Mennonite/Brethren in Christ Missiology for Thailand

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I have always been interested in mission theology and practice, in previous assignments in Africa and the Middle East as well as in my current involvement as Thailand co-representative for Mennonite Central Committee. During my time in Thailand, I have befriended a number of missionaries, observed current mission practice, and tried to understand how Thai people become Christian and what implications this has for mission work here.¹

Following are a few observations about how mission in Thailand can be formed on a Mennonite/Brethren in Christ theological base, together with three illustrative stories of Thai people grappling with Christian faith.

Thai culture carries strong influences from at least three religious streams (see cultural backgrounds below). The cultures of other groups in Thailand, such as ethnic Lao people or indigenous hilltribe people, are different from the culture of the majority Thai group. But I suspect there are enough similarities, particularly when one considers the primal religion (animist) base that pervades these two as well as the Thai group, that the observations here may apply in significant ways to them as well. That is a subject for further study.

Rahim, a Thai man of around 25, came to our office one afternoon. He lived in the house next door to our house/office. From his name I could tell that his faith background was Muslim: rahim in Arabic means merciful.

He asked about the office and the work of MCC. But he was especially interested in our Christian faith. He spoke some English; I spoke some Thai. With a lot of help from him, I managed to communicate some of what it means to be a Christian.

Rahim had a Bible, given to him by a missionary in south Thailand where he grew up. So he was somewhat familiar with the Bible as a whole, but the Bible was in English, and it was a bit beyond his comfortable reading ability.

Rahim was interested in reading the Bible in Thai language. I loaned him our office copy, and we had several sessions where I attempted to express to him what the Bible is about and how it is organized. I encouraged him to start his reading in Mark as the shortest and easiest to understand of the Gospels.

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He took the Bible to his room in the neighboring house, where he lived as a boarder with a large Muslim family. One day he brought it back and explained that he could no longer keep it in his room, since one of the women in the household had discovered it while she was cleaning in his room. But he could continue to come and talk.

As we talked, I reflected on my previous experience in the Middle East, where I had learned that it was very difficult for a person of Muslim faith to become a Christian. I expressed this to him one day, and he readily agreed. He was quite sure his family would cut him off, or maybe threaten him physically, if he converted to faith in Jesus Christ.

Over time our talks about the Christian faith kind of faded away. Rahim struck me as an incredibly curious person, interested in faith questions and willing to explore another faith far beyond what most of his peers would do. He never told me he had made a faith commitment; I never pressed him for a decision.

The best I can say about my role is that some seeds were sown, perhaps to come to maturity later in another context.

1. Cultural backgrounds

As I attempt to understand Thai culture, I have found it helpful to remember an aphorism I learned during a previous assignment in the Middle East: “If you scratch a Palestinian Christian, you’ll find a Muslim underneath.” But here, while 95 percent of Thai people are at least nominally Buddhist, the religious underpinnings of culture are more mixed than in the Middle East.

From the Buddhist mainstream, Thai people learn of prohibitions on killing, stealing, lying, “unchaste or sensual” behavior, and use of alcohol or drugs (von der Mehden 1986:68). Followed strictly only by monks, these tenets nevertheless form a bedrock of ideals for Thai society, honored perhaps more in breach than in observance. The well-known Thai gentleness and moderation are undoubtedly related to these Buddhist principles.

One of the major religious shrines in Bangkok is the Erawan Shrine, where there is a representation of the Hindu god Shiva. Many Thai people “make merit” by bringing to this image an offering in the form of flower garlands, carved wooden elephants, or payments to the dancers at the shrine. It is common to see Thais wai-ing the statue, showing respect by pressing the hands together and bowing the head. The Erawan Shrine illustrates the influence of Brahmanism on Thai culture, producing especially a strong belief in reincarnation and the necessity to live a good life of respect for one’s betters if one is hoping to live again as a person at a higher level. This belief provides obvious incentives for stability in society, and discourages revolt against ruling classes who are presumed to be better by right. It is also a significant disincentive for major disagreement with one’s parents.

The spirit houses in front of many Thai houses provide an example of the animism that pervades Thai belief, most strongly among hilltribe people but also held quite firmly among even the most secular residents of Bangkok. All beings, objects, and places have spirits, and the spirits of a place that are disturbed when a house is

built must have a place to reside—thus the tiny spirit houses, where many Thais place food each morning. When a person dies prematurely, the spirit is not at rest in its assigned place, and may continue to disturb people in the place where the death occurred.

When the grandfather of a friend of ours became a Christian many years ago in a village in northern Thailand, he wanted to get rid of the sacred objects he had used as a spirit medium. He packed them in their wooden box and threw the box into the middle of the river. Many villagers were watching as the box floated upstream out of sight. Incidents of this type illustrate the pervasiveness of spirit belief in Thai culture.

An additional challenge in grappling with Thai culture, beyond its mixed character, is that it is constantly changing, not least as a result of its encounter with western materialism and commercialism. Changes are occurring rapidly not only in large cities but in every village, connected with the cities by an excellent transportation infrastructure, and with the west by television and movies. The challenge for mission is two-fold: (1) to understand a culture that is a constantly moving target, and (2) to avoid bringing our cultural baggage in a way that would further this corrosive impact of the West.

Thai culture borrows from three major religious streams. It is flexible and adaptable, and places a high value on social harmony, maintained more by submission to one's betters and by prevention of conflict than by assertive conflict resolution. Just as Thai monarchs and political leaders have maintained Siam's independence for centuries through a sophisticated and supple negotiating ability, so Thai people tend to be open to other religions while maintaining a quiet autonomy and a profound commitment to their own status quo. And while there are significant contributions from Brahmanism and animism, Thai culture remains strongly identified with Buddhism.

"Kanchana" was my teacher during my fourth month of language study. Right away in the early days of the module I could sense a deep gentleness in her that went beyond the Thai cultural style. There also seemed to be hints as we discussed various topics in class that she might be among the minority of Christian teachers at the language school.

Tutoring sessions were available each afternoon at 1:00. One day I worked up my courage to ask Khru Kanchana whether I could come that afternoon to talk with her about religion. She said, "You can, of course!" As we talked that afternoon, I was amazed to find out that just in the past month she had decided to become a Christian.

She told of how she had been reading the Bible for many years, how her husband (a member of the border police who spent weeks at a time on the Cambodian border) and family would not approve of her decision but would not oppose it and would not be surprised, and how she was being disciplined by an American missionary. I was humbled when she asked me how to pray; I could only mumble, in my limited Thai,

that I thought the Lord's Prayer was the model we should follow.

What was it like when she actually made the decision? She felt that there was a struggle in her between the Spirit of God and evil spirits. She had intense headaches and heard loud voices, painfully loud. She was afraid to turn off the lights at night, especially the first night or two. There was pain--the pain of relinquishing the hold of her former spirit system, the pain of new birth which few of us westerners experience who grow up in Christian contexts.

I was awed to have a glimpse, albeit flawed and filtered by my limited language, of the heart of a very new Christian. I was impressed that her faith decision had occurred after significant contact with an expatriate missionary and after considerable reading of our Scriptures. Her demeanor and her witness convinced me that the decision was part of a process, one that would undoubtedly continue for years or for a lifetime.

2. The encounter with Christian faith

How do Thai people become Christian? A facile answer is that not many of them do. After 160 years of Protestant mission activity in Siam/Thailand, less than one percent of the current Thai population is Christian.²

When Thais do decide to become Christians, they begin a process that takes a significant amount of time. One missionary estimates that a Thai person choosing to follow Christ typically takes 10 years to become completely Christian. I suspect it is an even longer process than this, as it is for all of us who never completely live up to our Christian ideals. But the point is clear: Christian faith is so different from the faith experience of most Thai people that an enormous amount of reorientation must occur over time if the person is to identify fully as a Christian and experience a full measure of living in discipleship.

A more significant barrier to Thai acceptance of Christian faith is to be found in the strong identification of ethnic Thais with Buddhism. Thai society is made up, broadly speaking, of ethnic Thai people, who comprise the vast majority; Chinese Thais, descendants of traders and business people who came here from China in the last 100 years or so; and people of other ethnic minorities, such as hilltribe (indigenous) people, people of Malay descent, and people of Indian descent. Of these groups, the one least likely to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ is the ethnic Thai group. Part of the reason is that the others tend to be marginalized, and therefore have less at stake as they contemplate changing religions. Another reason was provided by a fellow singer after Messiah rehearsal who responded, when I asked him if he is Christian: "No, I am Buddhist—to be Thai is to be Buddhist!" In Thai schools, the day begins with a recitation of loyalty to the king, the motherland, and Buddhism—another manifestation of the close link between ethnic Thais and Buddhism.

One of the key factors in this remarkable resistance to the Gospel is the great flexibility of Thai culture, the suppleness that has also enabled successful Thai diplomacy. Like a palm tree that bends in the monsoon winds but will eventually return to its original angle, Thai people tend to be open and accepting of new ideas

on the surface, while underneath remains a seamless cultural and religious reality—which for most Thai people has strongly Buddhist content.³

Another barrier is the emphasis on respect for elders, linked to Brahmanist belief in reincarnation, which combines with strong family solidarity to make it extremely difficult and unlikely for young family members to break from the past by changing religious faiths. And older family members tend to be set in their ways, even less likely to consider breaking away from their faith of origin.

Until about seven years ago, there was no significant peace church mission presence in Thailand. There have been a number of missionaries, particularly under the Church of Christ in Thailand, who have been oriented toward peace theology. Whether mission grounded in a shalom theology will be more effective remains to be seen.

3. Mennonite/Brethren in Christ connections with Thai culture

Observing the points of contact between Mennonite/Brethren in Christ theology and Thai culture encourages us to consider mission to Thailand grounded explicitly in peace theology.

a. Emphasis on ethics

Thai people consider their behavior and specifically their treatment of other people to be religiously important. The fact that one can “make merit” by performing acts of mercy or devotion suggests an emphasis on “works righteousness.” Fred R. von der Mehden (1986:67) states that “Buddhism has been described by some as not a religion at all, but a code of life, the teachings of one of the world’s greatest spiritual leaders.” Ethical behavior is specifically emphasized also by the Brahmanist stream in Thai culture, though not particularly by that of animism.

Mennonites and Brethren in Christ believe strongly that our faith must be matched by our works, and a strong emphasis on ethical and moral behavior is part of our heritage and practice. The Thai disposition to see their religious commitments in terms of specific behavioral expectations is thus consonant with one significant emphasis of our theology. Moreover, the ethical thrust of Buddhism (see paragraph 2 in “Cultural backgrounds” above) is parallel to that of the Sermon on the Mount, the bedrock of Mennonite/Brethren in Christ moral and ethical commitments.⁴

b. Emphasis on peace

Partly because of the importance of Buddhist concepts, and partly because of a strong commitment to social order and stability, Thai people tend to place a high value on peace, particularly at the interpersonal level. Thai ways of dealing with conflict are significantly different from Western modes in that Thai people tend to emphasize conflict prevention rather than using resolution techniques after a conflict has escalated. Also, confrontation is usually avoided, so that conflicts tend to simmer slowly, to be dealt with in indirect ways. Still, the ideal of social harmony should be a natural bridge to Mennonite/Brethren in Christ theology of peacemaking.

This is not an attempt to play out this theme fully. But one obvious direction for

further missiological work would be to explore how in other settings the connection is made between a commitment to interpersonal peace and the need for peace with God, a parallel perhaps to Christology “from below” rather than “from above.”

c. Mutual aid

Family solidarity built on respect for elders is very strong among Thai people. In traditional Thai society, the community is viewed as having great importance, and one is just as likely to take action on behalf of the community as in pursuit of individual agenda. (Individualism, abetted by Western ideas, is making strong inroads into this communitarian commitment, but the latter remains strong in Thai society.)

Mennonite/Brethren in Christ theology includes an emphasis on helping those in need, both inside the family of faith and in the broader community around the world. It does not seem a large leap to envision Thai people broadening their family and clan commitments to embrace all humankind. This project could be worked on together, since many Western Christians have not “arrived” in this regard either.

These three examples point toward the possibility of a unique Mennonite/Brethren in Christ witness in this country. They encourage an explicit “peace theology” approach in mission to Thai people. While this approach will not necessarily bring a greater stirring toward Christian faith on the part of Thai people, it seems theologically more honest than adopting a generic evangelical theology. The latter would likely lead to further results along the lines already observed.

“Jit” has been a Christian for eight years. She became a Christian while a teenager, struggling to make meaning of her life at a time when her parents were separating and her own future was in doubt. As a university student, she was befriended by a Thai Christian who shared her faith with Jit. She began attending church regularly and studying the Bible, and when she announced her decision to become a Christian to her cousins with whom she was living at the time, her uncle made a special trip to Bangkok to try to convince Jit not to do it and to tell her that as a Christian she would have to move out of the house.

She felt very much alone in the world, but her decision was affirmed when a missionary couple offered to let her stay with them. Meanwhile, the couple met Jit’s cousins and worked toward her reconciliation with her family, which happened within the next year.

Jit is a thoughtful and active member of a Southern Baptist congregation in Bangkok. She has been a leader in the youth group, where she met her husband, and she invited her sister, six years younger, to come to church and youth group meetings with her. It took several years, but eventually her sister followed her example in deciding to become a Christian.

Soon the two of them were working on their mother, who had gotten back together with their father after much mediation, pleading, and prayer by Jit. It was a big event when Mother came to church with them for the first time. Before long she was attending regularly, and in less than a year she professed faith in Christ. But when

she returned for a visit to her family in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, she not only stayed away from church but attended a Buddhist service with them. It took nearly another year before she was strong enough in her faith to attend church in Chiang Mai. There have been relapses but it seems that Mother is firmly on the path of Christian discipleship.

The three female family members are praying that Jit's father will follow them into the family of Christian faith. He has visited church once, but it will probably take a lot more time before he will be open to this life change.

Jit says a big part of her witness to her family has been her desire to show Christ's love to them in many ways. It is a constant challenge for her to represent Jesus Christ faithfully in her life.

4. Toward a Mennonite/Brethren in Christ paradigm for mission in Thailand

Here I propose a few modest building blocks of a mission paradigm that might be specially suited to Thai culture. But first, a theological observation. The first three parts of this article have assumed a narrowly defined concept of mission, almost equating it with evangelism and church planting. A full-orbed gospel and ecclesiology are not limited to evangelism as the sole activity of the church. The discussion of this point will begin our exploration of what an explicitly Mennonite/Brethren in Christ missiology for Thailand might look like.

a. Mission addresses all needs

Faithful mission in the name of Jesus Christ must be faithful to Christ's life and teachings, and indeed to his mission goals and methods. There is no disagreement with the fact that Matthew 28:18-20 is a key programmatic element of mission theology. But if we take the life of Jesus seriously as we define mission, we cannot claim that evangelism as "preaching to convert others" was Jesus's exclusive priority. That would exclude the healing and feeding that he did. Nor can we assert that the meeting of physical needs was only an adjunct to conversion, since there are many examples of Jesus's healing or feeding which were not accompanied by a call to conversion.

When we explore the question, "What was Jesus sent to do—that is, what was Jesus's mission?"—we are forced to conclude that Jesus was sent to preach, teach, and heal. Jesus's mission was not limited exclusively to calling for conversion, nor to healing only as a means of encouraging conversion or of supporting those already converted. The result of Christ's mission was a community where preaching, teaching, and healing (as well as sharing) are the norms.

I suspect few mission agencies in Thailand focus on evangelism to the utter exclusion of addressing social and material needs. A more subtle error is to tack on a social ministry or two as a mere adjunct or annex to the "real work" of evangelization—which comes close to the long discredited "rice Christian" approach. Genuine integration of evangelism and service—addressing the whole person—is not easy, and indeed is a continuing challenge to the faithfulness of every mission agency and

every missionary.

b. The purpose of the church is to be the church

A biblical ecclesiology will observe the fantastic growth of the early church in the context of faithful sharing of resources, works of mercy, and ethical decision-making. The church of the first century was well-rounded enough and confident enough to recognize that its primary task was to be faithful to its Lord—in other words, to be the church. To be a part of such a radically faithful church was indeed good news that demanded to be shared.

It is a truncated ecclesiology that suggests that the only, or even the primary, task of the church is to reproduce itself. Such a reductionist conception is dangerously close to “evangeliolatry.”

We all can think of examples of congregations that were not growing numerically, but were deepening their faith commitments in ways that later became manifested in visible growth of various kinds, including membership increases. We also know of situations where congregations grew larger by unethical means—by encouraging members of other churches to leave and join theirs, for example. These illustrations challenge the adequacy of setting numerical growth as the only goal of the church, or evangelism as the only activity of the church.

A missiology for Thailand must be built on a whole ecclesiology, and it must have the goal of assisting Thai people in building a whole church in which evangelism takes its place in the context of a faithful community with many functions and ministries.

c. Missionaries to Thailand must be thoroughly incarnational

Because Thai culture is flexible and will bend to new winds while maintaining its essential character, mission to people in Thailand will be ineffective if it attempts to move immediately to confrontation. Thai society and interaction are built on indirection, and only an “indirect” approach has a chance of long-term impact. By “indirect” I mean commitments such as the following: to spend years, perhaps many years, learning the culture before attempting to evangelize; to talk about faith matters as Thai people talk about a sensitive issue, that is, by subtly approaching the subject over the course of many conversations, and by backing off if the time is not right; to understand the Buddhist-Brahmanist-animist roots of Thai culture so thoroughly and sympathetically that the missionary could almost become a convert, and is able to articulate in Thai language what these religious and cultural roots means to the Thai people.

To say that a missionary to Thailand must enter fully into Thai culture is to state the obvious, applicable to any context. But it is crucial here, where there are many barriers to immersion in the culture. One’s appreciation of the apparent openness on the surface gives way over time to a feeling that Thai people really may not want them to enter fully. The barriers may be soft and smooth, but they also prove to be tough and possibly impermeable. One can only do one’s best and pray that over time

sincerity will be recognized and accepted where cultural fluency fails.

The only hope for effective mission by foreigners in Thailand is to incarnate as completely as possible the Good News and the person of Jesus Christ. This is of course impossible and forces the missionary to depend utterly on God's grace.

d. Emphasize peace theology

As observed above, Mennonite/Brethren in Christ theology has unique connections with Thai culture. In one case of mission to Lao ethnic people in northeast Thailand, that I am familiar with, the commitment by the missionaries to peace theology seems to have been one factor in the steady growth of their church in maturity, appreciation for their own Lao culture, relationships, and numbers.

Mennonites and Brethren in Christ can do no less than share with Thai people the joy we've experienced in relationships, vertical and horizontal, when they have been ordered by our understanding of Scripture.

e. The best missionaries in Thailand are Thai people

Our experience in this country, and the reflections summarized above, convince me that no foreigner will ever be as effective a missionary in Thailand as a committed, vibrant Thai Christian like "Jit."

Why then do we have foreign missionaries in Thailand? "Because there are Thai people who have not yet become Christian" does not provide a full answer. I suspect a large factor is the inertia of the mission establishment in this country, which maintains foreigners here in spite of the priority of supporting Thais to do the work of growing their church. It is relatively easy to place missionaries in Thailand, which also makes it easy to keep on doing so.

A more serious and valid reason to place expatriate missionaries here is to provide training for Thai church leaders. I believe this need remains, though the goal should be to work oneself out of a job through a planned program of raising the training level of local leaders.

But I suspect another reason for the continuing existence of the foreign mission establishment in Thailand is impatience by Westerners at the perceived slow pace of growth in the Thai church. Some of this sense is conveyed by Maarten van der Werf in another context:

Our western culture infuses us with an extreme addiction to the success process: I plan; I carry out; it works. We seldom look at side effects. This quick process motivates us. But history [and Thai culture!] operates at a different speed and is unpredictable. Things escape our personal fix-it spiritual power. Resources for sustained motivation then become necessary (van der Werf 1994:5).

We feel we can bring about faster growth—despite the 160 year history of gradual growth and the unlikelihood that expatriates can be as effective as Thai people in mission here. A Thai-driven pace of church growth is more likely to be culturally appropriate and is more likely to result in solid long term expansion in faithfulness,

ministry, and membership. Can we accept the possibility that God will build the church here in a Thai way and at a Thai pace?

Conclusion

Whatever paradigm is adopted by groups involved in mission in Thailand, they can be assured by history and cultural factors that it will probably continue to be a difficult field of work. I have suggested that an approach built on peace theology might be consonant with Thai culture in some powerful ways. But no one should expect that a new approach will necessarily bring stronger results by any measure.

Mission in Thailand will continue to involve the hard, deep work of being the church and opening windows for others to see into that portion of society that has already been claimed by God's kingdom. Mysteriously, like the seed growing at night (Mark 4.26-29), that church will continue to grow in this amazing Thai land.

Bibliography

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Endnotes

¹ Is my current work with MCC "mission"? I certainly regard it as part of the work the church is sent to do in the world, and therefore within the concept of mission. I am not involved in evangelism as a program or in church planting, but as will be seen later, I do not think mission is properly reduced to these activities.

² The first Protestant resident missionaries in Thailand were Carl Friedrich Augustus Gutzlaff and Jacob Tomlin, arriving on August 23, 1828. Previous Roman Catholic mission to Thailand beginning in 1511 was effectively curtailed with the execution of a Catholic government minister and the banishment or imprisonment of priests in 1688. (Smith 1981:14,9)

³ Alex G. Smith summarized a missionary's 1915 account of Thai response as follows: "Evangelists and missionaries are often frustrated at the impassive, lethargic inactivity of Thai in response to the Gospel, though the people may have long listened with apparent interest. This good natured indifference bends under the touch of the Gospel 'only to spring back into place a moment later' secure of Buddhism." (Smith 1981:275)

⁴ From the notes of my second conversation with "Kanchana," December 13, 1989: "I asked her reaction to the Sermon on the Mount, which I had encouraged her to read the last time we talked. She said simply that it was very parallel to Buddha's teachings....She said she did not think it impossible to live out, but that she knew she could not always obey and was in regular need of forgiveness."