

A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF HINDRANCES RELATED TO THE SLOW GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY IN THAILAND

Kelly Michael Hilderbrand

Abstract

From the very beginning, Christianity has experienced slow growth in Thailand. This article examines the historical hindrances to growth in Thailand. What are they, and why have they hindered church growth? Early hindrances have included climate and disease, ministry approaches, and a lack of persecution. Historical and present hindrances are also examined, including the foreignness of Christianity, confrontational evangelism, and the Thai patron-client social structure. Once identified, missions organizations and missionaries can make adjustments to be more effective in impacting the kingdom of Thailand for the gospel.

INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, church growth in Thailand has been slow. Theologian Chansamone Saiyasak reported that “eighteen years of hard labor by twenty-two American Board missionaries, 1831–1848, did not result in a single Thai convert! The Presbyterians had to labor nineteen years, from 1840–1859, before they saw their first convert. The American Baptists’ thirty years of unforgettable work in Bangkok only yielded forty-five converts, most of whom were Chinese.”¹

¹ Chansamone Saiyasak, “The History of Christian Interactions with Buddhist Thais During Pioneer Protestant Missionary Era in Thailand, 1828–1860” (unpublished paper, Evangelical Theological Faculty’s Doctoral Colloquium, Lueven, Belgium, 2003), 12.

Even today, the population of Christians has risen to barely one percent of the population, if we count Catholics and Protestants together; yet, the situation is much worse than that. Most of the growth of the church has been in northern Thailand among minority tribal peoples—Karen, Lisu, Lahu, and Akha. In major metropolitan areas like Bangkok, ethnically Chinese people have been the most open. Of the ethnic Thai population, the percentage of Christians is a small fraction of that one percent.

HISTORICAL SUMMARY

Christianity is not recent to Thailand. There is some evidence of a Nestorian presence in Siam (the name of Thailand before 1939) during the ninth century.² Early twentieth century missiologist Stacy Warburton records that Cosmas, an early traveller, found Christians living in Thailand and neighboring countries as early as 525 AD.³ However, by the time of the arrival of Catholic missionaries during the sixteenth century, no Nestorian Christians were found.

The very first Protestant missionaries arrived approximately 250 years after the Catholics in 1828. The first missionaries included medical doctors Carl Augustus Friedrich Gutzlaff and Jacob Tomlin. The London Missionary Society sent both. When they arrived, they were only granted permission to work among the ethnic Chinese in Siam. Because of Catholic attempts to use Thai and Pali languages as the medium for religious instruction, King Borommakot issued an “Edict of Religious Intolerance” in 1730.

Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, were not allowed to print literature in any of the native languages. No one was permitted to teach Christianity to the ethnic Thai, Mon, or Lao people. No one from these communities was allowed to convert to Christianity. No one was allowed to critique or criticize the Buddhist faith.

Nonetheless, the early Protestant missionaries ignored the edict and printed material in the Thai language. One hundred years had passed since the edict was issued, and the law was no longer strongly enforced. After three years, one person of Chinese ethnicity converted through the ministry of Gutzlaff and Tomlin, but “then the two missionaries left for China.”⁴ Protestant Christianity struggled through a succession of missionaries until it finally gained some traction in the late nineteenth century.

² Alex G. Smith, *Siamese Gold: The Church in Thailand* (Bangkok: OMF Publishers, 1982), 9.

³ Stacy R. Warburton, *The Making of Modern Mission* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1931), 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Health in the Tropics

One of the primary factors affecting the early years of Protestant missionary work was the climate of the central plains. Bangkok and Ayutthaya are both situated on a marshy, flat, flood plain, crisscrossed with rivers and canals draining into the Gulf of Thailand. On average, this tropical expanse is one of the hottest in the world; the weather is consistently hot all year long. The temperature rarely drops below 26 degrees Celsius at night, even in the coolest of seasons. The central plain is ideal for the cultivation of rice and other agricultural endeavors, but the seasonal floods and constant humidity are also ideal for the breeding of disease and mosquitoes.

When the first Protestant missionaries arrived, Thailand had a population of only four million people. Cholera, typhoid, dysentery, small pox, tuberculosis, and malaria were instrumental in keeping the population low. Even today, almost all missionaries have experienced the effects of tropical diseases needing treatment. Dysentery and dengue are among the continuing plagues of modern Thailand. One missionary working with the author suffered from meningitis because of contact with stagnant water. The heat is also a constant problem even for native born Thai, causing occasional dizziness, rashes, lesions, and problems associated with dehydration, including kidney stones. The author has experienced many of these difficulties as well, including the mental and physical torment of a six-day battle with intestinal dysentery that produced hallucinations, as well as continuous vomiting and diarrhea.

Even though many early missionaries were doctors, English and American doctors were not trained in tropical disease. The death rate among missionaries, especially among children, was beyond expectation. By July 1835, all missionary children born in Thailand, except one, died before the age of eighteen months. Most missionaries left the field because of failing health, either of their own or of a family member. Only a few persevered.⁵

Dr. Saiyasak wrote, "Illness and death were the determinative factors prohibiting Protestant missionaries from living long enough to deepen their relationships sufficiently and see the fruit of their labor. Such an atmosphere was not conducive to planting new religious faith; it was into this atmosphere that Protestant Christianity made her first entrance into Thailand."⁶

Herbert Swanson, historian and professor at Payap University in Thailand, concurs that health problems caused a discontinuity in missionary presence, which contributed to a lack of growth. No one stayed long enough to create the relationships needed for evangelism.⁷

⁵ Ibid., 186.

⁶ Saiyasak, "The History of Christian Interactions," 13.

⁷ Herbert R. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua* (Bangkok: Chuan Press, 1984).

Early Ministry Approaches

Early missionaries relied on ministry approaches that were effective in a Western context, but did not produce much fruit in the Buddhist context of Southeast Asia. These missionaries relied on one-to-one evangelism (in a collectivist society). They distributed printed literature in a primarily oral society and conducted medical ministry that was not effective in the tropics. In addition, many of these same missionary physicians were dying while treating others.

Medicine.

According to the memoirs of early missionary George McFarland, Thai people living in the nineteenth century believed their own medicine was far superior to Western medicine. A Western doctor would need to give a thorough physical examination before determining the disease and treatment. Thai physicians would use magic and divination to determine whether the patient would recover or not. Therefore, the Western physicians were thought to be less skilled than the indigenous professionals.⁸

Literature Distribution.

Gutzlaff and Tomlin, the very first missionaries, became involved in the distribution of Bibles, but only among the Chinese population. Soon, they were able to translate the Gospels from Chinese into Thai, but their helpers were Chinese and Burmese. The translation was poor and not even written in Thai script, but in a Roman script that Thai people could not read. Neither the Chinese or Burmese assistants were able to write Thai. They could speak Thai imperfectly but had not mastered the script.⁹

The problem went deeper. When Christians did communicate, both orally and through literature, the words chosen were incomprehensible to a Buddhist mindset. In order to avoid confusing Christianity with Buddhism, early Christian translators invented words that were specific to Thai Christianity and only comprehensible to the indoctrinated Thai Christian. According to Dr. Boon-Itt and his wife, the Christian vocabulary problem continues even to this day.¹⁰

Educational Ministry.

One of the most effective ministries of the early missionaries was education, and it can be argued that it remains so today. “It was the firm belief of the

⁸ George B. McFarland, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam, 1828–1910* (Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press, 1928), 13.

⁹ Saiyasak, “The History of Christian Interactions,” 34.

¹⁰ Batoon Boon-Itt and Mali Boon-Itt, “Communicating in Context for a Theravada Buddhist Breakthrough,” *Mission Frontiers* 36, no. 6 (2014): 15–19.

majority of Protestant missionaries that education must be a necessary part of the evangelization process.”¹¹

Early missionaries added a component to education that increased its effectiveness. Thai children who wanted an education were “adopted” by the missionaries. The children lived with the missionaries, were given chores, ate together, participated in Christian services, and often were treated as their own. The children were taught and raised by the missionaries. This model of education fit well with the Buddhist pattern of education where male children are offered in service to the temple. These “children of the temple” (เด็กวัด) served the monks in exchange for an education. This is a practice that continues to this day. Poor parents will send their children to live in the temple as servants in order to receive an education that the parents could not afford otherwise.

This model produced the first generation of Thai Christians who were indebted to the missionaries for their education and care (see section on patron-client relationship). Bradley records that “a plan of redemption”¹² was implemented by the missionaries. Parents would often use their children as collateral for loans. In exchange for money to pay off debts, children were sold to the missionaries to be raised and educated by them. This new policy was extended to young Thai females as well, making Christian missionaries the first to provide education to girls in Siam (Thailand).

Lack of Persecution/Indifference

Tertullian famously declared in his work, *Apologeticum*, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Apart from a few occasions, however, martyrdom has been rare. The usual response of the Siamese has been indifference. The deaths of Protestant Christians Nan Chai and Noi Sunya in 1869 were a pivotal moment for Protestant missions in Siam. Partially because of the martyrdom of these two northerners, the king of Thailand felt compelled to issue an edict of toleration for the Christian church in 1878.

Persecution has been rare in Thailand. This may seem like a perverse point, but the rarity of persecution and the incredible indifference to the gospel was a growth killer for the Christian church. Christianity has never been seen as a major threat to Buddhism, and it has never been forcefully suppressed, except on very rare occasions. The result of these rare persecutions has always been growth.

¹¹ Saiyasak, “The History of Christian Interactions,” 32.

¹² William L. Bradley, *Siam Then: The Foreign Colony in Bangkok Before and After Anna* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), 43.

Nation and Religion

Two studies found that the number one hindrance to Thai people becoming Christian is that Christianity is “not Thai.” Professor Philip Hughs conducted a survey among students studying at McGilvary Seminary and found that two-thirds of the students felt that the foreignness of Christianity was a significant barrier to becoming a Christian. Hughs wrote, “It was interesting that problems of opposition from family and friends, or problems with the nature of Christian belief itself were not nearly as significant ... as the fact Christianity was ‘not Thai.’”¹³

Saiyasak confirms that Thai people, in general, view Christianity as the religion of the foreigners.¹⁴ More than that, many Thai people believe that foreigners are not able to understand the ways of Thai culture. Although not universal, it is common for a foreigner’s ideas to be dismissed simply because they come from a foreigner. This is not unique to Thailand. However, it does affect how Thai people view Christianity.

University students, both Christian and non-Christian, who were interviewed considered Buddhism to be an inherited religion or culture. It is part of the identity of being Thai. Buddhism and “Thai-ness” are not easily separated.¹⁵ Males find it even more difficult. Part of the respect shown to family is to become an ordained monk for a short time in early adulthood. This brings merit to the mother and enables her to enter into a better rebirth. When one becomes a Christian, that person disconnects from ritual; this decision affects the whole family and community.

Historically, missionaries ignored this communal aspect of religion. How does one become a Christian and also stay part of the Thai community? Herbert Swanson reported that early missionaries would often insist that new converts join with the foreigners and separate themselves from communal and family pagan rituals. This would isolate the new convert from his or her family and community; thus, Christianity was not an attractive prospect.¹⁶

¹³ Philip Hughs, “Accepting the Christian Faith in Thailand,” *Christian Research Association Bulletin* 6, no. 4 (1996): 6–9.

¹⁴ Saiyasak, “The History of Christian Interactions,” 13.

¹⁵ Suragarn Tangsirisan, “Factors Relevant to Conversion Among Thai University Students: A Comparative Study of Christian and Non-Christian Ethnic Thai University Students” (masters thesis, Canadian Theological Seminary, 1999), 81.

¹⁶ Herbert R. Swanson, “This Heathen People: The Cognitive Sources of American Missionary Westernizing Activities in Northern Siam, 1867–1889,” (unpublished thesis, University of Maryland, 1987).

Even at the present time, the author is aware of churches that forbid children from attending the funeral rituals of parents because they are pagan and Buddhist. This is not the case for most churches. However, Christianity in Thailand must come to an agreement about what is acceptable participation in Thai culture and what is “participation with demons.”¹⁷

Historical Roots of Christian foreignness.

The phenomenon of Christianity as a foreign religion has historical roots. Christianity entered into Thailand with the colonial Europeans. Christianity was, and still is, perceived as a Western religion. To accept the religion of the westerners is to be absorbed into the colonial powers. Thailand is one of only a very few Asian countries that were never colonized by a Western country. This is a fact of which Thai people are proud. Thailand has adeptly maneuvered itself through the dangerous colonial waters by adapting when necessary, but also by maintaining their independence and identity, of which Buddhism is a central part.

Furthermore, the arrival of Protestant missionaries came at the same time when France, England, and the United States were expanding their control and influence over Southeast Asia. To the Thai royalty and government, Christianity and colonialism were one and the same.

Thus, “The perception of Christianity as a mechanism for the advancement of foreign Western powers permeated the minds of the common people, especially in and around Bangkok. The social reaction against Thai people who converted to Christianity was strong. The Thai people equated Christian conversion with joining a foreign religion, rejecting the ancestral institutions, and merging with another race. Thai people converting to Christianity were branded as national traitors. In some areas, economic restrictions were placed on Thai people who did make a profession of faith.”¹⁸

Confrontational Evangelism

Another obstacle to evangelism was the confrontational approach of the missionaries. Thai people are traditionally non-confrontational. Many westerners mistake this non-confrontational approach with dishonesty. However, this is a misunderstanding. English is a very dualistic language. Questions are often direct, and answers are expected to be clear.

English has only one word for “yes” and one word for “no.” In the Thai language, there are many shades of “yes” and “no” depending on the question and the politeness of the response. Using the Thai language, one can say “yes” and not really mean “yes.” This poses a difficult problem for missionaries who use evangelism techniques where a direct or immediate response is

¹⁷ See 1 Corinthians 10:20.

¹⁸ Saiyasak, “The History of Christian Interactions,” 20.

required. Even asking a non-religious question in English through a translator can be difficult.

In Thailand, interaction is often related to context and one's relative position in society. It is usually impolite to say "no" to any question if the relationship is distant. There are itinerate preachers from the West who claim hundreds or thousands are responding to the gospel in Thailand. This author has observed this phenomenon while attending such religious events. The proof of conversion is that many people respond to an invitation to "pray" by raising their hands during an evangelistic rally. Actually, the people are being polite to the visiting foreigner so he or she will not be shamed (lose face).

Christianity did not firmly take root until the time of Daniel McGilvary who began a mission in northern Thailand in 1867. McGilvary adopted a relational approach and adapted his missions model to fit more closely with Thai social norms.¹⁹

Patron-Client Relationship Structure

One of the most misunderstood cultural structures in Thailand is the patron-client social system. Westerners, especially missionaries and mission agencies, have a difficult time operating within this system because it violates foundational Western values. However, this social construct is found in much of the majority world. Misunderstanding this social reality has caused difficulties for Western political leaders as well as mission practice. From creating a stable society in Afghanistan to building self-funding and self-propagating churches, Western leaders need to understand and work within or through the patron-client system.

In biblical times, Rome had a well-formed patron-client social structure very similar to Thailand. This means that biblical writers were familiar with this social context, and they operated within it. Our English word for "patron" is derived from the Latin "pater" or "father." The word client is also derived from Latin, "cluere." The word literally means "to hear oneself called," as a child would be called by the father. Although not specifically a patriarchal or male-dominated cultural construct, those filling the role of patron are most often male. In Thailand, women are sometimes patrons, but to a much lesser extent than males.

The psychology of the patron-client relationship in Thailand is built on the concept of *bun khun*. The patron provides favor and care to the client in exchange for loyalty and service. The client becomes "indebted" to the patron and therefore shows intense loyalty. The patron, however, is required to provide for the client, to make sure the client has his physical, economic,

¹⁹ Karl Dahlfred, *Daniel McGilvary: Pioneer Missionary to Northern Thailand* (Amazon Digital Services, Kindle Edition, 2013).

and social needs met. The patron will provide for health care, attend weddings and religious ceremonies, give gifts at special occasions, and even care for widows or orphans if needed. To remove this care is to betray the patron-client relationship.

According to Taylor, *bun khun* is a type of indebted goodness. It is a “psychological bond between someone who, out of sheer kindness and sincerity, renders another person the needed help and favor, and the latter’s remembering of the kindness done and his ever readiness to reciprocate the kindness.”²⁰ Even Thai people are careful about entering into a *bun khun* relationship because of the obligations involved and the difficulty of extracting oneself from such a commitment. Many missionaries have fallen into this trap, and this construct hinders indigenization. Once in a patron-client relationship, the client will expect that relationship to continue indefinitely.

According to Thai cultural anthropologist Chai Podhisita, the patron-client construct is not peripheral to Thai culture but woven into the very fabric of Thai society.²¹ Understanding relative relationships can enable the missionary to be very effective in evangelism and church planting. In this author’s experience, understanding one’s status and how to use that status to develop loyalty is a great help to evangelism. The difficulty for missionaries comes from extracting oneself from the obligations of the relationship in indigenizing the church.

The missionary can learn from the example of Thai pioneer missionary Daniel McGilvary (1828–1911). Payap University’s College of Divinity is named after him. His work solidified Christianity in northern Thailand where Christianity still has its greatest influence and the largest number of churches.

McGilvary built the Christian church on the patron-client model. He became a client to the commissioner of Chiang Mai and operated as a patron to the Christians of northern Thailand. Anthropologist Edwin Zehner noted that Christianity was expanding rapidly until the interference of the American Presbyterian mission in 1895. The mission decided to replace the patron-client structure and impose a church polity based on American democratic principles. Instead of relating to a patron, churches and members were expected to submit to elected committees.²² According

²⁰ Stephen Taylor, “Patron-Client Relationships: A Challenge for the Thai Church,” *Mission Round Table: The Occasional Bulletin of OMF Mission Research* (2007): 17.

²¹ Chai Podhisita, “Buddhism and the Thai World View,” in Amara Pongsapich, et al (eds.), *Traditional and Changing Thai World View* (Bangkok: Social Science Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University, 2013), 32.

²² Edwin Zehner, “Church Growth and Culturally Appropriate Leadership: Three Examples from the Thai Church,” (Unpublished paper, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 1987).

to Taylor, “it was unfortunate that a Western democratic system was introduced rather than a biblical one.”²³

Had the mission been run on the original patron-client pattern set by McGilvary, his status as client and patron could have produced a much greater harvest, according to Zehner.²⁴ Church growth was also slowed by an argument about church support. McGilvary favored a more nuanced approach to support for churches. The American church won the argument, and decreased support to churches rapidly without replacing it with some other form of care. Thus, the patron-client contract was broken. The result was distrust of the patron and a slowing of church growth.

Hindrance to growth comes when one attempts to impose Western models of church on Thai church structures, which foreign mission agencies often do. In addition, not understanding the significance of the patron-client model, mission agencies withdraw support before a new model of care has been established. Moreover, it must be noted that this transition cannot effectively take place without a strong Thai leader, a leader with enough social status to shepherd the process across the organization, guiding the process. The most successful “missions” have indigenous leaders with high social status (family name, education, respect) and resources—local and foreign—at their disposal.

Western agencies must also understand that democracy is not expected or even wanted among lower status individuals.²⁵ The desire among many is for security—financial and otherwise. Their desire is not often for participation in governance. Governance is the duty of the leader, the patron. This may be anathema to many Western ears, but democracy is not always wanted or desired.

Wit Wisadavet, a Thai researcher, asserts that most Thai people do not believe that democracy is the best system for a Buddhist society. Buddhist teaching has historically promoted the ideal of a righteous dictator. The famous monk Buddhadasa, who died in 1993, also taught that society is better served by a virtuous dictator.²⁶ This is an idea advocated in many Asian societies, including Singapore, Malaysia, and China.

Democracy is perceived as too chaotic. Democracy does not promote peace, but conflict. Many Asians do desire democracy, but it is not a universally accepted concept of government. Elections are often held to

²³ Taylor, “Patron-Client Relationships,” 103.

²⁴ Zehner, “Church Growth and Culturally Appropriate Leadership.”

²⁵ Norman Jacobs, *Modernization Without Development* (London: Praeger Publishers, 1971).

²⁶ Wit Wisadavet, “The Buddhist Philosophy of Education: Approaches and Problems,” *The Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies* 2, no. 2 (2003): 159–188.

appease Western patrons, not because elections are thought good or even wise.²⁷

The trend towards self-sufficiency has also been problematic in Thailand. Mission agencies often withdraw support without replacing the patron-client structure of the missions agency with a more indigenous one. Again, this requires a strong Thai leader who has the experience, resources, and status to take over the position of patron from a missionary. The mission agency may need to support the new Thai leader (in an undemocratic way) for a longer period than they feel comfortable. Without this structure in place, however, many of the members and churches under the influence of the missions agency may feel betrayed.

CONCLUSIONS

Health Care and Literature

How are these hindrances being overcome today? Health issues are less of a problem today for missionaries from more temperate climates. Access to excellent health care and technological developments like air conditioning make life in the tropics much more comfortable. Literature distribution is more effective today among the middle to upper class. Translations are better, but there is still a great lack of training material in the Thai language. Many ministries have moved beyond literature to visual-based medium (videos and the Internet) to reach a more technologically savvy and visually oriented culture.

Education

Churches that “adopt” children at risk in order to provide for them and educate them are still one of the most effective forms of ministry. Although not technically orphanages, many churches provide housing and tuition support for children desiring educational attainment. Some children have no parents, some are abandoned, and some are from families too poor to provide education or even food for their children. Children study, work, and live at the church, attending a church-based school or a school nearby. This author is involved with several such projects, raising up a new generation of well-loved and disciplined children for the future.

This model of ministry has also been found to be effective in preventing human trafficking. Parents, who might otherwise have sent their children to

²⁷ See Meic Pearse, *Why the Rest Hates the West: Understanding the Roots of Global Rage* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Mark R. Thompson, “Pacific Asia After ‘Asian Values’: Authoritarianism, Democracy, and ‘Good Governance,’” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 6 (2004): 1079–1095.

“work” in the city, will give their children to the church instead. Although controversial among some more liberal organizations, the practice is effective because it follows the cultural model of dedicating children to serve at the temple. Furthermore, it places children and their families in a *bun khun* relationship with the church leaders.

Indigenous Leadership

The most effective churches are those with leaders who have sufficient moral and social status to be seen as respected teachers in the culture.²⁸ This includes family background, education, and financial resources. The Hope Church movement²⁹ and its offshoots are one such example, as is Jaisamarn Full Gospel Church, among others. According to sociologist Rodney Stark, effective Christian movements are started among the privileged classes.³⁰ In order to move from a missionary-based Christianity, missionaries must find and disciple qualified leaders who are culturally fit to lead. Many organizations are making good progress in this area, but the focus on the poor and tribal areas in evangelism must be matched with successful evangelism of the urban elite.

Patron-Client Structure

The misunderstanding of the patron-client culture by Western mission agencies is still a significant hindrance to evangelism. Western mission agencies often impose Western church structures on the Thai church and create problems for developing self-governing and self-funding churches.

Western churches, for financial or philosophical reasons, pull support from churches without having the appropriate structure or policies in place. It is not unreasonable to want churches to be self-supporting, but it must be replaced with an acceptable alternate support structure. Instead of direct financial support, mission organizations can fund training events, conferences, and other aspects of ministry that build community. It is also very important to have funds to support pastors and leaders who are having family or financial difficulties. For example, funds might be available to help with hospitalization or tuition support for the children of pastors. Very few

²⁸ See 1 Timothy 3:1–7.

²⁹ The most successful church growth and church planting movement in Thai history has been the Hope Church movement, which was founded in 1981 by Dr. Kriengsak Chareonwongsak. The church operates firmly on the patron-client model. Its recent divisions aside, the Hope Movement and its daughters’ organizations are still the most prolific church planting movement in Thai history.

³⁰ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 37.

Western organizations have done this well. Where it has been done well, there has been a strong, well-resourced indigenous leader who filled the vacuum, while still showing respect to the founding agency.

The Thai pastor or spiritual leader must have the necessary status to fulfill this role. If they do, they are expected to exercise authority (พระเดช / อำนาจ / สิทธิอำนาจ) and benevolence (พระคุณ / เมตตากรุณา).³¹ Members of the church are expected to show deference, loyalty, and obedience. The result will be church growth. This is why the fastest growing movements in Thailand are led by indigenous pastors with high social status.³² These pastors and leaders understand the patron-client model and can use it effectively.

Western agencies also place too much faith in elections and democratic procedures that cause conflict and instability in Thai relationships. Each indigenous organization needs to develop its own governing form. The checks and balances of leadership should be natural to the culture.

Christianity as a Foreign Religion

The greatest hindrance to the gospel is still the common view that Christianity is a foreign religion. In the mindset of most Buddhist Thais, to be a Christian is to cease to be Thai. In the opinion of this author, a separation must occur between Buddhism and culture for this hindrance to be overcome. This can only occur through a cataclysmic event. Unfortunately, China, Vietnam, and Cambodia are examples of this separation, but it came at the cost of great persecution and many lives. Thailand is about to go through a crisis that will either pull people closer to Buddhism or farther away. The impending ascension of a new monarch and the political turmoil surrounding that transition will be profoundly unsettling for the Thai people.

This author predicts that the era of persecution in Thailand is yet to come. With a Christian population of less than 1 percent, there is no threat to the majority religion. However, when Christianity reaches parity with Islam at about 5 percent, Christianity will be seen as a significant threat, and serious persecution will become more widespread.³³ The future is not without hope. However, it is the view of this author that Christians must stand ready for a move of God to come through a time of great pain and suffering. Only time will tell if this prediction comes true.

³¹ Taylor, "Patron-Client Relationships."

³² Ibid.

³³ This has occurred in Sri Lanka where the Christian population stands at 7.4 percent in 2011. According to personal communication with Christian leaders in Sri Lanka, even Buddhist monks have participated in the killing of Christians and the burning of churches.

References

- Bradley, William L. *Siam Then: The Foreign Colony in Bangkok Before and After Anna*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981.
- Boon-Itt, Baton and Mali Boon-Itt. "Communicating in Context for a Theravada Buddhist Breakthrough." *Mission Frontiers* 36, no. 6 (2014): 15–19.
- Dahlfred, Karl. *Daniel McGilvary: Pioneer Missionary to Northern Thailand*. Amazon Digital Services, Kindle Edition, 2013.
- Hughes, Philip. "Accepting the Christian Faith in Thailand." *Christian Research Association Bulletin* 6, no. 4 (1996): 6–9.
- Jacobs, Norman. *Modernization Without Development*. London: Praeger Publishers, 1971.
- McFarland, George B. *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam, 1828–1910*. Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press, 1928.
- McGilvary, Daniel. *A Half Century Among the Siamese and Lao: An Autobiography*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1912.
- Pearse, Meic. *Why the Rest Hates the West: Understanding the Roots of Global Rage*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Podhisita, Chai. "Buddhism and the Thai World View." In *Traditional and Changing Thai World View*, edited by Amara Pongsapich. Bangkok: Social Science Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University, 1985.
- Saiyasak, Chansamone. "The History of Christian Interactions with Buddhist Thais During Pioneer Protestant Missionary Era in Thailand, 1828–1860." Unpublished paper, Evangelical Theological Faculty's Doctoral Colloquium, Lueven, Belgium, 2003.
- Smith, A. G. *Siamese Gold: The Church in Thailand*. Bangkok: OMF Publishers, 1982.
- Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Swanson, Herbert R. *Khrischak Muang Nua*. Bangkok: Chuan Press, 1984.
- Swanson, Herbert R. "This Heathen People: The Cognitive Sources of American Missionary Westernizing Activities in Northern Siam, 1867–1889." Unpublished thesis, University of Maryland, 1987.
- Tangsirisatian, Suragarn. "Factors Relevant to Conversion Among Thai University Students: A Comparative Study of Christian and Non-Christian Ethnic Thai University Students." Order No. 9932063, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1999. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304558497?accountid=8624>.
- Taylor, Stephen. "Patron-Client Relationships and the Challenge for the Thai Church." Unpublished thesis, Discipleship Training Centre, Singapore, 1997.
- Taylor, Stephen. "Patron-Client Relationships: A Challenge for the Thai Church." *Mission Round Table: The Occasional Bulletin of OMF Mission Research* (March 2007).
- Thompson, Mark. R. "Pacific Asia After 'Asian Values': Authoritarianism, Democracy, and 'Good Governance.'" *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 6 (2004): 1079–1095.
- Warburton, Stacy R. *The Making of Modern Mission*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1931.
- Wisadavet, Wit. "The Buddhist Philosophy of Education: Approaches and Problems." *The Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies* 2, no. 2 (2003): 159–188.
- Zehner, Edwin. "Church Growth and Culturally Appropriate Leadership: Three Examples from the Thai Church." Unpublished paper, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 1987.

About the Author

Dr. Kelly Michael Hilderbrand is an adjunct professor at several Bible Colleges and Seminaries in Southeast Asia. He is involved in training pastors, leaders, and church planters in Thailand and developing curriculum for Bible Schools in Southeast Asia. He has also started churches in both Hawaii and Thailand and has lived in Bangkok, Thailand since 1999. He is a missionary with the Foursquare Church in Thailand and presently in the PhD ICE program at Biola University.