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NORTHERN THAI THERAVADA FOLK BUDDHISM
THROUGH THE EYES OF BUDDHIST
BACKGROUND BELIEVERS

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the Faculty of
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APPROVAL SHEET

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THROUGH THE EYES OF BUDDHIST
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I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Carrie. I could not have completed this dissertation without the kindness, patience, encouragement, and Christ-like love that you have freely given me. God has blessed me with an amazing ministry partner in you. I look forward to the years ahead as we follow Christ and glorify Him together.

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PREFACE

Thank you to Carrie, my wife. You truly are a gift from the Lord. Thank you to our kids, Fiona, Evan, and Monroe, for your encouraging smiles and for your excitement when I get home from teaching. Thank you to my parents for your love and support. Thank you to the pastors and members of Sojourn Community Church in New Albany, Indiana. Thank you to Joyce, my editor, for your assistance and careful eye. Thank you to my friends in Chiang Mai for the lodging you provided and your friendships. Thank you to my respondents for your God-honoring stories. Thank you to my fellow world religions doctoral students, who have given me encouragement and constructive criticism throughout this program.

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Nick Walburn

Clarksville, Indiana

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Theravada Buddhism has existed in Southeast Asia since the third century BC, and is still prominent in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand today. The history of modern Thailand began with people groups who arrived from China and displaced groups indigenous to the region. The Tai people spread from mainland China beginning sometime in the first millennia until the twelfth century. The Tai were originally animists who worshipped forest spirits and their ancestors. Already present in the region were the Theravada Buddhist Mon people, whose continued existence shaped later Thai society and governance. Today, Thai culture still bases itself upon the precepts of Buddhist *dharma* and a spirit of meekness pervades all interactions. The Thai proverb “to be Thai is to be Buddhist” demonstrates that Theravada Buddhism remains a major part of Thai cultural identity.

Despite Buddhism’s prominent place in Thailand, the animistic roots of the past remain. Each home and business contains a *pii* house, built by Thai people who believe in local benevolent spirits.¹ These small animistic dwellings exist alongside ever-present household shrines to the Buddha. A mixture of animism, Brahminic ritual, and Buddhism intertwine in Thai culture.² Many animists in Thailand readily accept Buddhism, as their belief systems easily assimilate new Buddhist forms. While Buddhism has functioned as a way to store up merit for the next life, Thai people retain the rituals of

¹*Pii*, according to Thai belief, are local ghosts that can bring blessing if they are appeased with offerings. *Pii* are believed to cause trouble for humans if ignored or offended.

²The Khmer empire was a Hindu kingdom present in Southeast Asia until the fifteenth century. My own observations in Thailand confirm a mixture of these religious forms as a part of the culture. The prominence of Hindu forms there is clearly seen in the Thai national symbol, the *Garuda*.

animism in order to protect their day-to-day lives. Observers may note this syncretistic mix of religious practice among Thai folk Buddhists living in Chiang Mai.

Protestant Christian mission among the Thai people in Chiang Mai has seen limited results since its inception a hundred and fifty years ago. Daniel McGilvary and his wife established the first Chiang Mai mission in 1867, as recorded in his autobiography, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*. Perhaps the most compelling account from McGilvary's fifty years as a missionary in Northern Thailand is the testimony of Nan Inta, the first baptized Christian convert in Chiang Mai.³ Nan Inta's deep respect for Buddhism was overcome by a growing interest in "the doctrine of a free and full pardon through the merits of another," a concept alien to Theravada Buddhism.⁴ In his autobiography, McGilvary gives detailed accounts of Nan Inta's conversion, describing this radical change in terms of a revolution in this former Buddhist's thinking. McGilvary quotes Nan Inta:

If the Gospel system seems too good to be true in that it offers to pardon and cleanse and adopt guilty sinners, and give them a title to a heavenly inheritance, it is simply because it is divine, and not human.⁵

Today, though many faithful Western missionaries and Northern Thai believers continue to share the gospel in Chiang Mai, Thai people living in Chiang Mai today remain overwhelmingly Buddhist—only 6.52 percent of Chiang Mai residents claim to be Christian.⁶

³Daniel McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1912), 96.

⁴Ibid., 97.

⁵Ibid., 98.

⁶"Christian Presence Map: Chiang Mai," ESTAR, accessed October 10, 2017, <https://estar.ws/harvest/christian-presence-map.html>. The ESTAR foundation, via its website, facilitates church growth in Thailand through providing up to date and complete statistics on the percentage of Thai people who claim to be Christian, offering a country-wide church directory, and making a print-on-demand publishing house available. Chiang Mai has a higher population of Christians than many cities and regions in Thailand.

Statement of the Problem

A small subset of Thai people in Chiang Mai are Buddhist background believers in Christ. This population exists despite the prevalence of folk Buddhism in the region and the national expectation that to be Thai is to be Buddhist. With this study, I examine the character of folk Buddhism that this population of Northern Thai Buddhist background believers practiced prior to their conversions. I elicited accounts from among these believers in order to shed light on their prior practices and motivations as folk Buddhists. Along with these descriptions of their former practices, respondents related their testimonies of how God drew them to Christ. I identified trends in these testimonies in order to understand their former practices and to facilitate Christian evangelism among Northern Thai folk Buddhists.

Challenges exist regarding the portion of this research that directly relates to God's action. Because God is spirit, he is invisible to human vision. His presence is often a mystery as he works in the lives of humans. In John 3:8, Jesus describes the activity of the Holy Spirit as being analogous to the wind. Thomas Oden builds upon Jesus' simile about the wind and the Holy Spirit:

The fact that we cannot see the wind does not mean that it does not exist. We hear it, feel it, observe its results. At times the unseen wind is capable of uprooting giant trees and swelling vast ocean waves—visible effects of a less visible operation.⁷

In addition to my primary goal of describing prior Buddhist practices among this population, I identified and examined trends in their testimonies prior to conversion. This examination sheds light on the means that God used to bring individuals to Christ while they were still folk Buddhists.⁸

⁷Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1992), 3: 9.

⁸Though Christian practice of these Buddhist background believers is not a primary focus of this dissertation, description of their Christian beliefs and practice is provided through interviews. In addition to contrasting their former practice of Buddhism with their present practice of Christianity, I am able to discern any syncretistically carried-over practices found within their new lives as Christians.

In Chiang Mai, folk Buddhism remains a prominent way of life for most Thai people. However, God is continually working, faithfully drawing Thai people in Chiang Mai out of folk Buddhism and toward lives of obedience to Christ through the gospel. The Holy Spirit is responsible for initiating their conversion and for sustaining their visible growth in Christlikeness, using unique circumstances and key relationships with gospel-sharing Christians to achieve his purposes (Titus 3:5, 1 Cor 3:7).

My respondents were folk Buddhists and are now Christians. As such, their former Northern Thai folk Buddhist practice is bounded by location *and* time. An observer of this dissertation may question the study of folk Buddhism through the eyes of former Buddhists. Its aim is to better understand the practices of a specific subset of folk Buddhists in Chiang Mai who eventually came to faith in Christ. This target population is the only group with insider knowledge of both domains. My interviews include questions targeting emic reflections on prior Buddhist practices, questions aimed at eliciting description of prior motivations, and questions providing opportunity for respondents to contrast their former lives as folk Buddhists and their present lives as Christians.

I used identified trends in the participants' accounts to construct a repertory of best practices for future evangelism among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. As descriptive and prescriptive aspects of this study exist together, its form resembles an engineering project. An architectural account, below, provides a helpful analog:

A leading architect once built a cluster of large office buildings set in a central green. When construction was completed, the landscape crew went to the architect for his word on placement of the sidewalk grid between the buildings. "Not yet," was the architect's reply, "just plant the grass solidly between the buildings." This was done, and by late summer the new lawn was laced with pathways of trodden grass, connecting building to building, and building to the outside. The paths followed the most efficient line between the points of connection, turned in easy curves rather than right angles, and were sized according to traffic flow. In the fall the architect simply paved in the pathways. Not only did the pathways have a design beauty, but they responded directly to user needs. Furthermore, there was never any

need to put up “DON’T WALK ON THE GRASS” signs, for there was always just the right little shortcut path.⁹

Like trodden grass, I interpret overlaps in the accounts of these former folk Buddhists as evidences of God’s leading. One might generalize these as fruitful paths for future evangelism among Northern Thai. Diverging from the well-known poem of Robert Frost, I aimed to find the road *more* traveled.

Understanding these former folk Buddhists’ perspectives is foundational for contextualizing the gospel in the process of making disciples of all nations, i.e., the work of missions. Edward M. Bounds defines missions as

the giving of the Gospel to those of Adam’s fallen race who have never heard of Christ and his atoning death. It means the giving to others the opportunity to hear of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, and allowing others to have a chance to receive, and accept the blessings of the Gospel, as we have it in Christianised lands. It means that those who enjoy the benefits of the Gospel give these same religious advantages and Gospel privileges to all of mankind.¹⁰

Bounds’ description of missional cross-cultural communication is accurate, though the transmission of information is not only one-way. A study of world religions requires

⁹Christopher Williams, *Origins of Form: The Shape of Natural and Man-made Things—Why They Came to Be the Way They Are and How They Change* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2013), 112.

¹⁰Edward M. Bounds, *The Essentials of Prayer* (New York: Fleming Revell Company, 1925; Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2004), 55. I disagree, in part, with a contemporary use of Bounds’ phrase “Christianised lands” without a caveat. North Americans currently live in a time often characterized as post-Christian. However, many Christians and churches remain in the West who live counter-culturally as people in, but not of, the world. I also readily affirm that Edward Bounds is known primarily for his works on prayer. In chap. 13 of the 1925 publication *The Essentials of Prayer*, prayer and missions are discussed at length. I value the richness of Bounds’ definition of missions, particularly his phrase “gospel privileges.” In 1972, George Peters contrasted mission and missions in *A Biblical Theology of Mission*. He wrote, “*Mission*, in my usage, refers to the total biblical assignment of the church of Jesus Christ. It is a comprehensive term including the upward, inward and outward ministries of the church. It is the church “sent” (a pilgrim, stranger, witness, prophet, servant, as salt, as light, etc.) in this world. . . . *Missions* is a specialized term. By it I mean the sending forth of authorized persons beyond the borders of the New Testament church and her immediate gospel influence to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in gospel-destitute areas, to win converts of other faiths or non-faiths to Jesus Christ, and to establish functioning, multiplying local congregations who will bear the fruit of Christianity in that community and to that country.” George Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 11. For additional discussion of missions, see Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), xv; Gary R. Corwin, Gary B. McGee, and A. Scott Moreau, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, ed. A. Scott Moreau, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 72; John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 39; Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 219.

much observation and listening. Becoming equipped to share the gospel cross-culturally invariably includes specific training to understand the culture and beliefs of the religious *other*. For the Christian, a study of missiology nearly always includes a study of world religions.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study, then, is as follows: What trends are present in the testimonies of formerly Buddhist Northern Thai Christians? By eliciting testimonies of how Northern Thai Christians came from folk Buddhism to faith in Christ, I provide recollections of their emic perspective on Buddhism. An emic approach is one that seeks “to understand the meaning of people’s lives, as they themselves define them.”¹¹ This study utilized the recollections of a unique subset of insiders: former folk Buddhists in Chiang Mai. For an outsider, gaining an insider’s perspective allows a helpful corrective against misinterpretation of the setting or system being researched.

Readers of this study encounter autobiographical descriptions of former folk Buddhist practice from Northern Thai Buddhist background believers. I compared, contrasted, and analyzed their stories through coding. Margaret LeCompte and Jean Schensul explain that “emic interpretations are local; they make the ethnographer’s story meaningful to insiders, or the local people who have been studied.”¹² This study identifies new areas of meaning for Northern Thai Buddhist background believers by analyzing and interpreting collected accounts of their former practices. Trends that respondents had previously been unable to discern emerged through systematic examination of multiple testimonies.

¹¹Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Ethics in Ethnography: A Mixed Methods Approach* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2015), 23.

¹²Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic Data: A Mixed Methods Approach* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 17.

Paul Hiebert thoughtfully considers using insider perspectives to improve interpretation of culture:

Both etic and emic models are useful, but the questions remain: Can an anthropologist, given his own cultural biases, ever really understand another culture in its own terms? And even if he does so, can he effectively communicate it to others who have not lived in-depth in that culture?¹³

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann similarly caution, “to include epistemological questions concerning the validity of sociological knowledge in the sociology of knowledge is somewhat like trying to push a bus in which one is riding.”¹⁴ To these critiques, I reply, to what degree are Westerners epistemologically stunted from understanding the East? To what degree are Northern Thai people unable to understand themselves? Learning in the field of social science should be a dialogue whereby initial observations lead to early theories. These theories should then be tested and refined to become more and more accurate. The end result of closely listening to and comparing multiple narrators’ self-descriptions has sufficient validity in their setting when properly delimited. These findings also provide meaningful observations and interpretations that can assist outsiders in making their own assessments about the local folk Buddhist practices in Northern Thailand. Paul Hiebert provides a way forward, epistemologically, with his assessment:

Clearly, our understanding of another culture is only approximate, just as *its* model of the world around it is approximate. But this does not mean we have no understanding of it at all. Careful study can give us a great many insights into another culture, and as we develop new methods for learning about the thinking and conceptual processes of others, these approximations should become more accurate and easier to verify.¹⁵

¹³Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 89–90.

¹⁴Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, introduction to *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Open Road, 2011), Logos. Because certain Logos format sources have no page or location numbers, I will cite quotations by chapter and subheading locations.

¹⁵Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 90.

Hiebert also advocates studying the worldview of the adherent in order to interpret his or her descriptions of cultural elements.¹⁶ In this study, I examined the Northern Thai folk Buddhist worldview as seen through the eyes of Buddhist background believers by administering ethnographic interviews with local respondents.

Personal Background

In my late twenties, I lived in South Korea. There, I first witnessed overt idolatry in a cross-cultural setting. At the top of a mountain outside of Seoul, I watched Buddhist worshippers perform an energetic sequence of bows before a gilded Buddha statue. I remember my shock at the sight and recall surprise at the degree of my own sorrow for the Korean men and women kneeling before the mute idol (Hab 2:18-20, 1 Cor 12:2). As a Christian from a predominantly Christianized setting, my initial observation of practicing Buddhists in a majority Buddhist setting is a powerful memory. My conceptual knowledge of Buddhism had not prepared me for an encounter with Korean folk Buddhism in its actual form. A later site visit to Tokyo exposed me to a radically different form of Buddhism, Amita Buddha worship among Japanese Pure Land Buddhists. My observations of Buddhism in Asia revealed its diversity in faith and practice, which differed from my previous study of historical Buddhism.

I have since pursued several seminary degrees in Christian ministry and have written this dissertation as part of a world religions research doctorate. My wife and I have prayed for revival among the people of Thailand consistently since 2011. Our hope is to join with what God is already doing to further His kingdom among the nations according to his calling on our lives. I find great value in this dissertation topic. I have made teaching my profession and I aim to assist outside observers of Buddhism to be better prepared to understand folk Buddhists in local settings, such as in Northern

¹⁶Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 90.

Thailand. As a Christian, I also see that this dissertation is potentially a useful resource for Northern Thai Christians and for Western missionaries living and ministering among Northern Thai folk Buddhists.

Literature Review

A literature review describes existing literature for a particular topic. Such a review alerts the reader to resources that can clarify and corroborate findings from a research project. Furthermore, a literature review assists in demonstrating the manner in which a project contributes to the body of literature in existence. Specifically, a literature review validates the study by showing why the study “has important implications for the discipline that informs it, as well as practical value for the population and specific problem under study.”¹⁷ Regarding my research question, existing literature is too broadly focused, does not take into account distinctions of regional variance in Thai identity, or is not focused on qualitative research. Nevertheless, the existing literature does provide a broad context for my research, a context that is supplemented by my research. Below, I have provided a non-exhaustive list of representative examples.

Several studies exist within the domain of Thai Buddhists who have converted to Christianity. Pacharin Chuchmanamast’s 2011 DMin thesis, “Effective Spiritual Movement Building among Thai Buddhist University Students,” interacts with Thai Buddhists, but only with Central Thai Buddhists who are also college students in Bangkok.¹⁸ My research setting is church based, in Chiang Mai. Suragarn Tangsirisan’s dissertation, “Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students: A Comparative Study of the Christian and Non-Christian Ethnic Thai

¹⁷Stephen L. Schensul, Jean J. Schensul, and Margaret D. LeCompte, *Initiating Ethnographic Research: A Mixed Methods Approach* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 49.

¹⁸Pacharin Chuchmanamast, “Effective Spiritual Movement Building among Thai Buddhist University Students” (DMin thesis, Bethel Seminary, 2011).

University Students,” similarly focuses on college students alone.¹⁹ Marten Visser created a Thailand-wide study of church growth that includes interviews in his 2008 PhD dissertation entitled “Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand.”²⁰ His efforts are admirable, but he bases his sample upon Thai nationality without taking into account any regional variances. As such, Visser includes Central and Northern Thai respondents in his sample.²¹ The main methodology of Visser’s research centers on church growth and is quantitative.²² My research is qualitative and focused solely on formerly Buddhist Christians in Chiang Mai, who are 6.52 percent Christian compared to Thai people as a whole, who are 0.69 percent Christian.²³ This regional distinction matters due to differences in culture, religious practice, and exposure to conversion to Christianity among various locations within Thailand.

I recall an account by Kosuke Koyoma, Japanese missionary to the Thai people. He reports a rebuke given to a Western missionary by a Northern Thai Buddhist woman. When attempting to share the gospel with her, the missionary was sharply told, “Just a minute! I am a Northern Thai woman. Speak to me in the Northern Thai dialect. . . .’ He replied, ‘I am sorry, I can speak only the Bangkok Thai . . .’ and she replied, ‘I thought so. . . . You missionaries are always trying to teach people while you really do not understand the people.’”²⁴ I have aimed to avoid the mistake of assuming

¹⁹Suragarn Tangsirisan, “Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students: A Comparative Study of Christian and non-Christian Ethnic Thai University Students” (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1999).

²⁰Marten Visser, “Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand” (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 2008).

²¹Visser, “Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand,” 3-4.

²²Ibid., 6.

²³“Christian Presence Map: Chiang Mai,” ESTAR, accessed October 10, 2017, <https://estar.ws/harvest/christian-presence-map.html>.

²⁴Kosuke Koyoma, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 25th anniversary ed., rev. and expanded (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 64-65.

that all Thai people are culturally similar, especially in regard to their former religious practice. I did this by asking questions of former Northern Thai folk Buddhists and delimiting any identified trends to the respondents among which I accomplished the research.²⁵

The MA thesis of Jurjen de Bruijne, entitled “Conversion: Discovering the Conversion of Thai Buddhists towards Christianity,” retests the interviews of Marten Visser and finds that written materials were often found to be prominent artifacts in Buddhist conversions.²⁶ However, his study relies on respondent sampling based on Thai nationality, is only forty pages, and does not utilize grounded theory. My study is delimited to Northern Thai Christians who were formerly folk Buddhists and, as such, my results have a more focused, local validity among this locationally bounded group. Another well-known historical treatment, Alex Smith’s *Siamese Gold*, recounts the history of the Thai Church from a church-growth lens, but only up to 1982, far too dated to provide anything but historical information for this research project.²⁷

This study utilizes a similar format as a dissertation from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary graduate, Matthew Lynn Pierce. This study is different in research goal but similar in methodology to Pierce’s research. In “Ethnic Identity among Diaspora Peoples: How Globalization and Migration Reshape the People Group Phenomenon,” Pierce interviewed displaced Burmese to determine their understandings of ethnic identity. Pierce’s use of phenomenological analysis, narrative research, ethnographic

²⁵I identified trends in my respondent accounts. Chapter 5 includes a list of hypotheses presented as emerging strategies for evangelism among Northern Thai folk Buddhists based upon these findings and a review of pertinent literature.

²⁶Jurjen de Bruijne, “Conversion: Discovering the Conversion of Thai Buddhists towards Christianity” (MA thesis, Ede Christian University for Applied Sciences, 2010), 25.

²⁷Alex G. Smith, *Siamese Gold: The Church in Thailand* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1982).

interview, case studies for gathering information, and grounded theory to analyze the results is a helpful methodological model for my own study.²⁸

The dissertation of Nantachai Mejudhon, “The Way of Meekness: Being Christian and Thai in the Thai Way,” presents his perspective on Christian mission among the Thai people and levels a criticism at typically Western attempts at evangelism.²⁹ He advocates a softer approach that works with an already present cultural value of meekness found in Thai society. Wan Petschongkram’s *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree: Some Observations on Communicating the Christian Faith in Thailand* is an insider description of Thai Buddhists’ misunderstanding of Christianity. Petschongkram wrote this pastoral treatise to make manifest many misunderstandings that Thai people often have when hearing the gospel in their Buddhist context.³⁰ My research centers on the perspective of Northern Thai folk Buddhists who later became Christians. Respondent interviews were analyzed in the context of this study. I compare identified trends in my own research to the findings of Mejudhon and Petschongkram.

This literature review shows that to answer my specific research question, a great deal of the literature on this domain is either too broad, not taking into account distinctions of regional variances between Thai identities, or is not focused on qualitative research. Based upon these distinctions, my study fills a niche in the research. This literature review demonstrates the reason why this study “differs in approach, concept, or methods and population from previous studies; why the study site is the right place for

²⁸Matthew Lynn Pierce, “Ethnic Identity among Diaspora Peoples: How Globalization and Migration Reshape the People Group Phenomenon” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016).

²⁹Nantachai Mejudhon, “The Way of Meekness: Being Christian and Thai in the Thai Way” (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 1998).

³⁰Wan Petschongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree: Some Observations on Communicating the Christian Faith in Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Gospel Press, 1975), accessed July 14, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/post/docs/Bo_Tree.pdf.

enhancing understanding of the study topic; and how the researcher's approach to the topic will fill a gap in the literature and/or extend extant work."³¹

Definitions

Conversion is the point at which a person becomes a Christian. A converted person experiences new life through faith in Christ and repentance from sin.³² Conversion entails a radical change. A person who is a Christian no longer believes what he or she once believed. The Christian Scriptures use varied imagery regarding this event, such as being born again, receiving a heart of flesh, becoming a new creation, and putting off the old self (John 3:3-6, Ezek 36:26-27, 2 Cor 5:17, Eph 4:22-24, Mark 1:14-15, Acts 3:19, Acts 20:20-21). The Holy Spirit initiates conversion via regeneration (Titus 3:5). A truly converted person also experiences sanctification. Sanctification is a process sustained by the Holy Spirit that effects continued growth in Christlikeness (2 Thess 2:13, 1 Pet 1:2).

Folk Buddhism is a localized expression of Buddhism. Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, define folk religion by

local expressions of the religion. These include local temples, churches, mosques, and shrines scattered around the countryside; the prophets, *purohits*, pastors, *mullas*, priests, evangelists, and lay leaders associated with them; the sermons, rituals, classes, and teachings in local congregations; and the religious beliefs and rituals found in the homes of ordinary people.³³

Northern Thai Buddhists have distinct practices that do not conform completely to forms of Buddhism found in ancient India or practiced in other parts of the world today. Folk religion differs from tradition by varying from the generally accepted loci of authority for religions that are

³¹Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte, *Initiating Ethnographic Research*, 49.

³²Faith and repentance work together in the Christian life. Succinctly, faith provides the means for beliefs and actions that constitute participation in the Christian life while repentance defines cessation from beliefs and actions that are in opposition to a Christian's participation in the Christian life.

³³Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 73.

often found in large institutions, old leaders, normative religious texts, written commentaries, schools where young leaders are trained in the accepted beliefs, and large centers of worship and pilgrimage where people come for deep, authentic religious experiences.³⁴

Since regional variance of Buddhist faith and practice exists throughout Thailand, utilizing the label “folk Buddhism” to describe the Buddhism formerly practiced by my respondents in Chiang Mai, Thailand allows me to more clearly delimit my study.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study is delimited to focus on a population of Buddhist background believers I interviewed in October 2017. It is also delimited locationally, taking place in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Limitations to this study include my inability to speak Thai. An intensive site visit took place during which I elicited testimonies through an interpreter. I was also limited by being a non-Thai Westerner. My observations required clarification and confirmation from insiders.

Much research on ministering among Thai Buddhists exists, and this literature was useful for comparison and contrast after gathering data and identifying trends from first-person testimonies. Prominent examples include *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree: Some Observations on Communicating the Christian Faith in Thailand* by Wan Petschongkram,³⁵ applicable chapters on Thailand from the series of books by David Lim and Paul De Neui on specific Christian ministry to Buddhists,³⁶ and several dissertations that focus on ministry among the Thai, including Nantachai Mejudhon’s “Meekness: A New Approach to Christian Witness to the Thai People.”³⁷ This study highlights unique

³⁴Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 73.

³⁵Petschongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*.

³⁶David Lim, Steve Spaulding, and Paul H. De Neui, eds., *Sharing Jesus Effectively in the Buddhist World* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 147-86, 283-326. David Lim and Steve Spaulding, eds., *Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 99-124, 179-252. David Lim and Steve Spaulding, eds., *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2003), 121-46.

³⁷Mejudhon, “The Way of Meekness.”

characteristics of Northern Thai folk Buddhist practice using comparison. Paul Hiebert explains that

comparison provides a heuristic device to guide us in looking for similarities and contrasts in areas that may not have been consciously explored in either culture. This “dialogue” between worldviews can help us find parallel sets of themes in two cultures.³⁸

This study allows for comparison between individual testimonies and for contrast between the current worldviews of the Christian converts and their prior beliefs as folk Buddhists in a Northern Thai setting.

Methodology

Respondents were theoretically sampled in the course of administering grounded theory.³⁹ Since I performed this research within Chiang Mai, it has validity in this setting, and may have limited explanatory power in other settings in Thailand or among diasporic Thai. I relied on key informants in my sampling “who have expert knowledge in specific areas relevant to the study, [knowledge that] can be extended to others who nominate other people whom they know for the researcher to contact.”⁴⁰ This method is also called reputational sampling. Schensul and LeCompte claim that reputational case selection requires that

researchers get help from community experts to identify suitable persons or units to study. Researchers first must decide what kind of individual or units they want to study. They then ask community experts to name others who—because of their

³⁸Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 103–4.

³⁹For a fuller explanation of grounded theory research, see John Creswell, *Qualitative Research & Inquiry Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013), 86. The respondents are chosen so as to facilitate the formation of a theory from the interviews and research. In grounded theory, researchers allow an explanatory theory to form in the course of the study, rather than applying an already formed theoretical lens to the study at the outset. All respondents are assigned numbers in the course of this dissertation to ensure their anonymity.

⁴⁰Jean J. Schensul and Margaret D. LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods: A Mixed Methods Approach* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), chap. 10, “Approaches to Selection in Ethnographic Research,” Logos.

reputations—are known to be the best examples of the kind of people the researchers want to study.⁴¹

Due to locational delimitations and cultural distance between my respondents and myself, this type of sampling is well suited for this research project.

My first stage of research was a phenomenological analysis. Russell Bernard calls this process of understanding the beliefs of others “trying to see reality through another person’s eyes.”⁴² Phenomenological analysis is also essential for making the gospel intelligible through contextualization. Paul Hiebert writes,

The first step in critical contextualization is to study the local culture phenomenologically. Before judging people, it is important to understand their beliefs because it is on the basis of these that they act. It is too easy to judge people before understanding them deeply.⁴³

Hiebert’s caution underscores the importance of seeking to understand inward character that causes outward conduct, rather than hypothesizing based on observation alone.

Hiebert, Tiéno, and Shaw also stress the interpersonal nature of this kind of study. They advise that withholding of judgment is essential because premature judgments are generally wrong and that people will not talk about their deep inner conflicts if the outsiders show incredulity or shock.⁴⁴ The purpose of phenomenological analysis is to understand the old ways, not to judge them.⁴⁵ In the course of this study, formerly Buddhist Northern Thai Christians describe prior instances of folk Buddhist worship. In order to gather quality data, I developed rapport with my respondents during the course of the interviews.

⁴¹Schensul and LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods*, chap. 10, “Identifying Key Informants or Local Experts,” Logos.

⁴²Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2002), 23.

⁴³Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 21.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

This study allowed participants to reflect on their former experiences as folk Buddhists and contains editorial comments offered from their new Christian perspectives. By compiling their accounts, I was able to identify trends and achieved a clearer picture of the community's self-understanding. Regarding phenomenological knowledge of religion, a respondent's self-reflection can lead to a new assessment that has the benefit of seeing past events in sequence. Luke Timothy Johnson writes,

Because we cannot know until after the moment—sometimes not until long after the moment—whether and how life has been restructured around that moment, we cannot identify a religious experience while it is being experienced, but only after the fact, by examining its results, the degree to which an individual's or a community's life has or has not been changed.⁴⁶

Phenomenological analysis is well suited for this task. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann explain that

[the one] method [they] consider best suited to clarify the foundations of knowledge in everyday life is that of phenomenological analysis, a purely descriptive method and, as such, “empirical” but not “scientific”—as [they] understand the nature of the empirical sciences.⁴⁷

If Buddhist background Northern Thai Christians retain misunderstandings about Christianity based on their prior immersion in a folk Buddhist worldview, phenomenological analysis can help draw out these errors, revealing how pre-understanding contributes to respondents' experiences.⁴⁸ Since pre-understanding *does* contribute to the learning process of becoming a Christian in sometimes negative ways, the possibility of hearing misunderstandings due to the respondents' majority Buddhist setting existed. However, since the purpose of this study is to identify trends in

⁴⁶Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 65.

⁴⁷Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, “Introduction,” Logos.

⁴⁸Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *Magic, Miracles, and Religion: A Scientist's Perspective* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2004), chap. 1, “Philosophies of Subjectivity and Agency,” Logos.

respondents' former practices, I identify the step of correcting misconceptions as a possible future research topic among this population.⁴⁹

I interviewed respondents to a point of saturation at which I could properly describe the characteristics of my target population. A point of saturation occurs when one interviews a “sufficient number of members with the characteristics of interest to the researcher.”⁵⁰ This study includes interaction with a number of respondents sufficient to give me information for a local validation of my findings. LeCompte and Schensul described this plane of assessment as

[an] *informational saturation point*; that is, the point at which additional data collection, including interviews and observations, produces no new information about cultural domains, subdomains, or factors. This is the point of “sufficient redundancy,” when patterns of response begin to repeat themselves and generate no new information.⁵¹

The label “saturation point” demands some qualification. Specific information pertinent to the study limits any saturation. Life stories are as varied as the kinds of people who tell them, and this study provides clarity on specific iterations of folk Buddhism in Northern Thailand prior to conversion among this population.

⁴⁹Another possible addition to future research would be to ask respondents “What did you think about Christians when you were a Buddhist?”

⁵⁰Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2010), 156.

⁵¹Schensul and LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods*, chap. 10, “Knowledge of Population Characteristics: Problems of Bias and Representativeness,” Logos. Rather than aiming for a specific number of respondents, I utilize the above definition of saturation for this study. The reader may note that I delimit this study and its findings to the Northern Thai Buddhist Background Believers I interviewed in October 2017. Together, saturation and proper delimitation allow for validity as I identify trends in respondent testimonies. Additionally, I am able to ask questions and form hypotheses about identified trends among my target population. Chapter 5 utilizes trends drawn from respondents' accounts and pertinent literature to formulate a list of hypotheses for Northern Thai Christians to test when evangelizing their folk Buddhist family members, friends, and neighbors.

Role of the Researcher

As a researcher, I listened as an active part of this study. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data gathering instrument.⁵² I did not undertake this study in a lab setting. As an ethnographer, I was a human observer in an environment outside of my control. Schensul and LeCompte explain that a certain lack of control is inherent in the ethnographic method, and when recording observations “it is important to remember that there may be more than one story; different participants may describe what happened and why differently.”⁵³ The researcher gathers data, but the unique role of the researcher does not end with this component of the overall task.

The researcher also creates helpful organized data from raw observations. When it comes to interpretation, LeCompte reminds that “only the researcher can create codes that link meaningfully to the conceptual framework and research questions and make the comparisons that result in good analysis and interpretation.”⁵⁴ Christopher Partridge presents a principle for interpretation:

an insider’s perspective, which may conflict with scholarly interpretations, is felt to carry equal if not more weight. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) has even argued that no understanding of a faith is valid until it has been acknowledged by an insider. Religious studies is thus carried out in the context of a dialogue which takes seriously the views of the insider, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the insider’s world view.⁵⁵

The statement above links the phase of data collection with a later component of this study, data analysis.

⁵²LeCompte and Schensul, *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research*, 1.

⁵³Schensul and LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods*, chap. 11, “Lack of Control over Field Conditions,” Logos.

⁵⁴Schensul and LeCompte, *Specialized Ethnographic Methods*, 333.

⁵⁵Christopher Partridge, *Introduction to World Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 17.

Data Collection Procedures

This study utilizes a list of questions formed from focused conversations with formerly Buddhist Thai Christians, advice from Western missionaries with experience in the region, and my previous experiences in Chiang Mai. Also utilized is a review of literature on the history of Thailand, Theravada Buddhism, animism, and the history of Protestant mission and the church in Thailand.

I asked respondents the following questions:

1. What is your age and occupation?
2. How long have you been a Christian?
3. “Are you the only Christian in your family?”⁵⁶ What is your ethnicity?
4. What do you remember about life as a Buddhist before your conversion? “When you were a Buddhist what rituals did you do? Did you do them daily, weekly or monthly? Why did you do the rituals?”⁵⁷
5. What do you remember as being important to you in your thinking, your heart, and your life during the time leading up to your conversion?⁵⁸
6. How did you become a believer in Christ?
7. How is your life different now that you have become a Christian?
8. “What do you do when you attend Thai ceremonies? e.g. a funeral, when Thai men become monks, and/or weddings?”⁵⁹
9. “How do family, friends, and people at work or school react when they know you are a Christian?”⁶⁰

⁵⁶Thai Buddhist background believer, Facebook message to author, July 8, 2017. This question was suggested by a Thai friend. Many Buddhist background believers are first generation. All of these questions are intended to be acceptable to Buddhist background Thai Christians.

⁵⁷Western missionary in Thailand 1, email message to author, July 12, 2017. This question was suggested by a Western missionary with many years of experience in a Thai setting.

⁵⁸Western Missionary in Thailand 2, email message to author, July 8, 2017. This question was suggested by a Western missionary as a way to clarify the kind of information I seek as a researcher.

⁵⁹Thai Buddhist background believer, Facebook message to author, July 8, 2017.

⁶⁰Ibid.

10. What would be something important to include when sharing the gospel with a Buddhist?
11. “What is something that would prevent Thai people from coming to Christ?”⁶¹

Narrative analysis. This research focuses on discovering an accurate view of how respondents, as former folk Buddhists, lived in the time immediately before the point at which they became Christians. To describe these phenomena, a semi-structured interview allowed respondents to tell their stories. Schensul and LeCompte explained that, in a semi-structured interview, “the same open-ended questions are asked of everyone in the sample, but the way they are explored and the way the responses evolve is flexible and depends on the respondent’s unique set of circumstances.”⁶² This method is well suited for eliciting the narratives this study requires. A semi-structured method allows for the identification of variables so that each testimony has as much overlap as possible. This method also allows for the revealing of patterns within cases.

Russell Bernard describes narrative analysis as having a goal to “discover regularities in how people tell their stories or give speeches.”⁶³ After multiple narratives are recorded, an emergent analysis came from comparison between multiple narrators.⁶⁴ I administered semi-structured interviews among a population that is all Northern Thai, presently Christian, and formerly Buddhist. Their autobiographical accounts provided raw data for analysis.

Interviews. David Fetterman labels interviews “the ethnographer’s most important data gathering technique,” touting their importance for explaining and putting

⁶¹Kasem, Facebook message to author, July 8, 2017.

⁶²Schensul and LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods*, chap. 7, “What are Semistructured Forms of Data Collection?,” Logos.

⁶³Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 451.

⁶⁴Ibid., 452.

into a larger context data gained through participant observation.⁶⁵ A semi-structured interview is a sub-set of interviewing designed to serve a specific research purpose and, in this case, “comparing responses and putting them in the context of common group beliefs and themes.”⁶⁶ The task of learning the testimonies of respondents is a means toward two goals: zeroing in on their histories in order to gain a better picture of their Northern Thai folk Buddhist practices and identifying the patterns of how the biblical God led each of them to faith in Christ.

Concerning the identification of themes across a collection of interviews, a prominent theme did not need to appear in every interview to be indicative of a pattern.⁶⁷ James Spradley defines an ethnographic interview as having a specific purpose, a series of explanations for interview elements, and ethnographic questions (of which subsets include descriptive, structural, and contrast questions).⁶⁸ These elements are present in an ethnographic interview and distinguish this research form from friendly communication due to the underlying purpose of gathering data. Herbert and Irene Rubin philosophically define the process of interviewing from an interpretive constructivist perspective as learning “how people view an object or event and the meaning they attribute to it [as being] what is important.”⁶⁹ This philosophy in interviewing is a guiding principle that is also submitted to a Christian worldview. The presence and working of God in the lives of Northern Thai men and women presupposes this study. Christ drew them to himself while they while still practicing folk Buddhism. No one becomes a genuine believer in Jesus

⁶⁵David Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step By Step*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 37.

⁶⁶Ibid., 38.

⁶⁷Schensul and LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods*, chap. 7, “What are Semistructured Forms of Data Collection?,” Logos.

⁶⁸James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979), 59-60.

⁶⁹Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 27.

through his or her own merit or volition, and all true conversion depends on the regenerating presence of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).⁷⁰

Case study. A case study is also referred to as a “narrative history,” and by collecting cases together, trends across the cases may be extracted and studied.⁷¹ Testimonies from respondents theoretically selected by a key informant comprise cases. Carol McKinney cites the importance of key informants to researchers because of their local knowledge.⁷² In my research, I relied on a local Christian who is a former Buddhist.

I first met my key informant when visiting Chiang Mai in early 2017. We connected when he described his testimony of how he, a former Buddhist, became a Christian. His level of English proficiency and work as a translator for local media businesses was a great advantage for this project. His network of similar former Buddhists in Chiang Mai who are now Christians allowed me to gather a collection of cases selected reputationally.

Data Analysis Procedures

After recording data from the case studies, the process of coding information took place. Respondent interviews were theoretically sampled in the course of administering grounded theory.⁷³ I used a constant comparative method of data sampling.⁷⁴ Open coding, followed by axial coding and selective coding, allowed for the

⁷⁰However, as humans are prone to do, a respondent might have misremembered or misunderstood reality in their reporting. Instances like these would be epistemologically difficult to determine since the researcher relies on respondents’ accounts for information about their testimony.

⁷¹Susan Weller, “Structured Interviewing and Questionnaire Construction,” in *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Russell Bernard (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1998), 373.

⁷²Carol McKinney, *Globe Trotting in Sandals: A Field Guide to Cultural Research* (Dallas: SIL International, 2000), 97.

⁷³Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 86.

⁷⁴Ibid.

identification of patterns and the development of a theory.⁷⁵ John Creswell presents the steps of a grounded theory study as creating and organizing files for data, reading through the text, making margin notes from initial codes, describing open coding categories, selecting one coding category for the central phenomenon in process, engaging in axial coding—exploring causal conditions, contexting, identifying intervening conditions, strategizing, identifying consequences, performing selective coding and interrelating the categories to develop a story or propositions, presenting a visual model or theory, and presenting propositions.⁷⁶ Following Creswell’s sequence of steps allowed me to draw meaningful data from individuals’ accounts and allowed me to compare and contrast my findings, ultimately identifying trends.

Grounded theory. Creswell describes grounded theory as an approach well suited for “when a theory is not available to explain or understand a process.”⁷⁷ In this study, I sought to answer my research question using grounded theory. I identified trends within former folk Buddhist practice of Buddhist background Thai Christians in Chiang Mai. Since trends are present, a section of my dissertation deals with implications of these trends.

This prescriptive section includes suggestions for evangelism among Northern Thai folk Buddhists based upon identified trends. I identified trends after coding characteristics from respondents’ testimonies. LeCompte and Schensul call coding in a grounded theory approach the inductive method. This practice involves a great deal of pattern recognition on the part of the researcher, a process that benefits from inputting

⁷⁵Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 86.

⁷⁶Ibid., 190-91.

⁷⁷Ibid., 88.

these codes into a computer-based coding platform in order to discover deeper connections.⁷⁸

Computer-based analysis. Once respondent interviews were administered and recorded, transcribed, and stored as text files, I entered these into a qualitative data analysis computer-based program, Atlas.ti.⁷⁹ I assigned codes to respondent interviews. Different codes that describe and categorize phrases from interviews were assigned. Atlas.ti “allows multiple codes to be searched at the same time.”⁸⁰ This program stores and allows for organization of data. Analysis then took place in a virtual workbench called the hermeneutical unit.⁸¹ In the context of this program, open coding, followed by axial coding and selective coding, allowed for identification of patterns and development of theory.⁸² Schensul and LeCompte describe open coding as inductive coding.⁸³ Inductive coding takes place when the researcher finds codes in transcripts and generates categories for organizing data.

LeCompte and Schensul discuss these levels of abstraction along which the researcher sifts and examines data through a process that is increasingly fine-grained.⁸⁴ Axial coding involves comparing codes to one another and determining the existence of relationships between the codes. What LeCompte and Schensul call “the pattern level of analysis” is analogous to axial coding.⁸⁵ Selective coding involves finding a central code

⁷⁸LeCompte and Schensul, *Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic Data*, 92.

⁷⁹Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte, *Initiating Ethnographic Research*, 54.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹LeCompte and Schensul, *Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic Data*, 181.

⁸²Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 86.

⁸³LeCompte and Schensul, *Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic Data*, 169.

⁸⁴Ibid, 248.

⁸⁵Ibid.

that serves as a theme against which a researcher relates other information. A qualitative data analysis computer program allows the researcher to not only select different codes as the research progresses, but to run and rerun data with different central themes in selective coding. Coding is not the only strength of using data analysis software, as the software also allowed me to take notes and to organize all data in one place, providing a great deal of flexibility and utility.

Strategies for Validating Findings

The specific population of Buddhist background believers who provided accounts limit the validity of this study. The respondents' descriptions are accurate according to their memories of their folk Buddhist practices prior to their conversions. Schensul and LeCompte wrote that "validity is the degree to which researchers actually have discovered what they think their results show and the applicability of those results to other populations."⁸⁶ This study is descriptive in regard to the local expression of Northern Thai folk Buddhism formerly practiced by my respondents.

In Chapter 5, this study also provides a suggested list of evangelistic best practices for the local population of folk Buddhists in Northern Thailand. I base this list of suggestions for evangelism on the presence of trends across respondents' accounts of their former folk Buddhist practices. As such, this section is secondary to the main task of better understanding respondents' former practices as folk Buddhists.

⁸⁶Schensul and LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods*, chap. 11, "Introduction: What is Research Quality?," Logos.

CHAPTER 2

CHIANG MAI CONTEXT

Introduction

This chapter examines the historical and religious context of Northern Thailand. It begins by tracing the history of Buddhism in the region, highlighting the roles of Buddhism *and* animism in the Lanna kingdom. First, I examine the role of Buddhism in Northern Thailand until the time of writing. Next, I describe the arrival of Western Protestant missionaries and the Christian mission to Thailand until the time of writing. Then, this chapter concludes with demographics among the Northern Thai today.

History of Buddhism in the Region

Thailand is locationally distant from northeast India, where Siddhartha Gautama (490-410 BC) preached his first sermon at Sarnath, India around 455 BC.¹ Like Christianity, Buddhism is a missionary religion. Buddhists carried their beliefs from India and spread them throughout Asia. Some Thai traditions claim that Buddhism first came to Thailand during the reign of emperor Asoka (304-232 BC), of the Indian Maurya dynasty, in the third century BC. However, a lack of archaeological evidence for this early arrival makes the claim impossible to validate. Since its arrival in Northern Thailand, Northern Thai people have incorporated Buddhism into their lives in significant ways. Because of the durability of statues, architecture, and preserved records of royalty, the history of Buddhism in Northern Thailand is observable through these artifacts. Accounts from the lives of folk Buddhist laity from this time period have largely been

¹Mark W. Muesse, *The Age of the Sages: The Axial Age in Asia and the Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 99.

lost to history. However, due to royal records and the prominence of the Tripitaka, evidence exists for the historical normative practice of Northern Thai monks and folk-Buddhist laity who symbiotically relied on one another for food and merit, respectively.²

Archaeological records indicate that Buddhism initially came to Thailand via the Theravada Buddhist Mon people who lived on the Thai peninsula during the first millennia.³ The Mon people group immigrated to Thailand beginning in the fifth and sixth centuries.⁴ Pali inscriptions from Haripunjaya, the Mon capital, show the prominence of Theravada Buddhism in their history.⁵ The Mon people displaced the original inhabitants of Northern Thailand, the Lawa, and were later superseded by the Tai.⁶ Though the Tai people eventually came to prominence in the region, Mon Buddhists persisted and influenced them.⁷ These ancient Tai people are the historical progenitors of modern Thai people.

The Tai Yuan, who called themselves *khon muang*, or ‘people of the principalities,’ emigrated from China.⁸ After their arrival, a sequence of kingdoms arose and declined in Northern Thailand including: the Hinduism influenced Dvaravati kingdom, the Haripunchai kingdom of the Mon people, and the Khmer kingdom, all of

²Buddha images have a major role in the history of Buddhist thought throughout the region. My respondent interviews also prominently feature Buddha images as a part of their former Buddhist practice in Northern Thailand.

³Kanai Lal Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia with Special Reference to India and Ceylon* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1982), 72. This author describes the Mon people of the Menang valley, to the South of the Ping river valley in Northern Thailand. He claims it is safe to assume that the Mon people in Haripunchai, Northern Thailand similarly practiced Theravada Buddhism.

⁴Michael Freeman, *Lanna: Thailand's Northern Kingdom* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 9. Their immigration continued until the middle of the thirteenth century.

⁵Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*, 133.

⁶Freeman, *Lanna*, 9.

⁷Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*, 135.

⁸Freeman, *Lanna*, 8.

which predated and existed alongside the Lanna kingdom.⁹ Chiang Mai is a prominent city founded in 1296 by Mangrai (AD 1239-1317), the first king of Lanna.¹⁰ Mangrai, of the Lao dynasty, set out to conquer the northern Thai Kok river basin. He was largely successful, founding Chiangrai in 1262, Chiang Khong in 1268, and then capturing the Mon capital Haripunchai in 1283.¹¹ King Mangrai of Lanna and king Ruang Ramakamhaeng of Sukhothai formed an alliance to clear their respective domains of Mon and Khmer people.¹² Buddhism, despite its association with the Mon, was practiced in the Lanna kingdom. King Mangrai acted as a patron of Buddhism, importing craftsmen from Burma who made gold, bronze, and stone Buddha images during his reign.¹³ These acts of patronage would set a pattern for subsequent rulers of the Lanna kingdom who similarly valued and commissioned these kinds of religious images.

In 1290, Mangrai built a pagoda (*chedi*) with many Buddha images and statues of Indra, Sariputta (who was one of the Buddha's first disciples), and other prominent figures.¹⁴ Records from the time indicate that Mangrai subsequently received relics of the Buddha from several *Mahathera* (elderly monks) who brought them from Sinhala in

⁹Freeman, *Lanna*, 8. To contrast, the Siamese, another Chinese ethno-linguistic group, settled in the Chao Phraya basin in Central Thailand. Readers may also note the usage of the title "king" throughout this section. While the Lanna kingdom was independent, this term is certainly appropriate. Later, after Lanna was retaken by the Siamese, these hereditary rulers functioned more like princes who ruled in submission to the king of Siam in Bangkok.

¹⁰Manich Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiangmai* (Bangkok: Chalermnit, 2000), 34. Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*, 142.

¹¹Phaisal Lekuthai, "Discussion Paper No. 168, Lanna Culture and Social Development: A Case Study of Chiangmai Province in Northern Thailand," Graduate School of International Development, Nagoya University, 27, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://www.gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp/bpub/research/public/paper/article/168.pdf>.

¹²Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiangmai*, 36.

¹³*Ibid.* Despite the Tai dominance over Mon people who were already in the region, the subjected Mon people influenced the Tai people via Theravada Buddhism. Kenneth Wells supposes that many of the *chedis* (pagodas) present in Thailand possess a Burmese origin, from before the eleventh century. Kenneth E. Wells, *Thai Buddhism: Its Rites and Activities* (Bangkok: The Christian Bookstore, 1960), 36-37. If this account of Mangrai employing Burmese workers is true, the influence would have continued into the twelfth century.

¹⁴David K. Wyatt and 'Arunrat Wichānkhēo, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), 40-41.

Langka (Ceylon).¹⁵ These pagodas were religious architectural forms transplanted from India to Ceylon (where they were known as *dagobas*), and then were subsequently built throughout Southeast Asia.¹⁶ *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, a centuries-old record of the Lanna kingdom, indicates that Mangrai asked for and received a miraculous validation of these remnants of the Buddha's burned body. Light shone from these relics, after which Mangrai gave the *Mahathera* 500 gold pieces to venerate a bo tree in Langka (Ceylon).¹⁷ *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* includes claims that the bo tree subsequently dropped seeds that sprouted in the bowls of the *Mahathera* as a sign that they should teach Buddha's dharma throughout the Lanna kingdom.¹⁸ These supernatural events figure prominently in the history of Northern Thai Buddhism, and connect a ruler's patronage to the wider distribution of Buddhist teaching. They also tie Buddhism found in the historical Lanna kingdom to the orthodox Theravada traditions passed on from Ceylon.

Animism and Buddhism in Lanna

As part of the former Lanna kingdom, Chiang Mai is located in the Ping river valley.¹⁹ A local legend about the founding of Chiang Mai includes the Thai prince, Suwanna Kham Dang. He reportedly chased a deer to the site of Chiang Mai, after which

¹⁵Wyatt and Wichānkhīeo, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, 40-41. Ceylon is the historical name for Sri Lanka.

¹⁶Gina L. Barnes. "An Introduction to Buddhist Archaeology." *World Archaeology* 27, no. 2 (1995): 165-82, accessed July 14, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/125079>. Pagodas are believed to hold relics from the Buddha's burned body.

¹⁷Wyatt and Wichānkhīeo, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, 40-41.

¹⁸Ibid. The reader may note an affirmation of the Buddhist worldview present in *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* manuscript, shown by its inclusion of miraculous light surrounding relics and dramatically shortened germination of seeds descended from the tree under which the Buddha was believed to reach enlightenment. This primary-source document presents these historical accounts uncritically. As such, it is referenced often, but not without the following *caveat*: In the course of this research, these accounts will be presented with understanding that they held religious as well as historical value for their original writers and recipients. Because this dissertation is not written from within a Buddhist worldview, a proper epistemic distance is maintained.

¹⁹Today, it is possible to trace the history of the settlement of the Lanna kingdom by viewing the histories of each valley. Freeman, *Lanna*, 5.

he founded the town, lived with a female spirit, and later became an ancestor spirit recognized throughout the region.²⁰ Historical records indicate that Prince Mangrai, the historical founder of Chiang Mai, was the actual individual who chased his stags to the site.²¹

Events in the life of Mangrai reveal a mix of animism and Buddhism. Together, with king Ngarm Muang of Payao and king Ramkamhaeng of Sukhothai, Mangrai founded Chiang Mai in AD 1296.²² A supernatural sign involving an albino mouse and a sacred tree marked the site as an auspicious one for the three rulers.²³ They performed animistic ceremonies to honor the local spirits, and Chiang Mai was established.²⁴ Despite its prominence, Mangrai did not rule Lanna from Chiang Mai and instead made the city a display of Lanna culture in the southern portion of his kingdom. Mangrai maintained Buddhist patronage and piety until the end of his life, when he died at age eighty in Chiang Mai.²⁵

Chiang Mai's geographic location contributed positively to its role as a cultural center through which the Lanna were able to influence neighboring kingdoms.²⁶ Mangrai remained in Chieng Rai and strategically presented Chiang Mai to one of his sons as a southernmost outpost against the Mons.²⁷ After a sequence of wars between Lanna, the Burmese, and the Khmer, Chiang Mai became the permanent capital of the Lanna

²⁰Hans Penth, *A Brief History of Lan Na: Northern Thailand from Past to Present* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2001), 12.

²¹Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiengmai*, 42.

²²Ibid.

²³Wyatt and Wichānkhēo, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, 45.

²⁴Ibid., 46.

²⁵Ibid., 55.

²⁶Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiengmai*, 37.

²⁷Ibid., 42-43.

kingdom in 1339.²⁸ A period of renewal for Buddhism throughout the region followed, and it became widely practiced by princes and commoners alike.²⁹ The effects of kings' Buddhist patronage are often still visibly demonstrated by enduring architecture, religious art, or Buddhist scholarship.³⁰

The history of Chiang Mai recorded in *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* contains much Buddhist supernatural imagery. Primary documents preserved on palm leaf pages in Northern Thai Buddhist temples present a record of Buddhism practiced and promoted by Lanna kings.³¹ *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* begins with an invocation, referencing and reverencing the Buddha, his dharma, and the body of monks that make up the *Sangha*.³² After discussing preliminary events taking place in India, the record turns to Hindu deities, specifically Indra, who reportedly sent a son of heaven named Lawakarat down a silver ladder to be the first northern Thai king at Chiang Mai.³³ Mangrai, a descendent of Lawakarat, is said to have taken part in ceremonies to reverence a sacred tree, believed to be the home of a benevolent tree spirit (in the form of an albino iguana).³⁴ When the sacred tree died, five elderly *Mahathera* approached Mangrai and urged him to

²⁸Freeman, *Lanna*, 13.

²⁹Penth, *A Brief History of Lan Na*, 43.

³⁰Various kings and princes of the Lanna kingdom are remembered for promoting Buddhism during their reign. Phaya Pha Yu (1345-1367) advanced the cause of Theravada Buddhism among his subjects, as did his successor, Phaya Keu Na (1367-1388). Since Theravada Buddhism is monastic, the number of ordinations into the *Sangha* may have increased or laity may have been encouraged to make merit through the support of monks and monasteries. Phaya Tilokaraj (AD 1442-1487), is remembered for being warlike in his conquests and is also remembered for his piety, since he made sure that the Tripitaka was reviewed in the Lanna kingdom during his reign. Lekuthai, "Discussion Paper No. 168, Lanna Culture and Social Development: A Case Study of Chiangmai Province in Northern Thailand," 29, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://www.gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp/bpub/research/public/paper/article/168.pdf>.

³¹Wyatt and Wichānkhēo, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, xxxi.

³²*Ibid.*, 1.

³³*Ibid.*, 6. Historical record cites Mangrai as the actual founder of Chiang Mai.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 35-36.

commission five Buddha images, three seated and two standing.³⁵ The king followed their direction and installed these images in place of the formerly auspicious tree. Historically, ideas and practices from both animism and Buddhism validated the Lanna kings' rule.³⁶

The *Mahathera* in this account provided Mangrai with a supernatural motivation for his meritorious actions. They promised military might. King Mangrai reportedly prayed,

With the merciful power [which accrues to] me [for] having built this Buddha image, I will raise my forces to take Ramannadesa- Hamsavati of the Mon Country. In the event that the. . . Mon Ruler submits to me and the power which accrues to me for having built these Buddha images, I will return to build a *vihara* in which to enshrine them.³⁷

History records that Mangrai raised an army, made alliance with the Mon, was given the daughter of the Mon king, and then subsequently returned to build the *vihara* (Buddhist monastery).³⁸ This instance displays how beliefs in animistic spiritual powers were incorporated from a solely animistic setting to one with a mixture of Buddhism and animism within a folk Buddhist worldview.³⁹

Buddha images, because of their cost and promise of auspiciousness are generally associated with historical kings in Northern Thailand. Kings built these statues of the Buddha for a variety of reasons. They held both religious *and* political value for

³⁵Wyatt and Wichānkhēo, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, 36.

³⁶The reader may view these Buddhist monks as supplanting the animistic practice of reverencing the sacred tree by instituting the honoring of Buddha images. However, the animistic ideas do not go away, as *pīi* are still feared by many Buddhists in Northern Thailand. Buddhism and animism exist alongside one another syncretistically. Angela S. Chiu explains that the use of relics from Buddhism was used by Lanna kings to solidify their rule and to place Buddha in a place above local spirits in then-present animistic power hierarchies. Angela S. Chiu, *The Buddha in Lanna: Art, Power, and Place in Northern Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 128.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Buddhism, as a belief system, is very porous and allows for the continued practice of animism alongside reverencing the Buddha.

kings and their subjects during this time period. For instance, the Buddha image known as Phra Buddha Singh originated from Ceylon in AD 157.⁴⁰ Ayudhya took the image as a spoil of war after defeating Sukhothai and installed it in Wat Phra Srisanpet.⁴¹ This image was subsequently stolen by prince Mahaprom and used to win favor with the king of Chiang Mai, Saen Muang Ma (1388-1411), who reciprocally re-installed Mahaprom as ruler of Chiang Sen.⁴² Saen Muang Ma then built the royal Pagoda Temple and installed two Buddha statues, one gold and one silver.⁴³ He acted based upon the reported vision of two merchants who saw the ghost of former king Keu Na (1367-1388). Their account led king Saen Muang Ma to build the Pagoda Temple so this former ruler “could be allowed to enter heaven.”⁴⁴ These royal patrons for Buddhist art and architecture were very visible proponents for Buddhism in Lanna. *Wats* (temples) of this time period each contained a Buddha image, facing east.⁴⁵ Behind each image was a stupa, locally known as *jedi* or *chedi*. These stupas reportedly contain relics. Kings supported the Buddhist monasteries and, at the local level, temples and monks promoted Buddhism among the laity.

During the time period of the independent Lanna kingdom, monks lived by the 227 rules of the *patimokkha*, and would go to villages early in the morning to collect offerings of food from lay-Buddhists.⁴⁶ This interdependence with the laity provided the monks with food and clothing and gave laity opportunity to make merit to improve their anticipated rebirths. Funerary rites in northern Thailand at this time were not carried out in the temple (as was done in central Thai settings). These would instead take place

⁴⁰Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiangmai*, 54.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., 55.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Penth, *A Brief History of Lan Na*, 54.

⁴⁶Ibid., 55.

outside the village.⁴⁷ Depending on their level of wealth, villagers' founding monasteries or donating to an existing monastery were also believed to contribute a great deal of merit toward their next lives.⁴⁸ For male villagers, becoming a monk was also an opportunity to accrue merit. Female lay-Buddhists were only able to make merit by living according to the five precepts and could not become renouncers themselves.

Monks in historical Lanna were to renounce the world and to live according to the pattern of Theravada Buddhism they inherited from the Mon people and from Ceylon.⁴⁹ In addition to seeking their own enlightenment, these monks provided laity with opportunities to gain merit by receiving donations.⁵⁰ Monks advised kings and provided artistic skill to wider society, and monasteries provided opportunities for the people to borrow and repay money, though any money donated to the monastery required approval from the royal court.⁵¹ Monks provided laity with respectable moral exemplars based upon the pattern of the Sinhala form of Buddhism. Local legends, such as the Buddha's visitation to the Lanna region, were likely inspired by beliefs passed on to these Northern Thai monks from Ceylon.⁵² Lay-Buddhists in Lanna learned about Buddhism

⁴⁷Penth, *A Brief History of Lan Na*, 55.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Beginning in the eleventh century, kingdoms in Thailand, as well as other kingdoms and countries throughout Southeast Asia, looked to Ceylon as the source of Buddhist orthodoxy. Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*, viii. In the neighboring Sukhothai kingdom, from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, the Tripitaka was reviewed and a form of Buddhism from Ceylon was instituted. Lekuthai, "Discussion Paper No. 168, Lanna Culture and Social Development: A Case Study of Chiangmai Province in Northern Thailand,"²⁴, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://www.gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp/bpub/research/public/paper/article/168.pdf>. Sukhothai is noted as being a center of Buddhist studies around the middle of the fourteenth century AD. It had direct influence from Ceylon and patronage from king Dhammaraja II. Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*, 148.

⁵⁰Penth, *A Brief History of Lan Na*, 56.

⁵¹Ibid., 56-57.

⁵²Ibid., 58. Another Northern Thai legend found in the Chiang Mai Chronicle ties Buddhist piety to animistic sacrifice, describing a symbiotic relationship. The ancient manuscript recalls the Buddha prophesying about Lanna, that he saw a city with no people. The cause of this desolation was deemed to be the existence of two demons, a husband and wife, who ate the people. According to the account, as the Buddha initially forbade this practice, the demons persisted in asking permission to eat one person a month, all the while being rebuffed. Finally, the demons negotiated their need for sustenance down to one water-buffalo a year. The Buddha consented to this arrangement through silence, and the demons explained, "If the people will give us a buffalo a year, we will sustain them and the teachings of the Buddha for 5,000

from these monks' example. They also performed rituals at temples, which housed Buddha images.

Decline and Renewal of Buddhism

During the reign of king Sam Fang Kaen (AD 1411-1441), Buddhism in Lanna entered a period of decline due to the king's interest in animistic practices.⁵³ Kanai Lal Hazra recorded that "He honoured demons and worshipped wooded groves, trees, rocks, forests, spirits etc. with cattle and buffaloes. In his domain many people worshipped demons."⁵⁴ This nadir in Buddhist belief motivated Northern Thai monks in Lanna to seek out ways to bolster Buddhism without a royal patron. Twenty-five Buddhist monks from Lanna underwent a voluntary exile, traveling to Ceylon by way of Cambodia.⁵⁵ They returned six years later, along with two monks from Ceylon, and spread Sinhala Buddhism throughout the Lanna kingdom.⁵⁶ The monks returned to Lanna with a Buddha relic and visited many other locales, including Southern Siam, Sukhothai, Haripunchai, Lampang, and Chiang Rai.⁵⁷ The actual effect of this local decline in Buddhist practice was that the Sinhala form of Theravada Buddhism was more widely dispersed throughout Siam during the reign of Sam Fang Kaen.

rainy seasons." David K. Wyatt and 'Arunrat Wichānkhīeo, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), 198. Animistic sacrifice and deference to local spirits historically existed among Buddhists in this region and exists till today, as is seen in respondent accounts. This syncretism poses no problem for the orthodoxy of Northern Thai Buddhists or the practice of animists, as their worldviews have apparently accommodated the other through this clause of non-competition since before the founding of the Lanna kingdom.

⁵³Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiengmai*, 60.

⁵⁴Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*, 155.

⁵⁵Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiengmai*, 60. Eight Cambodian monks joined them, traveling to Ceylon. Burmese sources confirm this contact between Ceylon and the Lanna kingdom during this time period. Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*, 155.

⁵⁶Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiengmai*, 60. These monks also wrote many ancient documents about Buddhism, copies of which have survived to modern times.

⁵⁷Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*, 158. Much of their activity involved performing *upasampada* ordinations of local monks into the Ceylon form of Buddhism.

Sam Fang Kaen's son Tilokarat (1442-1487) deposed him.⁵⁸ It was during Tilokarat's reign that bo tree seeds, prized for their association with the Buddha, were reportedly brought to Thailand from Ceylon.⁵⁹ War marked Tilokarat's reign, though he also built and repaired numerous temples and maintained the emerald Buddha, a white crystal Buddha, and a Buddha Sihing image.⁶⁰ Tilokarat's personal Buddhist practice and patronage included the higher ordination of 500 monks and promotion of Theravada Buddhism in Lanna.⁶¹ The eighth Buddhist council (1477) took place at Wat Jet Yòt during his reign. This council focused on the Tripitaka and promoted Buddhist scholarship throughout Siam.⁶²

Patronage and the Decline of Lanna

The grandson of Tilokarat, Yot Chieng Rai (1487-1495), succeeded his grandfather. He continued as a patron of Buddhism, building Wat Rampung in 1492.⁶³ His successor, Tilakapanattu (1495-1525) was also a devout Buddhist and patron of the *Sangha*.⁶⁴ He built several temples, installed a large Buddha statue in the *wat* he erected at Puppharama, and gave alms (dana) to thousands of monks of the Sinhala sect.⁶⁵ The

⁵⁸Tilokarat is also known as Tilokaraj.

⁵⁹Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiangmai*, 67.

⁶⁰Ibid., 69.

⁶¹Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*, 160.

⁶²Ibid., 161.

⁶³Ibid. Wat Rampung is found in Chiang Mai. During the reign of Yot Chieng Rai, the White Crystal Buddha would be a McGuffin for palace intrigue and rumblings of war. The dramatic turn of events began when a monk feigned sickness, saying that the white crystal Buddha was the cure. He asked to borrow this image and then bribed the museum curator who looked after the image to keep confidence when he failed to return it. This monk then fled to neighboring Ayudhya. Yot Chieng Rai wrote a letter to the king of Ayudhya asking for the return of the statue. He received a negative reply. It was only when he raised an army to attack that the image was produced and peace was restored. Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiangmai*, 71.

⁶⁴Hazra, *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia*, 162.

⁶⁵Ibid., 163. The king, Tilapanattu, also served as patron of a large number of Buddhist scholars. This patronage furthered the teaching of Buddhism in Lanna.

king intended this lavish bestowal of gifts to reap reciprocal spiritual benefits for Lanna and personal merit for himself, according to his Buddhist beliefs.

Despite Northern Thai kings' desires for auspicious circumstances and merit, an economic decline took place in Lanna.⁶⁶ After the death of Phaya Kao (1495-1525), a collection of factors led to a financial decline in the kingdom, including too much money dedicated to monasteries and too many Buddhist and civic building projects.⁶⁷ After a succession of six deposed rulers, the politically and monetarily weakened populace of Chiang Mai surrendered to the Burmese in 1558.⁶⁸ Hans Penth cites their weakness as providing an invitation for the invasion.⁶⁹ According to Kenneth Wells, the relative paucity of historical data regarding the practice of Buddhism in the day-to-day lives of lay-Buddhists in Lanna is due to the devastation wrought by the Burmese, who left the city of Chiang Mai desolate and inhabited by jungle animals.⁷⁰ Surviving information includes the narrative of *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, Buddhist religious architecture, and records from monasteries preserved by Lanna kings' patronage of Buddhism.

King Sai Setthatirat (1546-1547) was king of Lanna, but left Chiang Mai to rule in Lanchang.⁷¹ When he left in 1550, he took the emerald Buddha, white crystal Buddha, Buddha sihing, and the saekkam.⁷² After four years with no ruler in Chiang Mai,

⁶⁶Penth, *A Brief History of Lan Na*, 59.

⁶⁷Ibid., 59.

⁶⁸Ibid., 60.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Kenneth Wells was one of the first Western missionaries to return to Northern Thailand after WWII. His observations of the practice of Thai Buddhism and the history of the Northern Thai Lanna kingdom are helpful for this study. Wells, *Thai Buddhism*, vii-viii. Wells mentions how the Burmese decimated the city of Ayudhya in Sukothai in 1766-67, burning homes and destroying Buddha images. Within monasteries there in Ayudhya, not even a copy of the Tripitaka survived the destruction of the Burmese.

⁷¹Lekuthai, "Discussion Paper No. 168, Lanna Culture and Social Development: A Case Study of Chiangmai Province in Northern Thailand," 29, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://www.gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp/bpub/research/public/paper/article/168.pdf>.

⁷²Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiengmai*, 76. Today, the Saekkam Buddha image is found in Wat Karuhabodi, in Bangkok. Another prominent Buddhist artifact

king Mekuti succeeded Sai Setthatirat.⁷³ In 1551, Mekuti requested the return of these Buddha images, but received only the Buddha sihing.⁷⁴ The final decline of the independent Lanna kingdom took place in 1558 when Burma captured Chiang Mai and made it a vassal kingdom.⁷⁵ King Mekuti lost the throne of Chiang Mai and the Burmese ruled the Lanna kingdom. The Burmese subsequently submitted to Naresuen of the Ayudhya kingdom in 1599.⁷⁶ These events marked the beginning of the Northern Lanna kingdom's integration into modern Thailand.

Intensity of religious practice among kings in the Lanna kingdom ostensibly contributed to its decline and eventual annexation by the Siamese. The sheer number of Buddhist building projects consisting of stupas, *wats* (temples), and Buddha images negatively affected the finances of the Lanna kingdom and contributed to its eventual downfall.⁷⁷ Despite their negative effects, these tangible artifacts shed light on the character of religious practices from historical Lanna.

associated with Northern Thailand is the emerald Buddha, which came from Patalibut, India, where it was made in 43 BC by the Lord Abbot Nagasena. After three hundred years, it was sent to Ceylon, where it remained till AD 457, and was eventually sent to king Anuruth of Burma, though a storm caused the ship carrying it to land in Cambodia instead. The image eventually made its way to Chiangrai, where it was covered in lacquer to disguise its true form. Years later, after the Pagoda housing this artifact was struck by lightning, this shell fell away and its true form was revealed. Sam Fang Kaen sent an elephant to bring the statue to Chiang Mai for installation, but the beast stubbornly refused to go, choosing the road to Lampang, instead. A pagoda was built for the emerald Buddha in Lampang. The image was later transferred to Chiangmai during the reign of Tilokarat. There it remained till AD 1548. Jumsai, *History of Laos Including the History of Lannathai, Chiangmai*, 61-62.

⁷³Lekuthai, "Discussion Paper No. 168, Lanna Culture and Social Development: A Case Study of Chiangmai Province in Northern Thailand," 33, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://www.gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp/bpub/research/public/paper/article/168.pdf>.

⁷⁴Ibid., 77. The emerald Buddha was taken to Laos in 1550. It would not return to the Thai people until 1778. Phya Chakri, a Thai general, would eventually conquer Laos in 1778 and take the emerald Buddha to be installed in Bangkok. Ibid., 63.

⁷⁵Ibid., 23.

⁷⁶Ibid., 78.

⁷⁷Penth, *A Brief History of Lan Na*, 50.

Buddhism and Echoes of Independence

The Burmese continued to promote the practice of Buddhism in Lanna. The Burmese military commander in Chiang Mai installed a large bronze Buddha.⁷⁸ The Burmese king Bayinnaung, captured Chiang Mai in 1558 and the city was under their control until 1776.⁷⁹ After the Siamese repelled the Burmese in 1776, Chiang Mai became an outpost under the control of the Siamese kingdom. King Rama I, of Bangkok, installed Phaya Kawila as ruler of Chiangmai in 1782.

Several rulers from the Kawila dynasty restored the icons and symbols of Buddhism that indicated a more flourishing past in the formerly independent Lanna kingdom. Phaya Thammalangka (AD 1813-1821) restored temples, reviving the locations that allowed for the practice of Buddhist rituals.⁸⁰ Chao Kawilorot Suriyawong (1856-1870) improved temples in Chiang Mai, including Doi Suthep temple.⁸¹ Though the restoration of these religious sites recalled their independent past, the Lanna kingdom remained a vassal kingdom of Siam. Siam, too, was no longer isolated from the rest of the world. In the age of colonialism, Siamese kings sought to secure the independence of their kingdom through trade with powerful Western nations.

Siamese concessions to the British secured their independence through trade in Northern Thai teak. They harvested teak in Lanna, sent it to Bangkok by river, and traded it to the British.⁸² The teak trade ultimately contributed to a loss of cultural identity and further stripped the Lanna kingdom of its remaining regional autonomy. With increased

⁷⁸Penth, *A Brief History of Lan Na*, 60-61. Today, this Buddha statue is located in Wat Chia Phra Kiat, in Chiang Mai.

⁷⁹Freeman, *Lanna*, 14-15.

⁸⁰Lekuthai, "Discussion Paper No. 168, Lanna Culture and Social Development: A Case Study of Chiangmai Province in Northern Thailand," 29, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://www.gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp/bpub/research/public/paper/article/168.pdf>.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 35.

⁸²Penth, *A Brief History of Lan Na*, 74.

trade came increased British complaints about local Lanna officials.⁸³ The Thai kingdom in Bangkok sought to retain independence from the British, and subsequently imposed more control and cultural influence over their vassal state in Chiang Mai.⁸⁴ This arrangement led to the annexation of the Lanna kingdom by the Siamese in 1847.⁸⁵

Local lords who had traditionally retained power in Lanna were not replaced, tribute to Bangkok ceased, and central Thai became a mandated language for Lanna children in order to spur Siamese nationalism.⁸⁶ Technological advances of the modern age also brought more outside influence to the Lanna kingdom. Lanna, according to Michael Freeman, was further integrated into Siam by telegraph and railway connections in 1885 and 1921, respectively.⁸⁷ After a coup ended Rama VII's absolute monarchy in 1932, Chiang Mai became a province of the Siamese kingdom.⁸⁸ Despite this political upheaval, the regionally distinct mode of folk Buddhist religious practice in Lanna continued.

Buddhism in Northern Thailand Today

Modern Buddhist practice in Northern Thailand retains a great number of the elements that were present in the historical Lanna kingdom. Temples are still the main

⁸³Lekuthai, "Discussion Paper No. 168, Lanna Culture and Social Development: A Case Study of Chiangmai Province in Northern Thailand," 35, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://www.gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp/bpub/research/public/paper/article/168.pdf>.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Freeman, *Lanna*, 15.

⁸⁶Lekuthai, "Discussion Paper No. 168, Lanna Culture and Social Development: A Case Study of Chiangmai Province in Northern Thailand," 35, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://www.gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp/bpub/research/public/paper/article/168.pdf>.

⁸⁷Freeman, *Lanna*, 15.

⁸⁸The eventual incorporation of Lanna into Siam was fraught with difficulty. Since Lanna culture was distinct, yet subjected to Siamese governmental and legal norms, the imposition of Siamese control caused a dissonance. For instance, the prior practice of debtor's slavery in Lanna was abolished, and creditors resented treating (and paying) former debtors as employees. The prohibition of turning over slaves to Buddha images also led to resentment and a perceived loss of access to formerly meritorious actions among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Penth, *A Brief History of Lan Na*, 78.

locations where Buddhist worship takes place.⁸⁹ Buddha images still retain prevalence in these temples.⁹⁰ For example, the sihing Buddha image is still found in Wat Pra Singh, Chiangmai.⁹¹ Buddhist monks continue to perform meritorious actions to charge these idols with auspicious power via Buddhist magical rites called *phra parit*.⁹² The Tripitaka remains a guide for monks' Buddhist practice in modern day Chiang Mai, as was done in Lanna. Monks still rise early to receive food offerings from Buddhist laity, who believe they receive merit for their acts of service. On special holidays, lay-Buddhists visit temples and make merit for themselves. At Doi-Suthep temple in Chiang Mai, lay-Buddhists may purchase caged animals and free them in order to accrue merit in their folk-Buddhist belief system.⁹³ Monasteries provide adherents with opportunities to interact with monks, to make offerings, and to give respect to Buddha images.

Devotional practices of Northern Thai folk Buddhists still include the honoring of Buddha images. Folk Buddhists also honored these images in the historical Lanna kingdom. The Tripitaka contains no instruction for monks to venerate Buddha images, though evidence exists of Buddha's disciples bowing to superiors with palms joined together, what the Thai refer to as a *wai*.⁹⁴ This body posture is apparently a continuation of early Buddhist practice from India. As written in the first *Khandhaka* (minor discipline

⁸⁹Kenneth Wells describes the large number of historical temples in Chiang Mai, evincing the long history of Buddhism there. In his book, *Thai Buddhism: Its Rites and Activities*, Wells notes that there were 132 temples in Chiang Mai, a city with a population of 70,000 in 1960. Wells, *Thai Buddhism*, 28.

⁹⁰In 1960, Wells supposed that the number of Buddhist images in all of Thailand must have been numbered in the millions. Wells, *Thai Buddhism*, 39.

⁹¹The statue found in Chiang Mai is actually one of three Thai statues that are claimed to be the sihing Buddha.

⁹²Erick White, "Contemporary Buddhism and Magic," in *The Oxford Handbook on Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael K. Jerryson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 591. Yoneo Ishii, *Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 20-21.

⁹³Susan M. Darlington, "Contemporary Buddhism and Ecology," Jerryson, *The Oxford Handbook on Contemporary Buddhism*, 491.

⁹⁴Chiu, *The Buddha in Lanna*, 3.

regulations), monks seeking restoration “should bow down at the feet of the elder *Bhikkhus*, and squatting down, and raising their hands with the palms joined together.”⁹⁵ The *wai*, placing palms together and bowing forward, is widely offered by lay-Buddhists in Northern Thailand today. They perform this act when standing before the Buddha image or when interacting with monks.⁹⁶ Buddhist monks, notably, do not return the *wai* to lay-Buddhists.

Diversity also exists among the practices of folk Buddhists in Northern Thailand. The Thai king Mongkut (1804-1868) was a religious reformer who instituted a new monastic tradition during his lifetime; this tradition is known as *thammayut nikhai* (adhering to the dhamma order) and his school received privileged royal support.⁹⁷ In a 2008 study of monastic education in Thailand: *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words*, Justin McDaniel mentions that though Mongkut promoted his standardized iteration of Buddhism in and around Bangkok, *thammayut nikhai* did not disseminate out to Northern Thailand to the same degree and that Northern Thai Buddhism is generally “informal and idiosyncratic.”⁹⁸ The Lanna kingdom retained a kind of cultural and religious independence until the railroad and telegraph began to make northern Thailand more accessible in the twentieth century.⁹⁹

⁹⁵*Vinaya Texts*, ed. F. Max Müller, trans. T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1882–1885), 17: 341.

⁹⁶Theravada Buddhism is not a democracy. Monks claim to have spiritual power and lay claim to positions commensurate with their stated ability to provide laity with merit. Laity respect them accordingly. Theravada Buddhism is also not an egalitarian religion. Women are not able to attain nirvana and hope only for accruing enough merit to be born again as a male. Many Thai men do spend some time as a monk, even if for only a few months, and this ordination ceremony is said to accrue merit to their mothers in return for their giving them life. In this way, Buddhism is intertwined in the Thai identity and partially defines Thai family relationships. Buddhism is also said to provide merit and auspiciousness for business ventures. Furthermore, the national idea of what it is to be Thai is intertwined with Buddhist practices. A Buddhist worldview and its accompanying value structures are ever-present for folk Buddhists in Northern Thailand.

⁹⁷Rachelle M. Scott, “Contemporary Thai Buddhism,” Jerryson, *The Oxford Handbook on Contemporary Buddhism*, 200.

⁹⁸Justin McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 107.

⁹⁹In 1925, Chiang Mai was twenty-six hours from Bangkok by rail. Mrs. James W. McKean,

Marten Visser utilizes Milford E. Spiro's threefold categorization to describe Thai Buddhism: *nibbanic* (focuses on the Buddha's teaching about nirvana), *kammatic* (focuses on achieving a better rebirth), and apotropaic (or folk Buddhism).¹⁰⁰ He mentions that these categories are not of value to the adherents themselves, but that they are useful for researchers to understand Buddhists' practices as observers. With that caveat, he explains that in Thailand the *nibbanic* form is not present, but that a mix of *kammatic* and animistic forms are present, leading to a uniquely Thai mode of folk Buddhism.¹⁰¹

Animistic practices are readily found among folk Buddhists in Northern Thailand. They commonly perform offerings to local spirits, *pii*, to obtain blessings or to avoid negative circumstances. These practices, along with recitations of Buddhist rites in Pali known as *phra parit*, deal with a temporal aspect of life that the more soteriological components of Buddhism do not address.¹⁰² A belief in ghosts is common. Northern Thai folk Buddhists believe that spirit possession and amulets provide material wealth and business success. Offerings similarly relieve sicknesses ascribed to *pii*. The Buddhist worldview accommodates sacred trees in which these local spirits are said to reside. These localized animistic practices increase complexity and diversity, giving Northern Thai folk Buddhism its shape. Folk Buddhist traditions have been present in the region for hundreds of years, as Protestant missionary accounts from the late 1800s reveal.¹⁰³

"Narrative of Chiangmai," in *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam, 1828-1928*, ed. George McFarland (Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press, 1928), 126.

¹⁰⁰Marten Visser, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand" (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 2008), 27.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 26-30.

¹⁰²Ishii, *Sangha, State, and Society*, 20-21. *Phra parit* are recited at housewarmings, the consecration of Buddha images, and at funerals.

¹⁰³Daniel McGilvary, the first Protestant missionary to Chiang Mai, observed, "The Lao as a race have been in bondage to the spirits. We have already had frequent occasion to refer to the slavish fear of them among all classes, from the highest to the lowest. No event in life, from birth to the last offices for the dead, could be undertaken without consulting or appeasing the presiding spirits of the clan, the household, or the country. Their anger is the fruitful cause of every disease and calamity that flesh is heir

Modern Buddhist background believers in Northern Thailand face many of the same challenges that initial converts who left Buddhism encountered at the beginning of the Protestant mission to Northern Thailand.

History of Christianity in the Region

The history of Christian missions in Northern Thailand is less lengthy than the seven hundred year history of Chiang Mai and the Lanna Kingdom.¹⁰⁴ Arriving in Thailand in the nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries first began ministering among the Thai in the capital of the Siamese kingdom, Bangkok. Six hundred miles of river and overland travel isolated Chiang Mai from their reach, which often meant that travelers accounted for a month to travel from Bangkok to Chiang Mai.¹⁰⁵ Protestant Christian

to.” Daniel McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1912), 203.

¹⁰⁴Readers may note that Catholic missions predated Protestant missions in Siam, but that Protestant missionaries were the first to make a lasting impact in Northern Thailand. Catholic mission to Thailand was initiated by Catholic missionaries in the sixteenth century. Dom Maternus Spitz, “Siam, The Land of the Yellow Robe,” *Catholic Missions* (New York: The Society for the Propagation of the Faith, 1921), 15:6-7. According to Kirti Bunchua, Thai missionary work may be separated into three major epochs: (1) 1555-1828, the era of Catholic Missions, (2) 1828-1965, Catholic and Protestant Missions, and (3) 1965 to the present, the Period of the Thai church. Kirti Bunchua, “History of the Church in Thailand,” in *Asia and Christianity*, ed. M. D. David (Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House, 1985), 69-70. Initial contact between Catholicism and the Thai people potentially took place when Dominican priests, Jerome of the Cross and Sebastian de Cantu, made their way to Thailand in either 1554 or 1557 and “converted some 1500 Siamese . . . [till] 1569,” when they were martyred. Spitz, *Catholic Missions*, 7. M. Anesaki et al., “Missions,” in *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, John A. Selbie, and Louis H. Gray (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908–1926), 719. Sources disagree on the initial contact between Catholics and the Thai. A recent newsletter from Father Surachai Chumsriphan splits this Gordian knot, explaining that any earlier forays into Thailand, such as the often referenced 1550 entry of Bonferre, have no historical documentation. He places the confirmable date of Catholic entry at 1567. Father Surachai Chumsriphan, “A Brief History Of The Catholic Church in Thailand,” *Newsletter of the District of Asia, Oct-Dec 2002*, Society of St. Pius Xavier, accessed December 30, 2017, http://www.sspxasia.com/Newsletters/2002/Oct-Dec/Catholic_Church_in_Thailand.htm.

Jesuit priests came to Thailand in 1606 and 1624, but because of continued persecution, the priests fled, and Thailand was without a missionary presence until 1662. Spitz, *Catholic Missions*, 7. The numbers of native Thai Catholics grew to twelve thousand, but was then gradually reduced to one thousand by a century of revived persecution beginning in 1729. Spitz, *Catholic Missions*, 7. By 1828, the Catholic Church managed to retain “four churches in Bangkok, one in Ayuthia, and one in Chantaburi.” Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand 1828-1958*, 5.

¹⁰⁵Technically, the first contact between Protestant Christians and the Thai came from Ann Judson, wife of lauded missionary to Burma, Adironam Judson. She ministered to displaced Thai in Burma and crafted a statement of Christian belief in Thai via a tract in Thai script that was printed in Serampore, India. Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand 1828-1958*, 5. This tract ministry among diasporic Thai was soon followed by the first Protestant missionaries: Carl Gutzlaff and Jacob Tomlin. Both men arrived in Thailand in August 1828. Elmer A. Fridell, *Baptists in Thailand and the Philippines* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1956), 9.

mission in Chiang Mai did not begin until 1867.¹⁰⁶ It was during the reign of Chao Kawilorot Suriyawong (1856-1870) that Christianity took root in what was, at least culturally and locally, still known as the Lanna kingdom.¹⁰⁷ Christianity integrated into the history of the region with the initial arrival of Protestant missionaries in Northern Thailand. Inthawarorot Suriyawong became prince over Chiang Mai in 1901. During his reign, the American missionary educational system first became prominent there.¹⁰⁸ The last ruler of Chiang Mai under the Kawila dynasty, Chao Kaeo Naowarat (1909-1939), revived Chiang Mai. During Naowarat's reign, Chiang Mai became a province of Thailand.¹⁰⁹

Several accounts in English record the history of Protestant Christian mission to Thailand. These include Kenneth Wells' focused *History of Protestant Work in Thailand*. He wrote this first and second-person history in 1958, after the formal transition of the Presbyterian church mission to the Thai national church took place between 1953 and 1957.¹¹⁰ George McFarland edited *Historical Sketch of Protestant*

Gutzlaff and Tomlin began working with Chinese living among the Thai, beginning their work by translating the Christian Scriptures into Thai and writing a Thai-English dictionary. Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand 1828-1958*, 5. George Evers highlights a demographic trend seen today in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia: Christians come from immigrant populations throughout Asia. He writes that the majority of Christians in Thailand are of Chinese descent, while ethnic Thai are generally Buddhist. George Evers, "On the Trail of Spices: Christianity in Southeast Asia," in *Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Felix Wilfred (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2014), 70. This may have been true for the Bangkok mission, but many Northern Thai Christians came from the local populace, and not largely from an immigrant population.

¹⁰⁶Catholic mission to Chiang Mai actually began in 1844, when two priests came to evangelize the Northern Thai. After two months, the prince of Chiang Mai forbade his subjects from becoming Christian and prohibited the priests from evangelizing, precipitating their return to Bangkok. Philip J. Hughes, *Proclamation and Response: A Study of the History of the Christian Faith in Northern Thailand*, 2nd ed. (Chiang Mai: Payap College Manuscript Division, 1989), 6.

¹⁰⁷Lekuthai, "Discussion Paper No. 168, Lanna Culture and Social Development: A Case Study of Chiangmai Province in Northern Thailand," Graduate School of International Development, Nagoya University, 30, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://www.gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp/bpub/research/public/paper/article/168.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 35.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand 1828-1958*, 174-94.

Missions in Siam, 1828-1928, an earlier record written to accompany a hundred-year celebration of the Protestant mission to Thailand.¹¹¹ More recently, Alex Smith researched the history of Christianity in Thailand in *Siamese Gold, The Church in Thailand*, first published in 1982.¹¹² Marten Visser followed Smith with his 2008 effort, “Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand.”¹¹³ These authors wrote about the history of Protestant missions throughout Thailand. A missional history more focused on Northern Thailand is Philip J. Hughes’ *Proclamation and Response: A Study of the History of the Christian Faith in Northern Thailand*.¹¹⁴ Similarly, Herb Swanson’s treatment of Christianity in Northern Thailand, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, focuses on the development of the Northern Thai church from missionary beginnings until 1920.¹¹⁵

Beginnings in Bangkok

Thai Protestant Christian missions began in Bangkok in 1828. Initial missionaries experienced difficulty under King Rama III, Pra Nang Klao, who was wary of European ambition to colonize Siam and restricted missionaries to live and work only in Bangkok.¹¹⁶ Thai royalty eventually gave Protestant missionaries in Thailand a favorable status due to their desire to retain independence and power during a time of international colonial exploitation. King Mongkut began his rule in 1851 and was a

¹¹¹McFarland, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam*.

¹¹²Alex G. Smith, *Siamese Gold, the Church in Thailand* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1982).

¹¹³Visser, “Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand.”

¹¹⁴Philip J. Hughes, *Proclamation and Response: A Study of the History of the Christian Faith in Northern Thailand*, 2nd ed. (Chiang Mai: Payap College Manuscript Division, 1989).

¹¹⁵Herb Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua* (Bangkok: Chuan Printing Press, 1984,) accessed January 4, 2018, http://herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=43#ttt. Swanson claims to be very pro-church. He provides criticism of missionary actions or tendencies that he believes led to negative outcomes for the burgeoning Thai church. Swanson’s presented view of salvation and my own do not align, as he makes some statements that point to salvation outside of exclusive faith in Christ. Despite this disagreement, his work is helpful to provide a historical perspective to the life of the Northern Thai church up to 1920.

¹¹⁶Mary Backus, ed., *Siam and Laos as Seen by our American Missionaries* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1884), 321.

brilliant statesman noted for maintaining Siam's independence. He permitted Western missionaries to minister for the benefits of English teaching and medical advances they provided.¹¹⁷ Mongkut welcomed Protestant missionaries to Thailand in order to facilitate his goals.¹¹⁸ Though Thai Buddhists in Bangkok were not violent toward the Protestant Western missionaries, sickness among missionaries, restriction to living in Bangkok, and a resistance to conversion among the Siamese meant that an initial wave of Protestant missionaries in Bangkok floundered with little fruit to show for their efforts. Nineteenth century missionary records reveal that the average lifespan of a missionary to Thailand before 1890 was five years after their arrival.¹¹⁹

Sickness shaped the eventual denominational orientation of the Siamese mission. Baptists predated Presbyterian missionaries in Bangkok, but Baptist missionaries did not persevere in Siam. The first Baptist missionaries in Thailand, John Taylor Jones and his wife, arrived in 1833.¹²⁰ William Dean and several other missionary families would arrive several years later.¹²¹ Jones completed a translation of the Thai New Testament in 1843, but health problems would cause his presence on the mission field to be intermittent; he would eventually die of dysentery in 1851.¹²² Illness caused the mission there to dwindle till Dean was the only remaining Baptist missionary in

¹¹⁷Jesse Caswell was Mongkut's English teacher. A Congregationalist missionary, Caswell served in Bangkok until his death in 1848. At his funeral, the future king Mongkut reportedly cried and sent gifts to Caswell's widow. Barnes Frisbie, *The History of Middletown, Vermont, in Three Discourses: Delivered before the Citizens of that Town, February 7 and 21, and March 30, 1867* (Middletown, VT: Tuttle & Company, 1867), 67.

¹¹⁸Monkgut remained a staunch Buddhist to his death and did not convert to Christianity.

¹¹⁹Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 68.

¹²⁰Fridell, *Baptists in Thailand and the Philippines*, 9.

¹²¹Arthur Brown, *The Expectation of Siam* (New York: The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1925), 111.

¹²²"John Taylor Jones," in *The Baptist Encyclopædia*, ed. William Cathcart (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 616.

1871.¹²³ At his death in 1884, the Baptist Missionary Board deemed that redirecting resources to China would prove more fruitful, and their Thai mission closed.¹²⁴

The Presbyterian mission in Bangkok began in 1839. This Presbyterian mission coincided with the Baptist mission in Bangkok and had two target populations: one mission for Thai and one for ethnic Chinese.¹²⁵ After Baptists and Congregationalists had already been in-country for nearly a decade, Presbyterian missionary William Buell and his wife arrived and ministered in Bangkok for three and a half years.¹²⁶ At the end of his service, he could preach in Thai, but he and his wife left due to a paralyzing disease which struck her suddenly.¹²⁷ The Presbyterians' initial venture was tragically cut short by illness, but future Presbyterian missionaries would endure.

Three years later, in 1847, Stephen Mattoon and Dr. Samuel House restarted the Presbyterian mission in Thailand.¹²⁸ This second-beginning of the Presbyterian mission coincided with a decline of the Baptist and Congregationalist missions in Bangkok.¹²⁹ The Presbyterian mode of baptism (and church leadership) would become the main iteration of Christian faith advanced in Thailand. One of these Presbyterian missionaries, Dr. Samuel House, had a busy medical ministry and made many tours to pass out Christian literature, a practice that led to occasional converts.¹³⁰ It was in 1853 that Jesse Caswell, the Congregationalist pastor and former tutor to Mongkut, passed

¹²³Brown, *The Expectation of Siam*, 112.

¹²⁴Ibid.

¹²⁵McFarland, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam*, 35.

¹²⁶Ibid., 36.

¹²⁷Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 26.

¹²⁸McFarland, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam*, 36.

¹²⁹Ibid., 37.

¹³⁰Ibid., 40. Missionary doctors and educators provided a temporal benefit to the Thai. This role earned them the opportunity to share the gospel. George Feltus, *Samuel Reynolds House of Siam, Pioneer Medical Missionary, 1847-1876* (New York: Revell, 1924), 11.

away.¹³¹ The single remaining Congregationalist missionary family returned home, and the Presbyterian mission was able to purchase their remaining buildings and printing press in 1849.¹³² The First Presbyterian church of Bangkok was initially only populated by eight Western missionaries, but soon there was a Chinese convert, Sinsa Ki-en Qua-Sean. Qua-Sean also later worked for the mission as an assistant and for the school as a teacher.¹³³ From these humble beginnings, the Presbyterian mission grew.

In 1851, a major change in leadership took place in Thailand as king Mongkut took the throne.¹³⁴ His knowledge of English language and twenty-six years as a Buddhist monk led to many changes in Thailand.¹³⁵ Mongkut studied European languages and was open to learning from Westerners with the goal of improving the lives of his subjects through technology. Years of positive relationships with Christian missionaries led him to act in their favor as king, and he finally granted them land on which to build homes. King Mongkut's benevolent posture toward missionaries allowed the Christian mission in Thailand to take on a much more permanent character.

After the death of Mongkut in 1868, his son continued a similar policy of toleration toward Christian missionaries.¹³⁶ Despite positive pronouncements from Thai rulers that lessened danger from political intrigue, the hazard for Western missionaries

¹³¹Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 37.

¹³²McFarland, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam*, 41.

¹³³Ibid. Smith lists this Chinese co-laborer as Qua Kieng. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 26.

¹³⁴McFarland, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam*, 44

¹³⁵Ibid., 24, 44. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 24.

¹³⁶Brown, *The Expectation of Siam*, 118. The reader is likely familiar with the Rogers and Hammerstein play *The King and I*, in which Anna Leonowens became the governess of the Thai king's children for six years near the end of Mongkut's life. This sensationalized account is based upon an actual event, gathered from Ms. Leonowens' recollections of her time in court life. Her employment included a condition that she not proselytize and that she teach from a secular perspective, a pledge missionary observations at the time seem to confirm was kept. William L. Bradley, *Siam Then: The Foreign Colony in Bangkok before and after Anna* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), 103.

living Thailand continued in the form of physical maladies.¹³⁷ At one point, the Presbyterian mission dwindled to three missionary families, nearly mirroring the previously shuttered Congregational and Baptist efforts.¹³⁸ Several more Presbyterian missionaries revolved in and out of the mission in Bangkok until Daniel McGilvary's arrival in 1858. He, along with the MacDonalds and MacFarlands who arrived in 1860, brought the Presbyterian mission to Thailand into a more established era.¹³⁹ Several years later, the Protestant Christian mission to Chiang Mai was begun by the Presbyterian missionaries—Daniel and Sophia McGilvary and Jonathan Wilson.

Christian Mission to Chiang Mai

At the time of the initial Protestant mission to Northern Thailand, its remoteness isolated Chiang Mai from the courtly life of Bangkok. Traveling to the former Lanna kingdom from Bangkok required a month of passage by boat. Due to its geographical inaccessibility, there were no Protestant missionaries in this remote place until the McGilvarys arrived in Northern Thailand.

Daniel McGilvary (1828-1911), is the most striking example of a Christian missionary used by God to spark a widespread and lasting movement among the Northern Thai. The effects of his fifty-three years serving as missionary to the Thai and the Lao continue to shape the character of the Thai church in the region today.¹⁴⁰

McGilvary's lengthy ministry consisted of evangelizing converts, introducing smallpox

¹³⁷By 1893, ten Western missionaries had died because of the difficult climate and indigenous illnesses. McFarland, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam*, 47.

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Ibid., 49. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 57-58. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, <http://www.herbswanson.com/get.php?postid=44#c1>. George McFarland, author of a prominent history of early Thai mission, was known for his excellent Thai language skills. He was appointed the Superintendent of Public Instruction and President of the Royal College in Bangkok, which trained Thai physicians throughout the country. Brown, *The Expectation of Siam*, 118.

¹⁴⁰McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 1. Other missionaries worked alongside McGilvary and their efforts were considerable. This section focuses on his efforts as a pioneer missionary to the Thai as an ideal and representative example.

vaccinations and malaria treatments, and beginning a school system, a college, a medical school, a seminary, churches, and hospitals.¹⁴¹ His lifetime of missionary service there resulted in five hundred baptized believers.¹⁴² His impact on the life of the Northern Thai peoples did not go unnoticed, even by those outside the Christian faith. When he died at age eighty-three, Lao princes and officials mourned him and common people closed their businesses for a short time.¹⁴³ The reciprocal affection shown for this Protestant missionary is evidence of his great care for the Thai and the Lao during his time in their country.

Raised in a traditional Presbyterian home, McGilvary extended the Presbyterian mission to the Northern Thai region and ministered there with tremendous effort.¹⁴⁴ McGilvary's intellect and disposition were well suited to the task of frontier missionary work.¹⁴⁵ While at Princeton, Charles Hodge's call to foreign missions influenced McGilvary, as shown by his lifetime of service and his financial contribution to a later Hodge professorship.¹⁴⁶ McGilvary attended a lecture by Dr. Samuel House, missionary to Bangkok, who told students about King Mongkut and his openness to

¹⁴¹McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 2.

¹⁴²Wolfgang Gern, "Laos," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and David P. Barrett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill, 1999–2003), 165.

¹⁴³McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 6. McGilvary practiced the long-term friendship-based kind of evangelism recently advocated by David Stuart, modern missionary to the Thai. David Stuart, "Ministering to Buddhists of the Theravada tradition," *Mission Frontiers* 36, no. 6 (November-December, 2014): 27, accessed July 28, 2017, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/what-you-need-to-know>. Even if disagreement was present, the relationship between McGilvary and folk Buddhist individuals was still strong.

¹⁴⁴McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 20-22.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴⁶Princeton Theological Seminary, ed., *Proceedings Connected with the Semi-Centennial Commemoration of the Professorship of Rev. Charles Hodge* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Company, 1872), 127–128. McGilvary, *Fifty Years*, 36. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, <http://www.herbswanson.com/get.php?postid=44#c1>.

Western missionaries which signaled an open door for frontier ministry there.¹⁴⁷ About this, McGilvary wrote,

My hesitation was ended. Here was not merely a village or a parish, but a whole kingdom, just waking from its long, dark, hopeless sleep. Every sermon I preached there might be to those who had never heard that there is a God in heaven who made them, or a savior from sin.¹⁴⁸

When McGilvary heard that missionaries A. B. Morse and Stephen Mattoon were returning to the U.S. for relief due to physical maladies from the Thai climate, he left his ministry in the U.S. and traveled to Bangkok.¹⁴⁹

While in Bangkok, McGilvary first learned the local language then made strong relationships with the ruling class. They then invited him to serve their interests as an educator. Ethnic Northern Thai populated Pechaburi, located to the south of Bangkok.¹⁵⁰ The Lieutenant governor of Pechaburi asked McGilvary,

“Maw” (Doctor), I want you to come and live in Pechaburi. You have no family. I will furnish you a house, and give you every assistance you need. You can teach as much Christianity as you please, if only you will teach my son English. If you want a school, I will see that you have pupils.¹⁵¹

McGilvary enjoyed a path to institutional favor similar to Jesse Caswell, the Congregationalist missionary who taught English to Mongkut in the years before he took the throne. In 1860, McGilvary married Sophia Royce Bradley while in Bangkok. The

¹⁴⁷McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 37. Dr. House also had a passion to see Northern Thai people, then known as the Lao, evangelized. He unsuccessfully attempted to travel there in 1854. His passion, it seems, was successfully passed on to McGilvary. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 24. McFarland, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam*, 64.

¹⁴⁸McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 37. This statement comes after reflecting on the prevalence of Christianity in the United States. He felt that multiple churches in each town was unnecessary.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 42, 45. This journey lasted one hundred days.

¹⁵⁰Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=44#c1.

¹⁵¹McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 49.

McGilvary's then moved to Pechaburi in 1861.¹⁵² After living and ministering in Pechaburi for six years, McGilvary and his wife moved to Chiang Mai in 1867.¹⁵³

The Northern Thai seemed to be more religious than those the McGilvary's had encountered in Bangkok, but they faithfully evangelized with some success.¹⁵⁴ Kawilorot, a local prince in Chiang Mai called the "Lord of Life," allowed the missionaries to live and minister in his jurisdiction.¹⁵⁵ With his approval, the McGilvary's began their mission, living in an open veranda there. McGilvary and his wife were literally on display as they shared the gospel to Northern Thai who curiously gawked at their family at all times of the day.¹⁵⁶

For eleven years, McGilvary served as a Christian teacher and doctor who treated goiters, smallpox, and malaria, even though he lacked medical training.¹⁵⁷ Though he faithfully evangelized, Northern Thai hearers often misunderstood the gospel from within a Thai-Buddhist context. In his autobiography, McGilvary notes that her thoughts about Jesus's pardon comforted princess Bua Kam, but she supposed that the God the

¹⁵²McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 53-54. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=44#c1. In his autobiography, McGilvary indicated his approach to the Thai. He asked many questions and recorded the answers he was given, even including a comparison of Jesus to the Buddha from an initial contact in his autobiography. Christian theology was presented in light of a Buddhist context. This contextualization is a mark of McGilvary's success. McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 55.

¹⁵³Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 64-65. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=44#c1. McGilvary and his wife were able to move to Chiang Mai only after a difficult season of preparation. McGilvary and Wilson initially visited Northern Thailand in 1863-64. Before their eventual arrival, Sophia McGilvary was very ill for one year, funding was lacking, and Wilson's wife and child died.

¹⁵⁴Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=44#c1.

¹⁵⁵McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 68-69. Political intrigue made for a difficult start to the Chiang Mai mission. This regional governor was guilty of precipitating the martyrdom of two of the first few believers in Chiang Mai in September 1869. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=44#c1.

¹⁵⁶McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 70.

¹⁵⁷Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 24. McFarland, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam*, 66. McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 87-89.

missionaries worshipped was just the Buddha by a different name.¹⁵⁸ He interacted with a Buddhist monk who gained a deep knowledge of Christianity, but remained a Buddhist.¹⁵⁹ McGilvary recorded that the Northern Thai also practiced animism and maintained various shrines to spirits.¹⁶⁰

The first baptized convert in Northern Thailand was Nan Inta. “The doctrine of a free and full pardon through the merits of another” captivated his thinking and he left Buddhism.¹⁶¹ In order to avoid syncretism among his hearers, McGilvary highlighted distinctions between Buddhism and Christianity. He also successfully anticipated and explained a solar eclipse. This prediction demystified a recurrently transcendent event for Northern Thai folk Buddhists through superior Western scientific knowledge.¹⁶² Lao Nan, the former abbot of a Northern Thai monastery, converted to Christianity and dissuaded his two sons from pursuing the Buddhist priesthood. His was an influential conversion that caused many other Northern Thai to take Christianity seriously and to consider the claims of the missionaries.¹⁶³

Prince Kawilorot martyred the second and fourth converts to Christianity, Noi Sunya and Nan Chai, in 1869.¹⁶⁴ A dire threat to the lives of McGilvary and other Western missionaries was also present at the time. Despite the danger, the missionaries

¹⁵⁸McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 81.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 82. These kinds of descriptions are helpful for modern missionaries, whose task still includes much listening and learning about Northern Thai host culture.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 93-94.

¹⁶¹Ibid., 97. Nan Inta also became the Northern Thai church’s first elder on April 10, 1875. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, <http://www.herbswanson.com/get.php?postid=44#c1>.

¹⁶²McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 98. According to Smith, the conversion of several prominent men from the area threatened Kawilorot, which led to a wave of persecution. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 67.

¹⁶³McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 99.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 100. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, <http://www.herbswanson.com/get.php?postid=44#c1>. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 68.

continued to minister among the Northern Thai. Daniel McGilvary requested to stay in Northern Thailand while his persecutor, Kawilorot, left on a journey to Bangkok to attend the funeral of the Siamese king, Mongkut.¹⁶⁵ Kawilorot granted McGilvary's request to remain in Chiang Mai. Providentially, the oppressive prince died while on this trip.¹⁶⁶ Due to God's deliverance, McGilvary and the other missionaries were able to stay in Chiang Mai. From the city, they based their ministry to the rest of the Northern Thai region. Christian baptisms, which had ceased for a time because of the persecution, resumed in 1872. A period of growth for the Northern Thai church followed the reinstating of baptisms.¹⁶⁷ McGilvary ministered for decades in remote villages, moving from place to place on the back of an elephant, first to Cheng Rai, and then to other remote parts of the country till his death in 1911.¹⁶⁸

Continued Mission to Northern Thailand

The number of Western missionaries in Northern Thailand fluctuated in the early days of the mission. Records show that in 1874 and 1881, three missionaries and their families manned the Chiang Mai mission: Jonathan Wilson, Daniel McGilvary, and Dr. M. A. Cheek.¹⁶⁹ In 1884, Dr. Cheek was absent, but two female missionaries, Miss N. Warner and Miss J. Griffin, joined the McGilvary and Wilson families.¹⁷⁰ As the number

¹⁶⁵Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 69.

¹⁶⁶McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 135.

¹⁶⁷Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 69-70.

¹⁶⁸McGilvary, *Fifty Years among the Siamese and Lao*, 151.

¹⁶⁹*List of Protestant Missionaries in China, Japan, and Siam: 1874 Directory*, Yale University Divinity Library, vii, accessed January 12, 2018, http://divinity-adhoc.library.yale.edu/Resources/Directories/1874_Directory.pdf. *List of Protestant Missionaries in China, Japan, and Siam: 1881 Directory*, Yale University Divinity Library, viii, accessed January 12, 2018, http://divinity-adhoc.library.yale.edu/Resources/Directories/1881_Directory.pdf.

¹⁷⁰*List of Protestant Missionaries in China, Japan, and Siam: Corrected to March 1884*, Yale University Divinity Library, 8, accessed January 12, 2018, http://divinity-adhoc.library.yale.edu/Resources/Directories/1884_Directory.pdf.

of converts grew, so did the scope of the Northern Thai ministry. The mission opened a girl's school in 1879, planted a second church in 1880, and then built a hospital and boy's school in 1887 and 1888, respectively.¹⁷¹ Philip Hughes records that after 1885, the Northern Thai mission grew at a faster rate, resulting in twenty-three churches with 5,000 members by 1915.¹⁷² Alex Smith notes that while Daniel McGilvary ministered in Northern Thailand, the Lao Church grew from less than forty in 1879 to over four thousand at the time of McGilvary's death in 1911.¹⁷³ This forty year period was the most rapid period of growth in the history of the Thai church.¹⁷⁴

During the early period in the Northern Thai church, local converts joined missionaries in evangelizing the region. In 1895, twenty-six Northern Thai converts went out to evangelize, supported by mission funds.¹⁷⁵ However, the arrival of John Nevius' indigenous church principles stagnated the numerical growth of the Northern Thai church, since new churches and mission stations outside Chiang Mai were unable to support their own evangelists.¹⁷⁶ As missionaries misapplied these principles to local churches, growth slowed and the theological training school was also closed until 1912.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷¹Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 8-9. The girl's school did not have its own building until 1888. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua* (Bangkok: Chuan Printing Press, 1984), accessed January 18, 2018, <http://www.herbswanson.com/get.php?postid=44#c1>.

¹⁷²Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 9.

¹⁷³Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 92-93.

¹⁷⁴Ibid.

¹⁷⁵Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 9.

¹⁷⁶Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 604. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 106-9. Smith discusses the ability of the Chiang Mai church to take this step toward financial independence. Tension and confusion caused by the application of this principle to mission stations in neighboring areas slowed growth that likely would have continued had local evangelists continued to have been paid by the mission. Chiang Mai had 821 Christians in 1899, followed by Lampang with 188, Chiang Rai with 170, Lamphun with 140, Phrae with 90, and Nan with 51. Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 10.

¹⁷⁷Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 11. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, <http://www.herbswanson.com/get.php?postid=45#c4>.

At this time, Northern Thai converts were primarily trained to be evangelists.¹⁷⁸ Missionaries presented a Christianity in which the new converts were to renounce all animistic practices, to refrain from accompanying their friends to the temple, and to cease the accrual of merit in a Buddhist worldview.¹⁷⁹ Difficult conditions in the region led to a numerical increase in the church between 1911 and 1913. A terrible outbreak of malaria led many former animists, reportedly two thousand in Chiang Mai, to turn to the missionaries for effectual medicine and Christianity.¹⁸⁰ The Northern Thai were overtly animistic, and missionaries pointed to Christ as the one who offered freedom from oppression by local spirits.¹⁸¹ Notably, many people found refuge in Christianity after being accused of witchcraft by their animistic neighbors.¹⁸² A number of converts continued joining the church, and the missionaries employed many through

¹⁷⁸Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=45#c4. Swanson criticizes this emphasis on evangelism, since the task of making disciples was not central to the building up of the Northern Thai church. This lack of discipleship among converts, according to Swanson, lead to a kind of paternalism in the early church's relationship to their missionaries. Smith points to a trend in Petchaburi, populated by ethnic Lao people, in which nearly every Christian was converted through the witness and love of their Thai friends and neighbors, and not through the efforts of missionaries. He pointed to this as a major strategy for modern church growth today. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 118.

¹⁷⁹Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 16. Alex Smith asked if the initial persecution of the early church was primarily caused by the offense of the gospel or by a cultural offense of the missionaries to Northern Thai sensibilities. He was inclined to believe that the gospel was the offensive element rather than cross-cultural misunderstanding. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 71. In my own observations of modern Northern Thai Buddhist background believers, I see a continued general trend toward the list of prohibitions mentioned by Hughes, with the exception in many cases of attendance at Buddhist temples. This practice is maintained in order to support friends and family at funerals.

¹⁸⁰Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 18. In 1911, the Lao church growth doubled compared to other years, potentially because of this dire epidemic and the response of nationals trained as medical evangelists, a practice that continued into 1914. Smith remains unsure of definite causes. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 139-44.

¹⁸¹Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 112. Smith criticized the missionaries at the time for having an anti-supernatural bias against animism rather than seeing these practices as demonic. This, he explains was an error in thinking that shaped their apologetic to focus nearly entirely on Buddhism. This focus left animism largely unaddressed.

¹⁸²Mrs. James W. McKean, "Narrative of Chiengmai," in *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam*, 123. Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 19.

patron-client arrangements.¹⁸³ The Northern Thai church would continue to grow, but at a slower rate than the early successes of the pioneer mission.

Daniel McGilvary passed away in 1911 and a second generation of missionaries in the Northern Thai mission increasingly turned their focus from evangelizing new converts to maintaining the churches and institutions began by pioneer missionaries.¹⁸⁴ Revivalism influenced pioneer missionaries to Northern Thailand and this predisposition colored their approach as they focused on evangelism and training evangelists.¹⁸⁵ The shift in focus led to a decreased number of Christians in the area. The church declined in number during the early twentieth century. In 1915, there were about 4,000 members in the Northern Thai churches, but only 3,381 in 1928, and 3,300 in 1940.¹⁸⁶ To explain the slowing of growth in the Northern Thai church after World War I, Philip Hughes supposes that the Thai Buddhist government's use of medicines that provided relief from common maladies made it less likely for potential converts to attribute healings to divine causes.¹⁸⁷ Alex Smith points to lack of missionary interest in many of the Northern tribes that pioneer missionaries knew of, but could not visit for

¹⁸³Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, accessed January 18, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=45#c4. Alex Smith points to the record of all baptisms between 1877 and 1882 and discusses demographic details. He estimates that more than a third had close Christian family members, a third lived in the mission compound or hospital and/or were employed by the missionaries, and the rest were independent believers outside these categories. However, he notes that in Bethlehem Church, Chiang Mai, few, if any were employed by the missionaries. He cites this as a positive trend for potential church growth. Throughout Thailand, a focus on institutions rather than evangelism led to a meager growth rate and eventually to a decline in church membership. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 74-75, 159, 163.

¹⁸⁴Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 23. Hughes cites a lack of responses to missionary preaching as a major cause of this shift in priority among the missionaries. Alex Smith explains that Northern Thai missionary schools did not lead to conversions, and that missionary effort expended in this way did not extend the reach of the gospel, but only conserved biological growth of the church. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 127.

¹⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁸⁶Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 24. Growth of the Thai church as a whole slowed considerably: From 1914 to 1940, the growth was only 0.7 percent per year, much slower than the actual increase in population. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 145.

¹⁸⁷Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 26. Access to Northern Thailand by the rail line and a reduction in the number of accusations of witchcraft are also supposed as possible reasons for this slowing.

political reasons.¹⁸⁸ Notably, Presbyterian missionaries decreased in number from 106 to 68 in the years between 1920 and 1940.¹⁸⁹

Other circumstances also slowed the growth of the Northern Thai church in the early twentieth century. Siamese nationalism was a priority for the new king, Vajiravudh. He used Buddhism to promote national unity, which led to an anti-Christian sentiment among Northern Thai government officials.¹⁹⁰ In the midst of this environment, Thai Christians began the process of making their national church independent from missionaries, at first unsuccessfully at Chiang Mai in 1923, and then successfully on a national scale in 1934.¹⁹¹ An invasion by the Japanese in 1941 led to an even stronger unity between Buddhism and Siamese identity, as government officials became Buddhist evangelists.¹⁹² During World War II, 40 percent of all Protestant Christians in Thailand apostatized and returned to Buddhism.¹⁹³ As the Thai government increasingly aligned itself with Buddhism, many Thai Christians were also pressured to lessen their Christian commitments and to display loyalty to the Thai state *and* Buddhism.¹⁹⁴

The Japanese invaded Thailand on December 7, 1941, which led to a weak alliance between the Thai government and this occupying power.¹⁹⁵ Japanese control

¹⁸⁸Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 150-51. The French did not allow the Protestant missionaries into their territory, though some pioneer missionaries made converts there. Despite this earlier interaction, some areas were not visited by missionaries in twenty years. Home mission boards, according to Smith, did not send personnel there. The Thai church did not travel there either. Instead of sending missionaries to these northern tribes, who seemed ready to convert at a massive scale, the mission maintained fifty missionaries in Southern Thailand whose efforts averaged seven conversions a year. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 153.

¹⁸⁹Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 27. This decrease was due to the Great Depression.

¹⁹⁰Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 174-75. Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 28.

¹⁹¹Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 29-31.

¹⁹²Ibid., 28. Howard Campbell and Kenneth Wells are cited as Western missionaries whose knowledge of Buddhism made them experts. Wells wrote a book on Buddhism and Campbell apparently knew Pali, the language of the Tripitaka.

¹⁹³Visser, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand," 62.

¹⁹⁴Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 178.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 204.

forced Western missionaries to leave Thailand for the rest of the war. It was not until late 1945 that the Thai Christian church contacted Western Presbyterian missionaries and asked them to return.¹⁹⁶ The Presbyterian mission board sent 83 missionaries, though 20 of them were from China and worked among the Chinese living in Thailand.¹⁹⁷ Despite a large number of converts to Christianity among a population of Northern Thai lepers at the McKean Leprosarium, most Northern Thai did not respond positively to evangelism.¹⁹⁸ The number of Christians in Northern Thailand remained a small minority.

Christians who remained faithful during WWII faced pressure from Thai nationalists and they could only watch as their church properties and hospitals were ruined.¹⁹⁹ After the war, Western missionaries came back to Thailand to serve the Thai church by redeeming property appropriated by the Thai government. The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. provided a great deal of money to repair the church's properties, and Western missionaries came back only on an advisory basis in 1946, to ensure national church independence.²⁰⁰ In 1969, partially because China was closed to foreign missionaries at the time, eighty-two Western Presbyterian missionaries remained in Thailand.²⁰¹ A missionary presence continued though the Thai Presbyterian mission was technically no longer in existence.

¹⁹⁶Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 34.

¹⁹⁷Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand 1828-1958*, 179. Some of these missionaries also only remained in Thailand for a short time.

¹⁹⁸Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 34-35. These Christians emphasized a higher ethical commitment, setting themselves apart. One wonders why the gospel and the gift of grace was not seen as a major identifier to set apart Northern Thai Christians from their Buddhist neighbors. Gospel-centered Christianity makes Spirit-filled believers look more like Jesus, whose ethical standard is divine. Misunderstandings about God's free gift of grace and freedom from sin, when viewed from a Buddhist context, likely led to something more visible, i.e. higher ethical standards, being highlighted.

¹⁹⁹Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 36. Some of these Christians had high positions in Thai government, and reverted to Buddhism under the pressure. Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 208-09.

²⁰⁰Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 208-16. Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 36.

²⁰¹Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 37.

Since the 1950s, a great number of mission agencies began working with Thai tribal peoples in Northern Thailand, including Overseas Missionary Fellowship, American Baptists, and New Tribes Mission.²⁰² Occasionally, doctrinal differences between these groups meant that converts to the new modes of Protestant Christian faith come from another group of Protestant Christians instead of from local folk Buddhists. This was the case with the fundamentalist Church of Christ who attempted to “evangelize” the Church of Christ Thailand.²⁰³ A similar form of competition also happened during the 1930s, as the initial converts of the Catholic mission to Chiang Mai were former members of the Church of Christ Thailand.²⁰⁴

In the Thai National church, Western Presbyterian influence has waned since the 1960s. However, financial support continued. As recently as the 1980s, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. provided 27 percent of the yearly budget for the national Thai church.²⁰⁵ Growing pains marked this long period of separation from missionary influence for a church that was finding its way in a majority Buddhist setting.

Demographics

Protestant Christian church membership in the Chiang Mai area totaled 4,388 in 1947 and was 5,763 in 1970. The church increased by 31 percent despite an 87 percent increase in population during this time.²⁰⁶ (Catholicism in Thailand has traditionally outnumbered Protestantism. There were 144,175 communicants in 1964.²⁰⁷ However,

²⁰²Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 222.

²⁰³Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 38.

²⁰⁴Ibid., 33.

²⁰⁵Ibid., 38.

²⁰⁶Ibid., 41.

²⁰⁷Russell E. Brown, *Doing the Gospel in Southeast Asia* (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1968), 38.

most Catholics in modern Thailand are of non-Thai ancestry.)²⁰⁸ Though church growth was slow for Protestants, the national church was not the only group evangelizing Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Several foreign mission agencies worked alongside the national church, including the Southern Baptist Mission, Overseas Mission Fellowship, American Christian Church, and several Christian organizations from Europe.²⁰⁹ Along the Thai-Burmese border, Karen Christians increased in number as tribal evangelists called their family and neighbors to leave behind animistic practices.²¹⁰ Despite this increased effort among indigenous evangelists, Christians remain a minority among tribal peoples. A general trend among Karen tribes, as with the Thai, is for individuals to become Christians.²¹¹ This tendency leads to slow growth.

Between 1972 and 1975, membership in the Church of Christ Thailand increased from 5,763 to 7,400 in the Chiang Mai district, and in the entire Northern Thai area, the number of members was 18,949 in 1974.²¹² Alex Smith notes that between 1971 and 1978, the average annual growth rate for churches in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai was 2.2 percent and 4.5 percent respectively.²¹³ Including Pentecostals and other denominations, Phillip Hughes lists the 1982 Christian population of Northern Thailand at 30,000 believers, less than 1 percent of the population of 4 million at the time.²¹⁴ Total figures ought to include the growth of tribal Christians, including the Karen Baptist

²⁰⁸Visser, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand," 25.

²⁰⁹Brown, *Doing the Gospel in Southeast Asia*, 38. Here, Brown references the Southern Baptist Mission in Thailand.

²¹⁰Constance M. Hallock, *East From Burma* (New York: Friendship Press, 1956), 118-19. Several hundred Korean missionaries are included.

²¹¹Visser, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand," 64-65.

²¹²Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 41.

²¹³Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 231.

²¹⁴Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 41.

convention, which increased above 7,000 in 1980, and the Lahu in Northern Thailand.²¹⁵ Since Alex Smith produced *Siamese Gold* in the early 1980s, more mission organizations have entered Thailand and many have formed their own denominations.²¹⁶ Since 2000, interdenominational focus on evangelism has led to cooperation among many of these organizations with the goal of “a church in every district, a group of Christians in every subdistrict, and the Gospel preached in every village.”²¹⁷

In 2006, there were 326,257 Thai Christians in Northern Thailand, which was 3.14 percent Protestant.²¹⁸ At that point, 12 percent of tribal Thai were Protestant believers, but only 0.31 percent of ethnic Thai were Protestant Christians.²¹⁹ In 2009, the total number of Christians in Thailand was 339,048 with 55 percent of all Thai Christians living in the Northern Thai region.²²⁰ In 2011, the growth rate for the church in Thailand was 0.58 percent, with 51 percent of all Thai Christians living in the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son.²²¹ Today, Thailand’s total population is 65,729,098.²²² At the time of writing, the total number of Christians in Thailand is

²¹⁵Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 258-62.

²¹⁶Visser, “Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand,” 63.

²¹⁷Ibid., This goal is called Vision 2010.

²¹⁸Ibid., 76, 78.

²¹⁹Ibid., 77. Most of these tribes are found in Northern Thailand.

²²⁰Dwight Martin, “THAI Christian resource center PowerPoint, 2009,” accessed January 22, 2018, <https://www.dahlfred.com/blogs/gleanings-from-the-field/334-2009-thai-church-statistics>.

²²¹Dwight Martin, Estar Foundation, as discussed by Karl Dahlfred, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://www.dahlfred.com/en/blogs/gleanings-from-the-field/524-2011-thai-church-statistics-and-map>.

²²²“Christian Presence Map: Thailand,” ESTAR, accessed October 30, 2017, <https://estar.ws/harvest/christian-presence-map.html>.

455,514.²²³ This figure is 0.69 percent of the total population. Protestant churches also number 5,266 in Thailand.²²⁴

Chiang Mai is the Northern Thai city in which this research project takes place. Chiang Mai's population is 1,728,242 at the time of writing.²²⁵ There are 103,535 Christians in Chiang Mai, which make up 5.99 percent of the population.²²⁶ With 973 total churches in Chiang Mai, there are an average of 106 Christians per church.²²⁷

Conclusion

This chapter describes the lengthy history of Buddhism and animism in the Northern Thai region. Traditional characteristics of these religious belief systems include attending Buddhist temples, performing the *wai* to Buddha images, making merit by offering food to monks, and making offerings to local spirits.²²⁸ The history of Protestant Christianity in Northern Thailand began with Protestant missionaries' arrival in the late nineteenth century. The Northern Thai Church initially grew rapidly, but since the early twentieth century, growth has slowed considerably. Modern converts may still encounter similar hurdles to Christian faith as did the first Northern Thai converts. These barriers to conversion include misunderstanding Christian beliefs from within a folk Buddhist worldview and negative social pressure to remain Buddhist. One difference between historical and modern Thai Christians is that some modern Northern Thai Christians might be born into a Christian family, since the history of Christianity there stretches

²²³“Christian Presence Map: Thailand,” ESTAR, accessed October 30, 2017, <https://estar.ws/harvest/christian-presence-map.html>.

²²⁴Ibid.

²²⁵Ibid.

²²⁶Ibid.

²²⁷Ibid.

²²⁸The *wai* is performed by bowing with palms together.

back to the nineteenth century.²²⁹ The next chapter includes description of the former folk Buddhist practices of Northern Thai Buddhist background believers in the context of their testimonies.

²²⁹Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 46.

CHAPTER 3

ANSWERS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Introduction

I completed a sequence of ethnographic interviews in Chiang Mai during October 2017 in order to answer the research question, “What trends are present in the testimonies of formerly Buddhist Northern Thai Christians?” After describing research methodology in Chapter 1 and exploring the history of Buddhism and Christianity in Northern Thailand in Chapter 2, this chapter describes answers provided by respondents in the course of ethnographic interviews.

Respondent’s Answers to Interview Questions

After sharing an ethical agreement, I interviewed respondents according to a pre-determined sequence of interview questions. Their answers, which follow describe their former practices as Buddhists and their testimonies of becoming Christians. I analyzed these responses using open and axial coding according to grounded theory. The following answers also include an initial description of trends across multiple respondents’ testimonies.

Age and Occupation

The first question asked of respondents was, “What is your age and occupation?” Answers to the first part of this question ranged from 19 years old to 79 years in age. One respondent’s age, at the time of the interview, was between 18 and

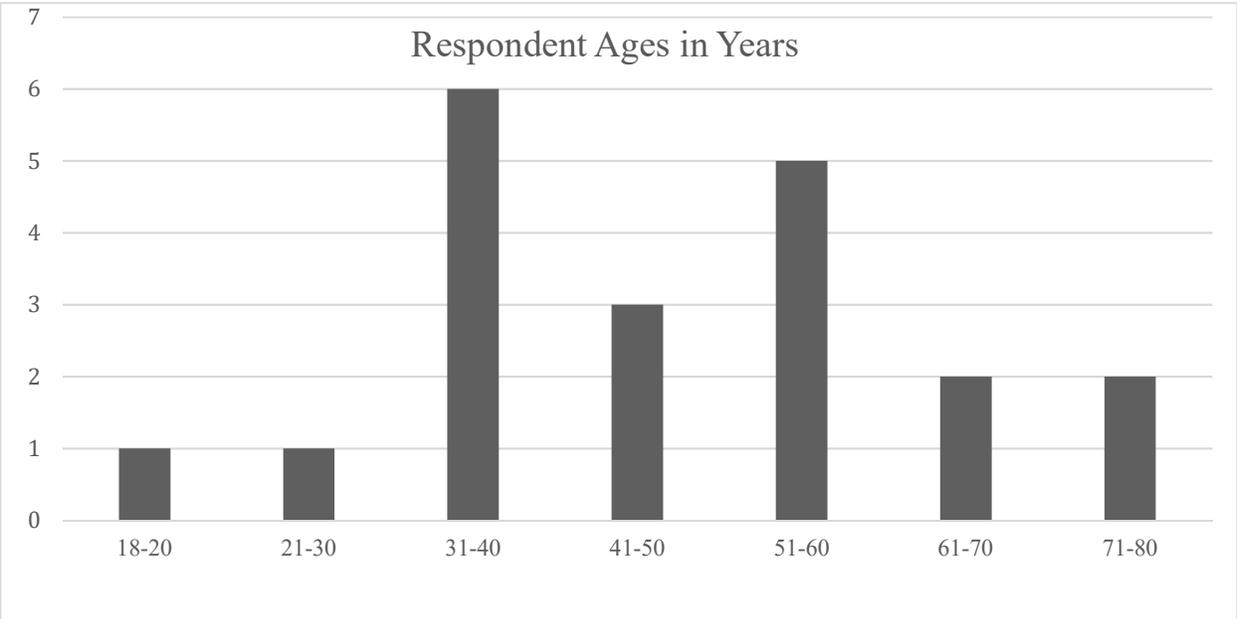


Figure 1. Respondent Ages in Years

20 years old. One respondent’s age was between 21 and 30 years old. Six respondents were between 31 and 40 years of age. Three were between 41 and 50 years old. Five were between 51 and 60 years old. Two were between 61 and 70 years old. Two were between 71 and 80 years in age.

Regarding occupation, respondents’ answers varied. One respondent was pastor of a church. Another was an air conditioner technician, home remodel counselor, and a financial counselor. One called himself a network marketer and counselor. One other served as church staff. Another owned an online business. One respondent worked as a disc jockey and network marketer. Another owned a salon and had an online clothing business. One other sold clothes online. Two were retired government officials. Two were farmers. Two were housekeepers. Six sold second-hand clothes or shoes.

Time since Conversion

The third question concerned how long each respondent had been a Christian. Answers ranged from a period of 2 to 40 years. Ten respondents were Christians for 10

years or less at the time of interview. Six were Christians for 11 to 20 years and four had been Christians for 21 years or more. All respondents were similar in that they formerly practiced Buddhism.

Only Christian in Family?

Respondents were then asked if they were the only Christians in their families. Responses often included information that gave some insight into their spiritual heritages. However, some respondents answered simply, “Yes.” Eight respondents were the only Christians in their families; and twelve claimed spouses or at least one child, parent, or sibling who were Christians. Details of these relational connections, if present, were readily shared. One respondent explained that he was the first in his family to receive Christ; then, he led a parent and sibling to faith in Christ. Respondents sometimes shared that their spouses and children are Christians, but their own parents and extended family

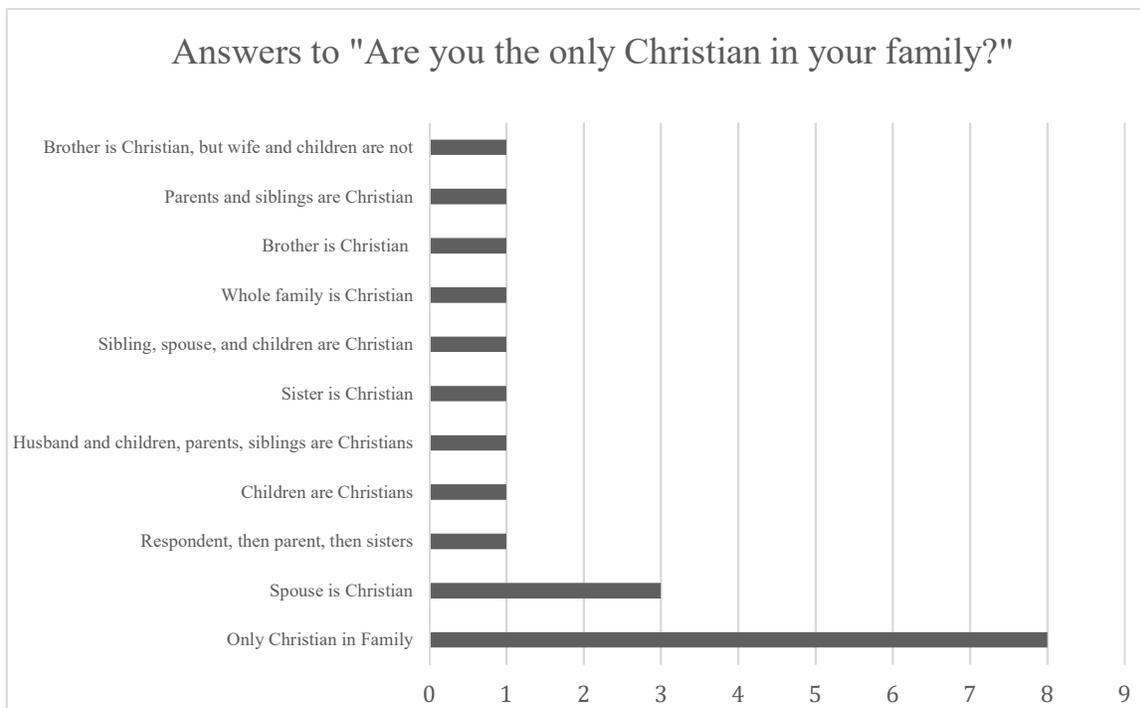


Figure 2. Answers to "Are you the only Christian in your family?"

remain in traditional Thai religions, Buddhism and animism. However, several of the respondents' parents were believers in Christ whose own conversions preceded the conversions of the respondents themselves. At times, siblings of the respondents had previously received the gospel, became Christians, and were effective evangelists who figure prominently in respondents' testimonies. One respondent's parents and extended family were all Christians at the time of the interview. In this instance, she described being born into a Christian family, but experienced a falling away into life as a Buddhist before repenting to follow Christ again. Some respondents became Christians and subsequently married Christian spouses. However, one respondent who came to Christ later in life spoke with emotion of his wife and children who remained Buddhists.

Ethnicity

In answer to the question, "What is your ethnicity?" fifteen respondents answered Thai, though some gave additional information to qualify their responses. One respondent answered Chiang Mai Thai and another identified as a Chiang Mai local. Two mentioned that they were Chinese. Another identified as Thai, adding that his parents were from China. All these respondents were living in Chiang Mai, but in some cases, the ethnic identities of their families superseded their current identities as Thai nationals.

Prior Experience as a Buddhist

The next three questions, together, allowed respondents to recount their prior experiences as Buddhists. These questions are

1. What do you remember about life as a Buddhist before your conversion?
2. When you were a Buddhist, what rituals did you do?
3. Did you do them daily, weekly, or monthly?

Each of these questions invited reflection on slightly different aspects of these former Buddhists' previous practices. Respondents readily provided examples of rituals

previously performed and/or the frequency with which they performed rituals in their memories about living as Buddhists.

Identified Themes in Coding Families

The following section summarizes respondents' answers and provides the reader with examples to illustrate themes present in respondents' testimonies. In the process of interviewing respondents, I identified codes and then later grouped them into three coding families. These initial codes had to do with prior practices (Buddhism and animism) and the means by which God drew respondents to become Christians. I adjusted and refined initial codes while interviews were conducted and sorted each code into one of three code families. Initial codes included temple attendance, worship of spirits, church attendance, the presence of festivals and holidays, and other elements of religious adherence.

This study follows Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss's process of theoretical sampling, where concepts are sampled until categories are developed.¹ Utilizing the same codes to categorize data without a need for new codes in the course of coding demonstrates saturation. In the process of creating categories via axial coding and theoretical sampling, some codes were merged with other codes and patterns began to materialize. Forty-two initial codes were present in respondent interviews. In the course of analysis, I merged or split some codes according to categories that emerged. Twenty-five codes compose Buddhist practice. Animistic practice has seven. Aspects of Christian conversion contains ten codes.

Two prominent and crosscutting themes emerged in respondent interviews. The first is relationship as a motivator for religious adherence. The second is tradition. Respondents' own words as given in their testimonies provided the titles of these themes.

¹Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2015), 135.

As such, they provide an emic perspective. Cantwell Smith writes, "No statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers."² This study follows a similar tack, utilizing grounded theory to identify trends within testimonies of Northern Thai Buddhist background believers.

The "Lausanne Occasional Paper 15" presents three reasons for a "lack of permanent self-perpetuating Christian communities among Buddhist peoples: persecution, syncretism, and the failure of the church to break through the social solidarity of Buddhist communities."³ The third of these three identified barriers to Christian church growth among Buddhists, "social solidarity of Buddhist communities," coincides with the themes of relationship and tradition identified in respondents' accounts.⁴

In Buddhist, animistic, or Christian settings, relationships are a means for the transmission of beliefs and values. In a Northern Thai setting that is overwhelmingly Buddhist and animistic, folk Buddhists pass on some traditions through societal expectations and some are passed through relationships. When respondents mentioned relational influences for a particular practice, these were most often in the context of family relationships. However, Christian beliefs in respondents' accounts were most often passed in the context of relationships with Christians taking place in church services, small group meetings, or Christian dormitories. Northern Thai respondents also are quick to describe Buddhist and animistic practices as Thai traditions, but do not

²Cantwell Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither and Why?," in *The History of Religions*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 42.

³"Lausanne Occasional Paper 15," Report of the Consultation on World Evangelization Mini-Consultation on Reaching Buddhists held at Pattaya, Thailand from 16-27 June 1980, Sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 3, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-15>.

⁴Respondent accounts also include instances of persecution and syncretism, but this third category, "social solidarity" appeared throughout respondents' descriptions of their previous practice as Buddhists and animists as well as descriptions of how they came to faith in Christ. For the purpose of identifying trends in respondents' former practices, the theme of social solidarity is highlighted.

identify Christian doctrines or practices as part of any Thai tradition. The next section briefly describes these themes.

Relationship as a Motivator for Religious Adherence

Relationship is a social component of Northern Thai folk Buddhist practice. This social component of religious adherence includes pressure to conform to the expectations of Buddhist family, friends, and neighbors and is mostly evinced in relationships with close family members. Twelve respondents mentioned specific influences from family members regarding their Buddhist practices. Six respondents mentioned influence by Buddhist neighbors, friends, or other non-familial relationships. Regarding animistic practices, seven respondents recalled influence by their family members. Only two respondents' animistic practices were influenced by animists outside their family. In their testimonies of how they became Christians, only three adherents mentioned influences from family members that pointed them toward Christ. Christians who were influential in the lives of respondents did so through invitations to become Christians, invitations to Christian festivals or parties, invitations to pray to God, invitations to study the Bible, or through involvement at small group meetings or church services.⁵

Tradition

Another prominent theme presented throughout respondent accounts was Thai folk-religion described as tradition. Buddhism and animism have venerable local histories in the minds of many Northern Thai. Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou

⁵Twelve respondents were influenced by Christians through church attendance. Four respondents were influenced by Christians through invitation to Christian parties or festivals. Four were influenced by non-family members in the context of small groups. Three respondents were influenced by Christians at a Christian dormitory or school. Three were influenced by direct invitations from non-family members. Four were influenced by direct invitations to pray to God.

describe these folk-traditions as “the sermons, rituals, classes, and teachings in local congregations; and the religious beliefs and rituals found in the homes of ordinary people.”⁶ These traditions are figuratively handed over from one adherent to another by example, by direct teaching, and by societal expectations.

Respondent 3 witnessed his grandparents and other people from his village going to the temple. He identified this practice as a tradition and followed their example. Respondent 5 was a female monk who learned to perform rituals from her Thai dancing school. This formal transmission of religious rituals included instruction on how to *wai* spirits and, specifically, to *wai* an elephant idol.⁷ Respondent 7 cited Thai tradition as her reason for going to a spirit healer and for going to the Buddhist temple on Buddha days. Respondent 10 also cited Thai tradition as a reason he made merit through giving food and money to the Buddhist temple. Respondents described their Buddhist and animistic practices as normative in their Northern Thai setting. The following section describes the practices of Buddhism, practices of animism, and aspects of conversion to Christianity mentioned in respondents’ accounts.

Practices of Buddhism

Ritual practices for lay-Buddhists include offering food to monks and meditating. Many of these actions are means toward the end of making merit. Since *kammatic* (focused on a positive rebirth) and animistic practices are both present in the region, the rituals of animism are often taught and passed on uncritically alongside more formal Buddhist forms found in Buddhist scriptures.⁸ These ancient forms are clearly part of the Buddhist tradition.

⁶Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 73.

⁷The *wai* is performed by bowing with palms together.

⁸Marten Visser, “Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand” (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 2008), 26-30.

Merit making. Lay-Buddhists receive teaching about the performance of rituals that accrue merit in order to gain them a better rebirth. These rituals include giving food to monks and offering money to Buddhist temples, or respecting a Buddha image with a *wai*. Monks provide merit toward a better rebirth. Laity meet the physical needs of the monks. The monastic structure of Theravada Buddhism includes this interdependence. Respondent 11 gave food to the monk in order to increase her chances of going to heaven. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge describe this kind of economic exchange in *A Theory of Religion*. Food offered to monks is a tangible reward, due to costs incurred in order to obtain it.⁹ The promise of merit, to be enjoyed through a positive rebirth, is a compensator due to a lack of verifiability in this life.¹⁰

In their former practices, respondents hoped to receive compensators in the next life for their meritorious actions. However, their aim was not only to receive transcendent benefits. By taking part in the merit accruing traditions of Buddhism, respondents also joined their family members and conformed to wider Thai society. Respondent 10 cited Thai tradition and culture as the reason he made merit by giving food and money to the temple. Respondent 12 performed Buddhist rituals to follow her mother, to be a good daughter, to gain wisdom for school, and in order for she and her parents to go to heaven. Respondent 19 mentioned that his parents imposed their will on him, pushing him go to the temple to make merit.

Temple attendance. Buddhist temples are important locations for Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Nineteen respondents discussed temple attendance in the course of

⁹Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 27.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 36.

their interview.¹¹ The high frequency of this answer in respondent accounts is not surprising, since many of the rituals of Buddhism, including funerals and other merit making activities, are performed in Buddhist temples.

Within the code family, Practices of Buddhism, codes included temple attendance as laity. Instances of this code were frequent in the narratives, showing up twenty-four times in the accounts of seventeen respondents. Other respondents briefly became Buddhist monks and then returned to their lay-Buddhist statuses.¹² Respondent 13 served as a temple boy who helped Buddhist monks collect alms. When he lived in a Buddhist temple as a temple boy, he would walk with a monk, helping to carry offerings. Reflecting on his practice while in the temple, he asserted, “Every Buddhist ritual, I did.”¹³ He would perform rituals in the temple every day and would sometimes cook food for a monk after noon, against Theravada monk regulations found in Pâtimokkha, Pâkittiya Thirty-seven.¹⁴ Respondent 13 recalled that after he finished school, he offered food for a monk on a daily basis as a lay-Buddhist.

Festivals and holidays. Adherents described regular festival days as occasions to visit temples and take part in rituals. Seven respondents mentioned attending Buddhist festivals as part of their practices. Respondent 9 prayed with a Buddha image and made merit by making offerings to a monk on Thai holidays: Buddha day, New Year’s, and a

¹¹Though Respondent 18 did not explicitly mention temple attendance, he became a monk for one month, and would have lived in a temple during this time. Only Respondent 4 did not mention going to the temple, fitting with her general resistance to performing Buddhist rituals during her time as a Buddhist.

¹²In Thailand, a traditional rite of passage is for Thai men to become monks for a short period of time, called a rain retreat. This is a traditional practice with roots in earliest Buddhism, since the rainy season and subsequently muddy roads in India made it difficult for monks to travel freely. This time of monastic retreat is practiced in Thailand and is commonly believed to accrue merit for the mothers of the monks.

¹³Respondent 13, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

¹⁴F. Max Müller, ed., *Vinaya Texts*, The Sacred Books of the East, trans. T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1882–1885), 13: 40. This quotation reads “Whatsoever Bhikkhu (monk) shall take or eat any food, whether hard or soft, at the wrong time—that is a Pâkittiya (offense).”

few days per month, per year. Respondent 19 would pray in *Pali* each night, but would only visit the temple on Buddhist holidays like Songkran. The existence of festivals in the Thai Buddhist worship cycle provides an expectation that Buddhists attend temples with some regularity. Many of these festivals contain elements of Buddhist and local animistic beliefs as a part of the larger Northern Thai folk Buddhist tradition.¹⁵

Wai to respect Buddha. Respondents performed the *wai* to Buddha images in their former practices as folk Buddhists. Historical folk Buddhists performed this religious ritual in the former Lanna kingdom and it continues to be commonly practiced in Northern Thailand. The *wai* is a worshipful pose that focuses the attention of the adherent on an object being revered. A bowed head and palms placed together composes the outward physical form.

Several respondents reported using Buddhist and/or animistic rituals to secure positive circumstances for themselves in the present. For instance, Respondent 1 told of his year living in a Buddhist temple as a monk at age thirteen, his obedience to the monks, and his practice of praying with a Buddha image. While there, a monk tattooed his tongue and breathed power into it, and he also invited spirits into his body. He believed that when he prayed to the Buddha, something would protect him from spirits. According to his account he would pray for a blessing, believing these spirits would subsequently help him open a shop. Respondent 19 explained that he performed Buddhist rituals because he believed that the rituals could help him. He cited a general trust in rituals, pointing to the lives of other Thai people being good when they worshipped the Buddha or did something good for a monk. Respondent 19 also explained that he, like most Thai people, hoped to receive that kind of blessing for himself.

¹⁵Russell H. Bowers, "Southeast Asia: History, Beliefs, Practices," in *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices*, ed. Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland, and Gerald R. McDermott (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 246.

Meditation. In Northern Thailand, traditional practices of Buddhism exist alongside animistic practices. Meditation is one example of this kind of ritual. Six former Buddhists mentioned meditating as a part of their former practice. Respondent 8 said he used to spend all of his time meditating, following the teaching of the Buddha to reach nirvana. His goal was not common among this population of formerly *kammatic* and animistic respondents, as most reported seeking a positive circumstance in their present lives or desiring to go to heaven.

Influence from family. Respondents also included a social component of Buddhism in their answers. Twelve respondents cited their families as influential to their Buddhist practices. Seven reported offering food to Buddhist monks. Four additional respondents did so specifically to give food to their deceased relatives. A folk Buddhist belief in Northern Thailand is that parents still require support and sustenance after death. Consequently, a social expectation exists for children to provide for their parents in the afterlife. The much beloved mother of Respondent 2 had passed away. Respondent 2 would give food to monks and pay money to the temple on Buddha day so she could pass on the food and money to her mother. Respondent 12 would go to the temple to make an offering once a month with her mother and would offer food at a Buddhist temple for deceased relatives at festivals like Songkran. With this anticipated transcendent need in the thinking of Northern Thai folk Buddhists, motivation exists for Buddhist parents to teach their children and family members to offer food to monks and to perform other Buddhist rituals. The grandmother of Respondent 16 taught him to respect the Buddha each night before bed. He explicitly cited both grandparents as his teachers, noting that one generation trained the next. Respondent 17 recalled his family's identification with Buddhism. They told him he had to give food to a monk. They told him he had to make merit because his family were Buddhists. Respondent 13 explained that his parents

explicitly taught him as a child to perform rituals, though he did not understand their meaning.

Practices of Animism

Animism and Buddhism are practiced concurrently in Northern Thailand. There is no strict delineation between the two belief systems since the Northern Thai folk Buddhist worldview accepts local spirits. Respondents report their former beliefs that the Buddha could at times protect them from local spirits. They also believed that local spirits may either oppress or benefit them.¹⁶ Animism exists within the folk Buddhist worldview in Northern Thailand, hence Buddhism and animism among Northern Thai folk Buddhists certainly could not be described as non-overlapping *magisteria*.

***Pii* worship.** Northern Thai folk Buddhists believe spirits called *pii* are present in their local setting. Observers may find small *pii* houses associated with businesses and in neighborhoods where folk Buddhists live. Eight respondents mentioned worshipping *pii* in their former practice. Food is offered to *pii* in order to secure auspicious circumstances. *Pii* are also believed to enter the bodies of humans. Several respondents mentioned spirit possession as a positive aspect of their personal or familial animistic practices. In one case, a respondent invited spirits into his body for power. In another case, one respondent's family would offer a yearly buffalo sacrifice to a *pii* that would inhabit a female family member.¹⁷ This family's practice resembles the ancient account

¹⁶I applied categories of Buddhism and animism to respondent accounts in order to organize and understand the former practice of these respondents. However, these modes of belief exist simultaneously in reflections on thinking and practice of my former Northern Thai folk Buddhist respondents.

¹⁷This festival took place yearly to ensure their family's earthly success.

of *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* in which local demons negotiated to have a yearly buffalo sacrifice instead of eating the local populace.¹⁸

Fear of *pii*. According to local belief in Northern Thailand, *pii* require offerings of respect or food from humans. If these offerings are withheld, respondents reported that the spirits cause problems that include financial ruin or death. Three respondents reported a fear of *pii*. *Pii*, according to respondent accounts, cause illness or death if they are not approached appropriately. Two respondents labeled family members' spirit oppressions by *pii* as a problem. Respondents recalled their animistic rituals to appease angry spirits; for example, Respondent 7 went to see a *mophi* (animistic healer) once when she was sick and would also take her children to the monk when they were sick, in both cases seeking a healing.

Respondent 13 performed spirit rituals involving a sacred cord and a ball of sticky rice when his mother was sick; he and his father would ask a spirit about what offering it would prefer, a chicken, pig, or alcohol. His father would then go and make the appropriate purchase. His father did this on the occasions of his mother's sickness, after which she would recover. According to Respondent 13, the *pii* was the cause of her illnesses. This aspect of Respondent 13's life before becoming a Christian figured prominently in his conversion. He saw that sickness and spirits oppressed his family: his mother was continually ill, a *pii* possessed his sister. He asked, "Why did the bad spirits do something bad only with my family?"¹⁹ He went to a monk and a shaman but could find no answer. According to his recounting, he then found an old Bible and tried to read it with little understanding. He ordered a Christian book from a mail order course. The book he purchased explained that God had power over spirits.

¹⁸David K. Wyatt and 'Arunrat Wichānkhēo, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), 198.

¹⁹Respondent 13, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

Influence from family. With no formal temples or sacred texts, animistic rituals are often passed along through family relationships. Respondent 11 took part in her family's yearly animistic family festival involving spirit possession and a buffalo sacrifice. Each year, her extended family would gather to worship the spirit, which would possess a female family member. Respondent 11's conversion to Christianity coincided with her refusal to serve as this medium. After she rejected her family's animistic practice to become a Christian, her family rejected her, refusing to give her any inheritance. Respondent 12 had a small *pii* house at her home and explained that her mother directed her to make offerings, both animistic and Buddhist. Her idea of being a good daughter included these kinds of ritual performances. Seven respondents reported family influences regarding animistic ritual performance. Only three mentioned influence from non-family animists. The passing along of animistic rituals in family units takes place in a Northern Thai setting and is accompanied by beliefs that failure to do so will anger the *pii*, leading to sickness, death, or financial ruin.²⁰

Aspects of conversion to Christianity

Each Buddhist background believer I interviewed turned from previous practices to follow Christ. Their brief narratives in the form of testimonies shed light on themes in their lives in the time leading up to their conversions and the period after they became Christians. I asked respondents the following questions in order to elicit their conversion stories:

1. What do you remember as being important to you in your thinking, your heart, and your life during the time leading up to your conversion?

²⁰Respondent 9 reported that her father built a house but did not properly appease the spirits and subsequently died. To appease the spirits' anger, the surviving family members performed a pig sacrifice to these *pii* with prominent members of the community. For additional discussion of the temporal nature of Thai *pii* worship and several local cases that provide various infractions and their corresponding maladies, see Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism and The Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: University Printing House, 1970), 263-71.

2. How did you become a believer in Christ? How is your life different now that you have become a Christian?
3. What do you do when you attend Thai ceremonies? E.g. a funeral, when Thai men become monks, and/or weddings?
4. How do family, friends, people at work or school react when they know you are a Christian?

I list themes presented in respondent accounts here and provide insight into the character of conversions to Christianity in a Northern Thai setting among this population of respondents.

Influence from non-family relationships. Some Northern Thai Buddhist families count conversion to Christianity as betrayal. As a result, they refuse fellowship or apply pressure for Christian converts to apostatize. Though several respondents had believing family members, most respondents' families are largely folk Buddhists. The kinds of persecution experienced by respondents in this Northern Thai setting were at times verbal and involved an exclusion from normal family relationships in the form of shunning.²¹ The existence of this familial opposition highlights a need for Christians to develop genuine friendships with Thai Buddhists. Respondents stressed the importance for Christians to form genuine relationships with those outside the church.

²¹The triad of persecution, syncretism, and the failure of the church to break through the social solidarity of Buddhist communities, identified by the Lausanne Occasion paper 15 describes the barrier to conversion present in Buddhist societies throughout the world. "Lausanne Occasional Paper 15," Report of the Consultation on World Evangelization Mini-Consultation on Reaching Buddhists held at Pattaya, Thailand from 16-27 June 1980, Sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 3, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-15>. In a Northern Thai setting, persecution was initially violent. Several of the first converts to Protestant Christianity were martyred. In modern times, the form of persecution present is largely verbal and at times takes place via exclusion from social groups (including families). Syncretism sometimes takes place when a Northern Thai Buddhist becomes a Christian, as seen in the testimony of Respondent 11. This syncretism is potentially due to the porous nature of Buddhism and the pervasiveness of the Buddhist worldview in the region. When a respondent turns from previous practice in conversion to Christianity, there is a definite moment in which their heart and mind are regenerated. The outward practices of their previous life may be transformed in an instant, or these may be more slowly changed as the Holy Spirit leads them through the process of sanctification.

These kinds of relationships with Christians sometimes took place when respondents moved to Christian dormitories or attended Christian schools.²² Attending a small group meetings or church services also led to genuine friendships with Christians. When respondents entered into relationships with Christians, they reported direct invitations to pray to God, to study the Bible, or to become Christians themselves. These gospel-centered relationships take place in the context of life among Christian friends and neighbors or when relating to believing family members. The character of Christ lived out by Thai Christians helps Buddhists notice the changed lives of their Christian friends or family members. This emphasis on relationships also reassures Buddhists who may be considering the claims of Christ that they will have relational support systems among Christians if they were to convert and subsequently experience persecution or ostracization from their folk Buddhist family members.

Respondent 11 became a Christian and changed her lifestyle despite rejection from her family. For a time, she wavered and continued practicing Buddhist rituals alongside her newfound Christian lifestyle. She wondered whether her family would accept her again if she returned to the animistic practices of her past. As long as her family thought she was a Buddhist who attended church, they did not mind, but when she told them she was a Christian, her family replied “. . . It’s up to you, and we will not care about you. Even if you are sick you will not have some money, we will not help you anymore.”²³ Relationships with Christians at church were helpful for her in this time of transition. After becoming a Christian and attending church for two years, she was baptized.

²²Some respondents mentioned that they lived in Christian dormitories when attending non-formal education classes.

²³Respondent 11, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

Respondent 2 grew up in a family of Christians. She tearfully recalled the time in her life when she renounced Christianity and lived as a Buddhist.²⁴ Her sister invited her back to church. She felt God drawing her to himself and it was through spending time with Christian friends and attending Bible study that she repented of her apostasy. Mark Dever emphasizes this kind of exposure to gospel-affirming believers. He writes, “how the Christian life is lived out in the Christian community is a central part of our evangelism.”²⁵ Respondent 6 was arrested for drug use and caused his family to lose face. His sister, who was the first Christian in their family, came to him at this difficult time. He recalled her statement, “I forgive you and Jesus also forgives you because Jesus loves you.”²⁶ Respondent 6 noted that this forgiveness was the key to opening his heart to Christ. His sister’s forgiveness mirrored God’s mercy through the gospel and confronted the prominent ego orientation, known conceptually as *face*, present in Respondent 6’s family. The concept of *face*, according to Sunatree Komin, is a major component of the Thai-self and motivates the Thai cultural elements: criticism avoidance and *klang chai* (surface-level agreement that protects relationships).²⁷ However, the gospel transcends Thai culture. The Holy Spirit drew Respondent 6 to saving faith in Christ through his sister’s witness and pardon.

Church attendance or residence at a Christian dormitory. Because of the regionally specific growth of the Protestant Church in Northern Thailand, Chiang Mai has many more churches and Christian dormitories than the rest of Thailand. Fourteen respondents mentioned church attendance in their testimonies of how they came to

²⁴Respondent 2, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

²⁵Mark E. Dever, *The Gospel & Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 66.

²⁶Respondent 6, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

²⁷Sunatree Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns* (Bangkok: Magenta Company, 1991), 133-38.

Christ. Three mentioned attending a Christian school or living in a Christian dormitory.²⁸ Compared to other settings in Northern Thailand, more opportunities exist for folk Buddhists to befriend Christians at these places, to observe Christian worship, and to be invited to become Christians themselves. A contrast between the folk Buddhist and Christian modes of life is clearly seen when folk Buddhists live alongside Christians or when they observe Christian worship in church services.²⁹

Respondent 15 had known her pastor for two years. She attended church each week, listened to sermons, and collected the ideas. She then decided to become a Christian. Of this time, she said, “Oh, maybe I have to change into a Christian for the rest of my life.”³⁰ Over time, Christian teaching from the Bible confronted her previously held Buddhist worldview and she came to a point of decision.

At churches, respondents received more than exposure to Christian doctrine alone. Respondents were also given opportunities to interact with Christians, forming relationships that made manifest the character of God. Respondent 15 visited a local church as a Buddhist and noted that the members of the church were kind to her, asking about her well-being. She contrasted this to gossip that took place at her local temple. At the time leading up to her conversion, she grieved her deceased brother. The pastor of the local church ministered to her. She remembered his kindness during this time and

²⁸Churches manage some Christian dormitories in Chiang Mai. Universities, seminaries, or Christian foundations manage others. Western missionary in Thailand 3, email message to author, October 22, 2018. A Western missionary residing in Chiang Mai provided this description. Some Christian dormitories house Christians preparing for ministry. Others allow Buddhists the opportunity to reside while they pursue non-formal education. Though diversity among Christian dormitories exists, some in the region provide folk Buddhists with opportunities to interact with Christians.

²⁹Respondent 19 came to faith in Christ during a church worship service. He made a connection between a sermon on Moses leading the people from Egypt and a movie he had seen as a child, *The Prince of Egypt*. He felt that God was inviting him to know Jesus at that moment. He grew curious about Christianity when he observed Christians happily worshipping. Respondent 12 followed her family in Buddhism until she was fifteen years old. A YWAM (Youth with a Mission) team visited her hometown and they began teaching English through a local church. Learning English was her initial reason for church attendance, but the team soon left the church. Despite their departure, she continued weekly attendance to learn about Christianity for two years before becoming a Christian around age seventeen.

³⁰Respondent 15, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 10, 2017.

compared communal meals at the church each Sunday to food waste at Buddhist temples. These things stood out to her as areas of contrast between the way Northern Thai Christians and folk Buddhists live.

Respondent 18 moved to Chiang Mai at age thirty-five and lived in a Christian dormitory, where he studied informal education. There, he met his future wife, who was already a Christian. She invited him to meals and to visit the seminary. This was a positive memory for him, since he sometimes did not have money for food. He believed that God was taking care of him at that time. He recalled that the people at the seminary were kind. They visited him, asking about his well-being. This led to increased happiness in his life. These initial experiences with Christians and Christian doctrines proved impactful to respondents, who lived former lives as folk Buddhists in ignorance of Christianity.³¹

Studying the Bible. Christians populate 5.99 percent of Chiang Mai, where this research takes place.³² Buddhism and animism heavily influence Northern Thai culture. As such, Northern Thai folk Buddhists who live in Chiang Mai are largely ignorant of the Bible or of Christian doctrines. This situation understandably leads to many misconceptions about Christianity in the minds of Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Several respondents explained that when Christians invited them to study the Bible they

³¹James Engel's scale is referenced here as a tool to describe where a person may be found in relation to the point of conversion. The Holy Spirit draws the lost and provides spiritual resources that are otherwise absent in the lives of Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Attending church and having gospel-centered conversations with Christians provides information to the lost individuals, moving them from a -8 on Engel's scale. Before conversion, this scale interacts with exposure to information and awareness of the gospel. As potential converts are exposed to Christians and Christian doctrine, they are potentially moved by the Holy Spirit. Informationally, they gain an awareness of what it would look like to be incorporated into a local body of believers, a +2 on this scale. However, until conversion, they remain outsiders, only looking into Christian church culture. As is sadly often the case, it is possible that they would reject the gospel after learning of it in the context of a church or friendship with a Christian. Will McRaney, *The Art of Personal Evangelism: Sharing Jesus in a Changing Culture* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 49.

³²"Christian Presence Map: Chiang Mai," ESTAR, accessed October 30, 2017, <https://estar.ws/harvest/christian-presence-map.html>.

began learning about God from his word.³³ This access to Christian teaching factored heavily in their conversions.

Respondent 1 noted that the pastor of his church invited him to study the Bible for three months, teaching him to read the Bible and pray. He was subsequently converted. He relates that the Bible changed him by shifting his thought patterns. He first desired to follow the Bible, then started loving his neighbors according to Mark 12:30-31. Respondent 1 made the decision to become a Christian after this three-month period of attending church and Bible study.

Respondent 9 was living as a Buddhist. Thoughts of where she would go after death scared her. At the time, she was living in a Christian dormitory, pursuing non-formal education. While there, a friend invited her to attend church. Though she attended church for four or five years, she did not understand Jesus or the Bible. She attended the church because her friend invited her. However, things changed when she began attending a different church and joined a class that involved purposeful Bible study. She explained how this class taught her “that God is the redeemer and reviver . . . why Jesus sacrificed for us. [She] understood and decided to be a Christian at that time.”³⁴

Understanding Bible doctrine prompted her conversion to Christianity. In his letter to the Roman church, the Apostle Paul asks his readers “And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”

(Rom 10:14). Faith comes from hearing and understanding the gospel (Rom 10:17).

Communication of the gospel and a Christian worldview to Northern Thai folk Buddhists is essential for making Christian disciples among this population. Through cell groups,

³³Recent Thai Bible translations include the Thai Standard Version 2011. In my observations of Western missionaries and Thai believers, the 2011 version is preferred to the 1971 iteration of the Thai Standard Version in regard to readability. Karl Dahlfred, “A Brief Survey of Thai Bible Translations,” Karl and Sun Dahlfred, *Missionaries to Thailand*, last modified July 2012, accessed October, 20, 2019, <https://www.dahlfred.com/en/blogs/gleanings-from-the-field/256-a-brief-survey-of-thai-bible-translations>.

³⁴Respondent 9, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

several formerly folk Buddhist respondents gained understanding, leading to their conversions.

After Respondent 3 graduated from university, he began attending a local church. Despite attending Sunday services and cell group meetings, he remained confused about Christianity and Buddhism and continued attending the Buddhist temple. Respondent 3 reported, at that time, he did not read the Bible and did not understand Christianity. Eventually, after a period of reading the Bible and coming to his local church for Sunday services, he decided to become a Christian. In his account, he recalled having this realization:

Because God is real. God [is] almighty. God loves me. Because God sacrificed for my sins. When I understood about the Bible and Jesus Christ, I never turned back to Buddhism.³⁵

His conversion took place because he understood Christian doctrines through studying the Bible.

Cell group attendance. A cell group is a small Bible study and is often less formal than a church service. For several respondents, joining a cell group led to regular opportunities for purposeful Bible study. In some cases, respondents interacted with Christians at a cell group meeting rather than a church service. Cell group meetings are positive events for Buddhists to attend in which they can learn about the doctrines of Christianity and get to know Northern Thai Christians. Robert Coleman writes,

When will we realize that evangelism is not done by something, but by someone? It is an expression of God's love, and God is a person. His nature, being personal, is only expressed through personality, first revealed fully in Christ, and now expressed through his Spirit in the lives of those yielded to him.³⁶

Coleman advocates the purposeful use of small group ministry to build churches and develop disciples, heavily emphasizing the relational method of Christ with his disciples.

³⁵Respondent 3, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

³⁶Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2006), 97.

In a Northern Thai setting, these small group meetings give folk Buddhists opportunities to observe Christians. By design, they facilitate the formation of gospel-centered relationships. The brother-in-law of Respondent 18 challenged him while he attended a cell group meeting at the local seminary. His brother-in-law said, “If you have some problems in your life, you can pray to God . . . When you go back to your dormitory, [you] can pray: ‘If God is real, if God is true, if God is alive. Please show something to me.’”³⁷ After accepting his brother-in-law’s invitation, he eventually became a Christian. Through this relationship, he was invited to pray to the Christian God and was subsequently brought to faith.

Invitations. Christian invitations are an important part of many respondents’ testimonies. Christians invited respondents to attend Christian parties or festivals while they were still folk Buddhists. Since the Buddhist mode of worship contains festival days, these events provide folk Buddhists in Northern Thailand a culturally familiar opportunity to interact with Christians and Christian doctrines.³⁸

It was through her work that Respondent 20 met a member of Respondent 6’s family, who invited her to a Christmas party. The party was on a Saturday, and Christians attending the party prayed for her. The pastor invited her to attend church the next day. Upon attending the church and witnessing Christian worship, she felt peace, happiness, and was moved to tears. While there, the pastor asked if he could pray for her. She answered, “Please pray for me. I need to know about God.”³⁹ She explained that she did

³⁷Respondent 18, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 10, 2017.

³⁸Songkran, which takes place in April, is an opportunity for Thai Buddhists to attend and support their local Buddhist temple. Other examples include the *Phra Kathin* ceremony and various merit making ceremonies. Kenneth E. Wells, *Thai Buddhism: Its Rites and Activities* (Bangkok: The Christian Bookstore, 1960,) 85.

³⁹Respondent 20, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 12, 2017.

not know about Jesus and only had a general idea of God. The pastor told her about Jesus and invited her to accept the gospel. She responded immediately, becoming a Christian.

Other times, invitations came as direct appeals to believe the gospel.⁴⁰

Respondent 8 recalled his former time as a folk Buddhist. His daughter, who was already a Christian at the time, came to him and urged him to become a Christian. She said, “It’s easy. It’s the time.”⁴¹ His daughter told him of her dream, in which his brother brought him to church on a motorcycle. His conversion followed this invitation. While in college, Respondent 19 maintained a belief that Christianity and Buddhism were the same. A Christian friend corrected this misconception, “If you would like to know more about Christianity, about Jesus, you can come with me [to church].”⁴² He did so, happily learning more about Christianity and noting the kindness of the Christians there. Direct invitations from Christians led to these respondents’ conversions.

A Christian friend invited Respondent 3 to a Christmas party while attending university. He was challenged to receive God at the party. He did not understand about Jesus, but he recalled that his hair stood up and he felt like there was something inside him. He responded to the invitation. Recalling his friend inviting him to this party and the experience he had there he remarked, “Friends are most important.”⁴³

Respondent 2 recalled a friend bringing her to church. She heard a sermon that challenged her to receive the Holy Spirit. She received a word from God in the form of a call to prayer and repentance. She obeyed this call and remembered thinking

⁴⁰Respondent 10 went to engineering school, hoping to find success in life through vocation, but was dissatisfied. He was worried about his job, family, and money, and was serious about his life. He was invited to a Christmas party by the sister of Respondent 6 and was moved by the invitation of a local pastor. This pastor asked, “If you want to know why you were born, you should ask the one who created you.”⁴⁰ The choice of language resonated with the heart of this engineer. He subsequently joined a cell group and began attending church. Respondent 10, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

⁴¹Respondent 8, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

⁴²Respondent 19, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 11, 2017.

⁴³Respondent 3, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

after I got the Holy Spirit inside, I promised God. “God I will not do the old thing like go to the temple, worship and respect the idol.” I canceled the other thing. I tried to go to the Christian camp. A camp for the Christians. Right now, I just only have Christian friends. My Buddhist friends? They invite me to the temple. Everything is stopping.⁴⁴

Respondent 2 reported being converted to Christianity when she heard God’s call to repentance. An invitation to attend a local church led to a divine encounter, her repentance from past idolatry, and a new life in Christ.

Christian invitations often disrupt typical social expectations of Northern Thai people. Respondents mentioned the importance of maintaining *klang chai*, outward agreement, even if inward resistance exists. A fundamental social rule for Thai people, this tendency exists between husband and wife, superiors and inferiors, and between strangers and friends in varying degree.⁴⁵ Most Northern Thai are folk Buddhists. Christians disrupt relational solidarity when they invite Buddhists to leave the majority of their peers who perform Buddhist and animistic rituals.⁴⁶ In a Northern Thai setting, invitations to attend church services may lead to outward agreement, but because of *klang chai*, inward disagreement may be maintained.⁴⁷ A genuine relationship is the context in which respondents most favorably received invitations to follow Christ.

Persecution and witness. Respondents sometimes mentioned instances of persecution from Buddhist family members and neighbors. They described this persecution as mocking, pressure to conform to family standards, and/or withholding of

⁴⁴Respondent 2, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

⁴⁵Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 136-38. Komin provides copious examples of well-meaning Western researchers who misunderstand *klang chai* as fear or limited to only some social situations. The reality, Komin explains, is that *klang chai* is more accurately understood as respectful concern and is found throughout Thai society.

⁴⁶Buddhism and animism are widely considered to be Thai traditions in the region.

⁴⁷Respondent 7 was invited to a local church by her Western brother-in-law. She was invited at their first meeting. Though she remained a Buddhist, she attended a Christian church for a brief period of time in order to maintain *klang chai*. This was a rather awkward situation for Respondent 7. She was offended by the clumsy attempt, by Thai standards, of invitation without genuine relationship. It was not until later, after a miraculous healing, that she was converted to Christianity.

financial help. However, in some instances persecution was opportunity for formerly hostile family members to convert to Christianity after seeing the change in the lives of their Christian relatives. Relationships between new converts and their families, though strained, were maintained. Amid persecution that often accompanies conversion to Christianity in a Northern Thai setting, some new converts to Christianity became effective evangelists.⁴⁸

The folk Buddhist friends of Respondent 3 think Christianity is funny and they mock his attempts at evangelism. They deride him and say, "He believes in Jesus."⁴⁹ He tells them that God helps him and that God can do anything, but they refuse to take him seriously. However, their verbal insults take place within the context of his continued friendship. The family of Respondent 4 initially said, "Oh, you are a Christian? But your life did not change."⁵⁰ Over time, however, her family did observe a change in her life. Her father became a Christian several months before our interview. Respondent 4 happily cites God's action in her own life for her father's conversion. When respondents maintain already existing close relationships with unbelieving family and friends, these folk Buddhists are able to see the Holy Spirit initiated and maintained transformations of respondents' lives.

Respondent 7 shared the gospel with her mother, brother, and cousin. Her mother and brother both became Christians. She related that her cousin and the rest of her family do not like Christianity and that her family does not like it when she prays before meals. They express their displeasure with her for being a Christian. She explained, "They talked to me. They said 'I don't like this. You forget yourself. You are Buddhist.

⁴⁸Not all respondents encounter persecution. Respondent 1 describes his family and friends as supportive, saying "It's okay, no problem, because Chiang Mai has lots of churches. Lots of Christians in the churches. Everyone knows about Christianity. Almost everyone." Respondent 1, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

⁴⁹Respondent 3, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

⁵⁰Respondent 4, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

Why do you believe in Jesus Christ?”⁵¹ In the course of our interview, Respondent 7 explained that she prays for her family, but doesn’t say anything to them. Sugarn Tangsirisan’s dissertation “Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students: A Comparative Study of Christian and Non-Christian Ethnic Thai University Students” describes the perception among his respondents that Buddhism was an inherited religion.⁵² In this study, the comparatively high incidence of respondents’ families influences to perform folk Buddhist rituals seems to support these findings.

At times, conversions to Christianity led to disagreement or persecution from Thai neighbors and coworkers. Respondent 9 attends a Thai massage school. The other students take food, flowers, incense sticks, and candles to their teacher. When asked why she does not do this she replies, “I am a Christian. I already have a good teacher.”⁵³ Respondent 11 is married to a Buddhist. She said her husband agrees with her being a Christian and supports her. She tells her coworkers that she is a Christian, that she has good relationships with Christians, and that they truly love her. Her coworkers reply, “Ah, you think wrong. You have been brainwashed.”⁵⁴ She remains unbothered by their opinions, expressing disappointment that she found Jesus so late in life.

Respondent 12 said that at first, her Buddhist friends hated her and did not want her to join other Christians. Her neighbors tell her that when her parents die, they will have nothing to eat.⁵⁵ They believe that Respondent 12, also, will not have food to eat in the afterlife. Instead, as a Christian, she will have to eat dust. Christian burial

⁵¹Respondent 7, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

⁵²Suragarn Tangsirisan, “Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students: A Comparative Study of Christian and non-Christian Ethnic Thai University Students” (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1999), 134-35.

⁵³Respondent 9, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

⁵⁴Respondent 11, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

⁵⁵However, she mentioned that some of her friends were envious and a few became Christians themselves.

practices being what they are, this warning seems to be based upon a contrast between burial under the ground and Buddhist cremation practices. Kenneth Wells describes Thai Buddhist funerary rites as taking place in a temple with a large crematorium.⁵⁶ Folk Buddhists wash the bodies. Monks chant. Attendees offer food for the dead, followed by cremation. In a Northern Thai *kammatic* setting, most Buddhists anticipate rebirth or going to heaven, rather than achieving *nibbana*.

Respondent 13 told me about his struggles with family and neighbors:

My father, my brother, my whole family [is] against me. I betray family. Sometimes when I want to go to the market, they have the same car. The family doesn't want me to share the car. Some people, when I walk past their house, the people throw water on me. And my father called me to talk one-on-one and told me to cancel being a Christian.⁵⁷

His father evicted Respondent 13 from his home and warned him not to evangelize family. Respondent 13 responded by gathering his family to have his pastor talk to them together. They then had opportunity to ask questions about Jesus and now they better understand Christianity and feel better about his being a Christian. All of these instances of persecution took place when respondents maintained their relationships with folk Buddhist family members, neighbors, and friends. The gospel is most often transmitted in Northern Thailand through these sometimes difficult relational connections.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 discussed the answers to interview questions of twenty formerly Buddhist Northern Thai Christians. I used open and axial coding to identify three coding families within respondent testimonies. Tradition and relationship as a motivator for religious adherence were also identified as cross-cutting thematic concepts in each coding family. Notable trends included the importance of family relationships in passing on

⁵⁶Wells, *Thai Buddhism*, 210-11.

⁵⁷Respondent 13, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

Buddhism and animism among respondent accounts, a trend that finds low occurrence in the aspects of conversion to Christianity coding family. Temple and church attendance both had high occurrence in Buddhism and conversion to Christian coding families, but animism has no equivalent code occurrence. Chapter 4 presents readers with unique implications of these identified themes and provides additional interactions with existing literature.

CHAPTER 4

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

In Chapter 3, I presented a description of respondent answers along with themes identified within their accounts. Chapter 4 provides readers with interpretations of themes from respondents' testimonies and interacts with literature pertinent to Northern Thai folk Buddhism, especially resources that address these phenomena from a Christian worldview or that contain accounts of Northern Thai folk Buddhists who converted to Christianity.

This chapter begins with a restating of research methodology used to answer the question “What trends are present in the testimonies of formerly Buddhist Northern Thai Christians?” I administered ethnographic interviews to Northern Thai Buddhist background believers during an October 2017 site visit. I then used Atlas.ti to analyze and categorize respondents' answers into code families.¹ I administered axial coding and themes emerged from the data. Susanne Friese explains the process of sorting and structuring codes through analysis' ultimate aim is to integrate findings in order to tell a coherent story.² Utilizing grounded theory to identify themes across respondents' accounts allowed me to identify this coherence.

¹Initial codes, according to Kathy Charmaz, are provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data. Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 117.

²Susanne Friese, *Qualitative Data Analysis with Atlas.ti*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 152.

Information Discovered

I identified two themes throughout respondents' accounts. Because trust and interpersonal connections are highly valued between Northern Thai people, I identify relationships as motivators for religious adherence. Thai religious traditions, Buddhism and animism, also compose a major theme in respondent accounts. Traditions are cultural concepts that are generally passed down in the context of relationships. When breaking with the folk Buddhist traditions of families, neighbors, and wider Northern Thai society, respondents often encounter social pressure to conform to their previous participation in Thai religious traditions.

Just as social interaction with folk-Buddhists reinforces the practice of folk Buddhism, the respondents who became Christians were motivated to do so by getting to know Northern Thai Christians and through invitations to read the Bible and pray to God. Respondents identified this trend by explaining that relationships are the most important aspect of helping Buddhists come to faith in Christ. Folk Buddhists in Northern Thailand dwarf the population of Protestant Northern Thai Christians. Respondents' folk Buddhist neighbors often do not have opportunities to learn about Christianity except through relationships with Thai Christians.

Interpretation of Findings

I have delimited the scope of this research project to a population of Northern Thai Buddhist background believers. In administering grounded theory, I recorded their responses and administered open and axial coding. I assigned the theme "tradition" to codes if rituals or beliefs were mentioned without specific individuals or family members associated with their beliefs or ritual practices. I assigned the theme "relationship as a motivator for religious adherence" when respondents cited family members, neighbors, or friends as influences on their beliefs or ritual practices. These themes were identified in relation to the three categories: Buddhism, animism, and aspects of conversion to Christianity.

Respondents reported friendships and close family relationships with folk Buddhists. These relationships influenced their former practices as folk Buddhists in the following codes:

Relationship as Motivator for Religious Adherence

Northern Thai folk Buddhists' interactions with other folk Buddhists support their relationship with their folk Buddhist belief system. In their former practices as folk Buddhists, family members, friends, and neighbors influenced respondents to attend local temples. They were expected to take part in folk Buddhist practices as part of their families' traditions and as part of a wider Thai tradition.

Animism, a prominent practice in the lives of Thai Buddhists, was also taught to respondents in non-formal ways through relationships with family members. Fathers of respondents modeled direct communication with *pii* for their children. Close family members suffered from spirit possession. The family relationships of these respondents were immersed in and influenced by a worldview in which spirits had power over their lives. Possible outcomes for family members' improper interactions with *pii* include death or sickness. This relational aspect of religious adherence for respondents also factored heavily in testimonies of how they came to faith in Christ.

Among Northern Thai folk Buddhists, the centrality of relationships in their folk Buddhist practice is difficult to overstate.³ Unexpectedly, literature discussing this characteristic of Thai people explains that this emphasis on relationships does not necessarily come from Buddhism. Thai people have a strong ego-orientation, feel a need

³For an excellent description of values orientations present in Thai national character, see interaction with Suntaree Komin's *The Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns* later in this chapter. Komin discusses the innate values of the Thai and how these color their interaction with Buddhism, animism, or any other belief system to which they may adhere. Nantachai Mejudon utilizes the work of Komin effectively and his dissertation provides thoughtful application of these ideas in a missional setting.

to maintain “face” at all times, and construct façades of agreement known as *klang chai*.⁴ A grateful relationship orientation among Thai people leads to reciprocal kindness and gift giving known as *bunghun*.⁵ Their others-centered dispositions show an aspect of the Thai-self known as social-smoothing.⁶ These relational elements lend themselves to a continuation of Buddhism and animism present in Thai society in order to shore up relationships through shared values.

A brief comparison of Western and Thai modes of thinking and communication provides helpful contrast for this study. Nantachai Mejudhon posits, “For the Thai, religion is felt, not rationalized.”⁷ Mejudhon’s proverb assumes that a conventional Western approach to religion is largely accomplished through rational thinking, rather than feeling. Pertinent literature often contrasts between native Thai communication styles and Western communication styles. Though this comparison aids interpretation of Thai modes of religion, in no case were Westerners present as evangelists in my respondents’ accounts. Instead, in the testimonies which make up the sample for this study, Northern Thai transmitted the gospel to Northern Thai. Thai modes of communication are less direct by comparison with Western modes. Thai Christians who are too direct risk offense in their hearers if close relationships are not in place. Respondents regard relationships as vehicles through which to transmit Christian doctrine

⁴Sunatree Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns* (Bangkok, National Institute Development Administration, 1991), 133-36.

⁵Ibid., 141. For lengthy discussion of *bunghun* as practiced by the Northern Thai people, see the dissertation of Thomas Lowell Bohnert, “Selective Missiological Implications of *Bunghun* among the *Khon Muang*” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018).

⁶Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 143-44. Komin identifies a high valuation of the following characteristics: “(1) Caring and Considerate (2) Kind and Helpful (3) Responsive to Situations and Opportunities (4) Self-Controlled, Tolerant and Restrained (5) Polite and Humble (6) Calm and Cautious (7) Contented (8) Social Relation” in this social-smoothing orientation.

⁷N. Mejudhon, “The Way of Meekness: Being Christian and Thai in the Thai Way” (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 1998), 50.

and belief.⁸ Their testimonies reveal that relationship as a motivator for religious adherence is also a prominent theme in the Buddhism and animism coding families.

Tradition

Relationships between adherents' families, their communities, and wider Thai society are the context in which traditions are passed along. No respondents identified Christianity as a part of Thai tradition. However, several respondents readily identified Buddhism and animism as Thai traditions. Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou describe folk religion as considering “meaning in this life and the problem of death . . . well being in this life and the problem of misfortunes . . . knowledge to decide and the problem of the unknown . . . righteousness and justice and the problem of evil and injustice.”⁹ The surface level traditions of these folk Buddhists align with their daily life experiences as Thai people. Northern Thai Christian respondents, by contrast, did not communicate that their identities as Christians aligned with their national identities as Thai people.

Respondents note that Christianity has a long history in Northern Thailand. Despite this historical presence, many Northern Thai Buddhists are largely ignorant of Christian doctrine. The city of Chiang Mai is only 5.99 percent Christian.¹⁰ Outside Northern Thailand, this number decreases dramatically, as only 0.69 percent of the total

⁸Relationships with Christians is a prominent theme in respondents' testimonies. Their conversions were facilitated by attendance at local churches and cell group attendance. Participation in Christian worship meetings seemed to be a prominent theme with how Northern Thai Buddhists, whose lives are otherwise shaped by their Buddhist friends, family members, and societal expectations, learned about the biblical God. When former Buddhists I interviewed began to live in Christian dormitories or were invited to church, they witnessed the character of Christians and were invited to pray to the biblical God, to study the Bible, and to become Christians themselves.

⁹Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 73.

¹⁰“Christian Presence Map: Chiang Mai,” ESTAR, accessed October 30, 2017, <https://estar.ws/harvest/christian-presence-map.html>.

Thai population are Christians.¹¹ Respondent 19 mentioned that Thai people were unfamiliar with the gospel because there are no Christians there to tell Thai people about Christ. Instead of Christianity, traditional Northern Thai religious practices shape local culture.

Folk Buddhism is a religious tradition that shapes the predominant Northern Thai worldview. Traditions are shared beliefs passed down from generation to generation that hold power over individuals. Traditions are concepts often maintained in societies on a national scale, in a regional sense, and in the context of families. Many respondents pointed to Thai traditions as the reason why they attended temples, made merit, and offered food to monks. Instruction from a specific individual is not always necessary to transmit these traditions. Respondents reported general expectations that they take part in ritual performance as part of Northern Thai culture.

Traditions are able to influence human thinking and actions. Northern Thai experience traditions along with expectations that come from others in the context of relationships. These expectations reinforce influences on adherents that might originally come from Buddhist scriptures or from interaction with local spirits. Respondents reported that festivals or occasional ceremonies are prominent means for the passing along of animistic traditions. In their recollections, temple attendance was at times motivated by relationships with family members or friends. At other times, temple attendance was an expected cultural and traditional component of their identities as Thai Buddhists. These traditions were prominently passed on through familial expectations that adherents would make merit by offering food to monks and performing the *wai* to Buddha idols.¹²

¹¹“Christian Presence Map: Chiang Mai,” ESTAR, accessed October 30, 2017, <https://estar.ws/harvest/christian-presence-map.html>.

¹²The *wai* is performed by bowing with palms together.

Folk Buddhist traditions in a Northern Thai setting shape family roles between Northern Thai folk Buddhist parents and their children. Relational interdependence extends beyond adherents' lifetimes. Sons and daughters are responsible to give food to monks in order to feed their deceased parents. This obligation is an expected, and overtly folk Buddhist, element of traditional Thai family life.

Themes in Animism Coding Family

Within the animism coding family, influences from family members were a prominent channel for introducing adherents to animistic practices. Respondents also sometimes referenced the worship of *pii* and spirit possession without pointing to specific individuals from whom they were learned. In these cases, these beliefs are considered part of the Northern Thai folk religious *milieu*. Respondents cited local superstitions practiced with occasional frequency and regular festival attendance as ways that these traditions were passed on to adherents.

Themes in Buddhism Coding Family

Within the Buddhism coding family, attending the temple was a frequently reported practice. Respondents mentioned temple attendance twenty-four times in their accounts. At times, respondents' friends or families influenced their temple attendance through invitations. At other times, the general expectation that Northern Thai people will attend the local temple as a part of the folk Buddhist tradition, a kind of generalized social pressure, motivated their attendance. As observed in the animism coding family, parental involvement is a major channel for the transmission of Buddhist traditions. Some respondents' parents took a direct role in advising their children to offer food to monks. In other cases, respondents' general knowledge of this practice as a Thai tradition motivated their offerings. Respondents, when they were folk Buddhists, would also perform the *wai* to respect the Buddha or Buddha images. This practice of performing a *wai* to respect the Buddha or Buddha images was nearly always understood to be a part of

the Northern Thai Buddhist tradition, except for one instance in which an adherent's friend taught them to perform the *wai* without relating its meaning.

Themes in Aspects of Conversion to Christianity Coding Family

In both animism and Buddhism coding families, respondents reported that the presence of Thai traditions creates expectations for adherents to perform religious rituals. Respondents also told me that Thai people do not think of Christianity as a Thai tradition. Christian traditions and doctrines are not included in typical Thai family or community life. Respondents mentioned the importance of relationships with Christians to facilitate interaction with Christian doctrines in a Northern Thai setting.¹³ A majority of my respondents are the only Christians in their families. Hence, family relationships are not the most prominent channel through which Christianity was transmitted among my Northern Thai sample of respondents. Relationships with Christian friends were major influences on most respondents' conversions. Conversely, respondents often mentioned that their folk Buddhist family members pressured them to apostatize.

Respondents' testimonies included descriptions of circumstances where relationships with Christians could more easily be made. Their recollections included living in Christian dormitories or attending Christian schools, attending local churches, attending small group meetings, or being invited to Christian festivals or parties. Once

¹³Without the presence of relationships, invitations to faith in Christ are incongruent with the typical way Northern Thai relate to one another. As a stark example of the importance of relationships, Respondent 7 recalled that her husband's sister is married to a non-Thai. These relatives invited her and her husband to visit their house. Their hosts were Christian and shared the gospel with them. Because of a Thai cultural element, *klang chai*, the respondent went along with the invitation so as not to offend her host. This outward agreement was communicated despite her thinking at the time, "I never knew about Jesus. I hated Christianity and Jesus. I didn't want to know about Jesus." After meeting her husband's brother-in-law only once, she and her husband were told, "You are going to get baptized this Sunday." This command was given despite her concealed disdain for all things Christian. Because of this perceived family obligation, Respondent 7 recalled, "I had to go to the international church every Sunday. I went to the international church three Sundays but I didn't like it. I didn't understand the worship . . ." Her obligatory church attendance did not lead to real belief. She was angry and felt forced to attend church each week by a close relative. She began to dishonestly claim to be busy on Sundays and returned to only practicing folk Buddhist rituals. Only later, after a miraculous healing, did she become a Christian. Respondent 7, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

respondents were introduced to Christians at these events, they reported invitations to become Christians, to pray to God, and to study the Bible.

This chapter discusses the themes of relationship as a motivator for religious adherence and tradition as respondents identified them in accounts, how they relate to existing literature, and the implications of these findings.

Interaction with Pertinent Literature

A review of pertinent literature provides interaction with other authors' work describing the nature of Northern Thai folk Buddhism in relation to Christianity. Identification of trends in respondent accounts is validated. I also identify the unique contribution to extant literature provided by this dissertation.

Sunatree Komin's Nine Thai Value Clusters

Since 1991, all serious studies of Thai culture include interaction with Sunatree Komin's *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns*. In her research, Komin utilizes surveys to better understand the Thai national character and engages with previous explanations for what makes a Thai person Thai.¹⁴ Her findings call into question the prevalent idea that Buddhism has influenced every aspect of Thai culture. Komin's findings reveal elements of the Thai national character that are incompatible with the idea of Buddhist detachment, namely an aggressiveness under the surface of Thai deference and a pervasive materialism among the Thai.¹⁵ In fact, Komin discusses the ways that Thai culture impacts the practice of Buddhism in Thailand. She

¹⁴Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 8-10.

¹⁵Ibid., 10. Komin readily admits that some elements of Thai culture have been influenced by Buddhism. However, she posits that key elements of the Thai-self do not seem to fit in with the idea that Buddhist values and Thai values are synonymous.

introduces nine Thai value clusters that together compose a Thai national character.¹⁶ I present these value clusters in order of prominence.

Ego orientation. The first identified value cluster is ego orientation. This quality is demonstrated by

a big ego, a deep sense of independence, pride and dignity. They cannot tolerate any violation of the “ego” self. Despite the cool and calm front, they can be easily provoked to strong emotional reactions, if the “self” or if anybody close to the “self” like one’s father or mother is insulted.¹⁷

Komin describes this element as “face” and presents those who wish to equate Thai identity and Buddhist ideals with a major problem. The existence of this value overturns the proverb that “To be Thai is to be Buddhist.” According to Komin, ego orientation as a prominent character quality leads to the “criticism-avoidance, face saving and . . . *Kreng jai*” observed among the Thai.¹⁸

Grateful relationship orientation. The second value cluster is the grateful relationship orientation. Komin describes this reciprocally grateful element of the Thai personality by explaining that relationships are extremely important in Thai culture. Their prominence is supported by relationship related values holding high ranks in the Thai cognitive architecture.¹⁹ Grateful people and grateful relationships marked by gift giving and loyalty known as *bunghun* are a major part of the social fabric of Thai society.²⁰

¹⁶Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 132-209.

¹⁷Ibid., 133.

¹⁸Ibid., 135.

¹⁹Ibid., 139.

²⁰Ibid., 139-41. The cultural element of *bunghun* influences the economy and society of Northeastern Thailand, whereby city Thai bring money to trusting rural Thai farmers. The farmers send their children off to the city to perform exploitative work that at times includes prostitution. Their children return each year to help on the farm, returning their parents’ kindness with loyal service. Ibid., 140-41.

Smooth interpersonal relationship orientation. Komin's third value cluster is the smooth interpersonal relationship orientation. A humble and polite personality type, shown by the stereotypical Thai smile, demonstrates this element of Thai culture.²¹ This disposition toward smooth interpersonal relationships is very different, Komin explains, from a typical ambitious/American way of living.²² Instead, this collection of Thai values emphasizes "social smoothing" through being caring and considerate, flexible, and polite.²³

Flexibility and adjustment orientation. A fourth value cluster is flexibility and adjustment orientation. Thai people display flexibility rather than total honesty and are situationally oriented. They apply rules differently depending on the circumstances and relationships involved.²⁴ It is not difficult to see how this cultural value contributes to *klang chai*.²⁵ As an example, Komin notes that the rule of law is often not applied to superiors, partially to fulfill *klang chai* expectations and partially to build reciprocal *bunkhun* arrangements with high-level offenders.²⁶

Religio-psychical orientation. Fifth in prominence is the religio-psychical orientation. Since Theravada Buddhism is widely practiced among Thai people, readers may find it surprising to learn that among Komin's sample of Thai Buddhist respondents, only 35 to 55 percent cited religion as a major influence on their lives.²⁷ Religious rituals

²¹Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 143.

²²Ibid., 144. Westerners who speak their mind in a Thai setting may be met with a passive form of noncompliance that leads to a breakdown of organizational structure. Ibid., 147.

²³Ibid., 144-47.

²⁴Ibid., 161-69.

²⁵*Klang chai* is surface-level agreement that protects relationships.

²⁶Ibid., 169.

²⁷Ibid., 171.

to make merit were widely practiced, but few Thai she interviewed had a deep knowledge of Buddhism. She reports, “In general, the Thai do not make conscious effort to reach nirvana nor do they fully and succinctly believe in reincarnation.”²⁸ Her assessment matches the formerly *kammatic* orientation of most Northern-Thai respondents I interviewed.²⁹ In fact, Komin cites Stanley Tambiah’s *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeastern Thailand* to explain the relationship between animism and Buddhism in Thai thinking. Psychological needs are fulfilled by the overarching schema of Buddhism and a general and additional applied layer of what Tambiah calls animism, magic, and other superstitious beliefs.³⁰ Komin’s discussion of how the Thai people approach Buddhism and animism is a helpful observation that aids this study regarding my Northern Thai Christian respondents’ recollections of their former folk Buddhist worldview.

Education and competence orientation. The education and competence orientation is the sixth value cluster. Komin finds that Thai people place a medium value on education. They largely see education as a means to higher status or salary.³¹ They focus on keeping up appearances rather than developing actual abilities, sometimes possessing a tendency to live beyond their financial means.³² Among my own respondents, I noticed predispositions to entrepreneurship and interests in finding success through creative efforts.³³

²⁸Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 176.

²⁹Komin explains that the Thai are more of a “this-worldly” orientation. Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 181, 184. Komin refers to Buddhism as a psychological cushion. She explains that Buddhism is a way to reason through difficulty and points to it as a way out. Karma, according to her findings, is utilized as an “after affect” explanation to explain difficult circumstances. Ibid., 185.

³¹Ibid., 186.

³²Ibid., 188.

³³Several respondents noted that they went to college and several more attended non-traditional forms of education in order to gain access to new vocational opportunities.

Interdependence orientation. An interdependence orientation is Komin's seventh value cluster. Collaboration, interdependence, and a sense of community lead Thai people to be more accepting and enable Thai culture to assimilate ethnic groups.³⁴ The interdependence orientation was found among my respondents. Though several respondents cited parents and grandparents who were from China, they self-identified as Thai.

Fun and pleasure orientation. The eighth value cluster is the fun and pleasure orientation. The Thai word, *sanuk*, describes fun. Because Thai people are known for their frequent smiles, a casual observer may expect the fun and pleasure value orientation to find a higher placement on the scale of Thai value structures. Komin found that *sanuk* is more highly valued by urban government officials than among rural farmers.³⁵ The common realities of life in Thailand, especially in the Northeast region, include subsistence farming with responsibilities that loom large in the thinking of rural Thai. Life is more serious when responsibilities multiply.

Achievement-task orientation. Last in prominence, a ninth value cluster among Thai people is the achievement-task orientation. Compared to social relationships, Thai people place less emphasis on the achievement of tasks.³⁶ Komin addresses the idea that Buddhist non-attachment is a cause of this tendency. Rather than a distancing from the world, she finds that Thai people largely have a this-worldly orientation.³⁷ She

³⁴Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 189-91.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 194-96.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 197-99.

³⁷Readers may understand that animism practiced syncretistically with Buddhism provides a counter against a purely detached mode of life.

describes them on the whole as hard workers, with the prestige-focused government officials in Bangkok having more of a tendency toward *sanuk* than rural farmers.³⁸

Interaction with Komin's Nine Thai Value Clusters

Because of the prevalence of Theravada Buddhism throughout Thailand, Western observers have generally assumed that Buddhism influences nearly all aspects of Thai identity. Komin's study overturns this assumption by identifying prevailing aspects of Thai culture which run counter to Buddhist detachment. According to her findings, Thai Buddhism is not as monolithic as it might seem. This appraisal of Buddhism's influence helps me interpret the prominence of animism observed in my own Northern Thai respondents' accounts. Buddhism is a major influence on the Thai, but animism accompanies Buddhism as a concurrent tradition in Thailand. Komin's findings show that innate characteristics of Thai people impact the practice of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. My Northern Thai folk Buddhist respondents formerly practiced Thai traditions that incorporated animistic beliefs as they were passed from one generation to the next.

The findings of my study reveal two trends in respondent testimonies: tradition and relationship as a motivator for religious adherence. A mixture of Buddhist and animistic traditions were present in these Northern Thai respondents' descriptions of their former lives. Respondents readily identified these folk-religious practices as Thai traditions. My interview questions focus on the recalling of prior adherence, religious rituals, and motivations for ritual performance. Komin notes the widespread performance of rituals throughout Thailand but identifies an accompanying devaluation of religious practice in the lives of Thai respondents.³⁹ Komin's finding raises questions about motivations for these widely practiced rituals in a Northern Thai setting.

³⁸Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 205-07.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 171-73.

Based upon the ordination of her nine Thai value clusters, motivation to save face for one's self and one's family (ego orientation), a desire to please parents and other family who have transmitted Buddhism and animism (grateful relationship orientation), and a desire to be polite (smooth interpersonal relationship orientation) would potentially take precedence over religious affections among Thai adherents. My respondents reported a mix of motivators. They cited Thai traditions, a general sense of family tradition, the direct instruction of parents and grandparents, influences from Buddhist friends, and actual beliefs that the rituals would provide blessing or protection from spirits as motivations.

Respondents most often cited family members as the source of their knowledge about Buddhist and animistic rituals. I view this trend in light of the prominence of ego orientation in Komin's findings. Despite Buddhism's insistence for a non-self and the solitary path toward *nibbana*, the transmission of ritual traditions is often associated with the reciprocal relationships of the family members from whom they were learned. Observing Komin's study alongside my research provides an undergirding explanation for the transmission of Northern Thai religious ritual traditions primarily through family relationships. Her analysis of ego orientation explains instances of *klang chai* (surface level agreement to protect relationships) reported among my respondents. Her analysis of grateful relationship orientation also provides a motivation for folk Buddhists' belief that they must continue to feed their parents in the afterlife by presenting offerings to Buddhist monks. If her findings regarding the relatively low importance of religion among the Thai are to be believed, then ritual performance of traditional Thai religion among my Northern Thai respondents could be interpreted as being motivated by perceived needs to meet relational expectations in addition to adherents' personal beliefs.

“Lausanne Occasional Paper 15”

The aim of the “Lausanne Occasional Paper 15” is to assist Christian witness in majority Buddhist settings. An international team of Christian missiologists, including some with experience ministering in Thailand, collaborated to write this paper.⁴⁰ In this document, the authors describe a characteristic of majority Buddhist cultures, that “people are born into their religio-cultural societies, not made members by personal choice or decision.”⁴¹ This default-setting characteristic of Buddhism and animism among my respondents is shown when respondents referred to these practices as Thai traditions. Respondents took part in the religious rituals of Buddhism and animism traditionally practiced by their parents and grandparents.

In addition to inheriting ritual performances from family members, my respondents’ former worldviews were shaped by their participation in wider Thai society. Buddhism and animism are prevalent throughout Northern Thailand. Notably, respondents did not similarly consider Christianity to be a Thai tradition.⁴² This is most likely due to the default character of Northern Thai folk Buddhism. Christianity requires a moment of conversion that includes a turning from former practices. The Buddhist background believers I interviewed chose to leave what they believed to be the traditions of their families, communities, and Thai cultural heritage to follow Christ.

The “Lausanne Occasional Paper 15,” describes folk Buddhism as popular level Buddhism that includes the seeking of help through spirits and objects, with a belief in an afterlife.⁴³ Though my interview questions specifically focused on respondents’

⁴⁰“Lausanne Occasional Paper 15,” Report of the Consultation on World Evangelization Mini-Consultation on Reaching Buddhists held at Pattaya, Thailand from 16-27 June 1980, Sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-15>.

⁴¹Ibid., 5.

⁴²Though Buddhism came to Thailand from India, it is considered to be indigenous to Thailand by my Northern Thai respondents.

⁴³Ibid.

recollection of former Buddhist practices, they volunteered many animistic rituals and beliefs in the context of their answers. The Northern Thai form of folk Buddhism is wholly syncretistic with animistic beliefs, which exist as a part of the overarching folk Buddhist worldview. A parallel exists between the popular-level Buddhism identified by the authors of the “Lausanne Occasional Paper 15” and the testimonies of my sample of respondents.⁴⁴

“Lausanne Occasional Paper 15” notes that social solidarity caused by integrative religious overlay is strong in Buddhist cultures.⁴⁵ The authors describe a mixture of Buddhism and animism often present throughout majority Buddhist cultures and describe the effects of these cultural influences on the consideration of Christ by any individual from a Buddhist society.⁴⁶ The typical Northern Thai worldview from which these observers assess Christian doctrines is heavily influenced by Buddhist traditions that influence family roles, ethics, vocation, and interpersonal communication styles. Most of my respondents mention the pervasiveness of Thai religious traditions in their families and note their neighbors’ regular celebration of religious holidays. Regarding the informal teaching of Buddhist ideas in this kind of society, the authors write,

Some Theravada Buddhist concepts, such as *karma* and *rebirth*, are ingrained and perpetuated by hearing legends repeatedly year after year, generation upon generation.⁴⁷

Their claim supports the identification of traditions transmitted by family members as a trend in my respondent accounts.

⁴⁴The “Lausanne Occasion Paper 15” includes lengthy discussion of the doctrinal differences between Buddhism and Christianity: non-theistic v. theistic, self-reliance vs. reliance on Christ, and karma vs. sin. Since these concepts are widely known, I will limit interactions with this document to the areas most pertinent to the identified themes from respondent accounts.

⁴⁵“Lausanne Occasional Paper 15,” 8.

⁴⁶Ibid., 8-9.

⁴⁷Ibid., 11.

When Christians communicate doctrines of Christianity to Northern Thai folk Buddhists, they are often unintelligible at first hearing.⁴⁸ Folk Buddhists assess each new idea according to plausibility structures found within folk Buddhism. For example, the Thai word for breaking a Theravada *sila* (rule of moral conduct) is the same word used for the Christian conception of sin, *baap*.⁴⁹ This term, *baap*, is a loan word that is easily confused by folk Buddhists. Their familiarity with its Buddhist definition instead of the Christian meaning, offense against a holy God, produces confusion in Thai Buddhist hearers. Because of this confusion, Thai traditions and the folk Buddhist worldview they form lessen the intelligibility of the Christian gospel in Northern Thailand.

The authors of the “Lausanne Occasional Paper 15” prescribe a solution for the problem caused by the prevalence of Thai traditions and their worldview shaping effects. They suggest that Christians in these settings spend time with Buddhists and in the context of a dialogue,

establish a cycle in the communicative process. Communication is not portrayed by a straight line. It is *not* a verbal echo or rebound of the actual words. It is more like a circle. Effective communication requires that the hearer understands the meaning intended by the communicator. Thus a feedback mechanism is essential for evaluating honest communication. Conversational interchange is helpful here, rather than just “pulpit announcing.” Effective feedback is essential to establish clarity of meaning. Only as the specific meaning intended by the evangelist is reproduced in the mind of the hearer, can it be claimed the gospel has been proclaimed or taught.⁵⁰

What they describe here is not accomplished by preaching from a pulpit or by a tract ministry alone. Broadcasting gospel-centered relationships in these ways is not possible. Instead, their prescription for purposeful dialogues is best lived out in the context of genuine relationships.

⁴⁸“Lausanne Occasional Paper 15,” 9.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 9-10.

The authors' (of the "Lausanne Occasional Paper 15") proposed solution validates the trend identified in my respondent accounts: relationship as a motivator for religious adherence. In a Northern Thai setting, building gospel-centered dialogues with folk Buddhists includes strong emphases on trust and mutual respect in the context of relationships. The Northern Thai respondents I interviewed cite close relationships with Christians as a major means for their understanding of the gospel when they were formerly Buddhists. The authors of "Lausanne Occasional Paper 15" emphasize the need for credibility in gospel communicators for the message to be believed.⁵¹ Without relationships, Thai Christians remain strangers to folk Buddhists. With relationships, they have opportunities to prove themselves and the Christian gospel credible. Building these kind of relationships takes time.⁵² Because conversion to Christianity means not only a turning from their prior practice, but also a turning from their prior worldview, and because converts potentially distress prior relationships with Buddhist family members and friends, Christians ought to realize that their friendships toward Buddhists communicate safety and social-support. If potential converts' families consider Christian conversion a betrayal due to breaks in social solidarity, Christian friendship networks can provide new believers with positive relationships.

The authors of the "Lausanne Occasional Paper 15" also mention a need to address spiritual powers when witnessing to Buddhists.⁵³ This is helpful advice for several reasons. First, these spirits actually exist as demons. A Christian worldview includes the existence of demons, admits the reality of spiritual warfare, and contains

⁵¹"Lausanne Occasional Paper 15," 12.

⁵²Ibid., 14. Kosuke Koyoma, Japanese missionary to the Thai, wrote the book *Three Mile and Hour God*. The title evokes comparison of the frenetic pace of modernism with the much slower pace of communicating the gospel in the context of relationships. As a missionary to Thailand, it is likely he, too, saw the slowness of the process of protecting relationships while allowing God to overturn traditional Thai worldviews one doctrinal point at a time through the power of his Spirit.

⁵³"Lausanne Occasional Paper 15," 13.

commands for Christians to prayerfully depend on God's strength (Eph 6:10-20). Western observers of animistic rituals would do well to avoid dismissing these rituals as mere superstitions. Northern Thai folk Buddhists who practice animism are deceived and are in bondage to their demonic oppressors. Assessing these phenomena from a Christian worldview provides a helpful corrective. Secondly, in a Northern Thai setting, a need exists to address spiritual powers because of the prevalence of animistic practices among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Animism is a major part of the way they see the world. To avoid this topic would be to leave this portion of their folk Buddhist worldview unaddressed.

Cautions and advice given in "Lausanne Occasional Paper 15" are sometimes more appropriate for Christians from a Western setting whose worldviews have been influenced by Post-Enlightenment rationalism. In my Northern Thai respondents' accounts, Northern Thai Christians are the primary evangelists. Among this population, properly contextualized evangelism that addresses local spirits is more likely to take place. Respondent 13 actually became a *pii* exorcist upon his conversion to Christianity, following the example of Jesus and his disciples. Regarding the existence of spiritual beings, the worldview of Northern Thai folk Buddhists corresponds more closely to that of the New Testament than does the worldview of Western anti-supernaturalists.

Erik Cohen's Buddhism and Christianity in Thailand

Erik Cohen's journal article, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand: The 'Battle of the Axes' and the 'Contest of Power'" discusses Christian missionaries' encounters with two very different modes of religion: Buddhism and animism. He proposes that missionary success in making Christian converts depends on a Thai person's orientation to Buddhism. According to his hypothesis, potential converts place a heavy emphasis on Buddhism if they are elite or monks and possess a strong orientation

to animism if they are rural Northern Thai folk Buddhists.⁵⁴ Cohen examines the various means Western missionaries historically presented Christianity to potential converts depending on their orientation on this continuum.⁵⁵ He cites Jesuits' efforts to promote Christianity through power encounters, explaining that this was a fruitful method for working with pre-axial animists since it confronted their plausibility structures.⁵⁶ However, when addressing those oriented strongly toward Buddhism, which as an axial religion has its own transcendent doctrines that include explanations for suffering in the world, confrontations were less likely to be successful.⁵⁷ Cohen sees the *kammatic* form of Buddhism present throughout Thailand as being particularly resistant to Christian evangelism, since the doctrines of Christianity and the Christian worldview are unintelligible when observed from within a Buddhist worldview.⁵⁸ Cohen's article provides a helpful assessment with which to categorize and understand Northern Thai folk Buddhism, though Buddhism and animism are not experienced exclusively from one another.

Cohen also helpfully notes that Thailand has an honor/shame orientation rather than a predisposition toward guilt/innocence.⁵⁹ In this assessment, he addresses interpersonal relationships, specifically the trend identified within my respondents' accounts: relationship as a motivator for religious adherence. Cohen describes the

⁵⁴Erik Cohen, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand: The 'Battle of the Axes' and the 'Contest of Power,'" *Social Compass* 38, no. 2 (June 1, 1991): 116, 129.

⁵⁵Ibid., 116. Here, "Axial" refers to Karl Jaspers' conceptual Axial age. Jaspers believed a novel category of religious thoughts came about when human societal development birthed world religions, e.g. Buddhism and Christianity.

⁵⁶Ibid., 117. The "Lausanne Occasion Paper 15" also suggests power encounter as a potentially fruitful avenue for ministry among some populations of Theravada Buddhists. "Lausanne Occasion Paper 15," 36. If Cohen's hypothesis is correct, since the Northern Thai iteration of Theravada Buddhism is profoundly syncretized with animism, this advice is warranted.

⁵⁷Cohen, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand," 117.

⁵⁸Ibid., 122.

⁵⁹Ibid., 124.

honor/shame disposition among the Thai and the difficulty experienced by individual Thai in converting to Christianity because of social pressure. Group conversions, he explains, make conversions more likely. Otherwise, he supposes, only outcasts would convert to Christianity.⁶⁰ Several of my Northern Thai respondents reported ongoing persecution or ostracization from family members who remained Buddhists. None of these respondents became Christians through group conversion. Despite the discomfort caused by their break with family traditions, those who persisted in relating to their Buddhist families were able to communicate the gospel. Their faithful witness produced occasional conversions to Christianity.

Cohen points to demographic trends among the Thai, noting that the poorer populations tend to be more oriented toward animism, though nearly all Thai identify as Buddhist.⁶¹ The inclusion of Northern Thai hill tribes, which are largely animistic and economically disadvantaged, may influence his demographic data. My respondents are ethnically Thai and live in Northern Thailand. Among these, the rituals of Buddhism were generally practiced alongside the traditions and rituals of animism, as was done in the Lanna kingdom centuries ago. Cohen's study labels animism pre-axial but does not identify the long local history for animistic rituals present in Northern Thailand today. Furthermore, his emphasis on the actions of Western missionaries' power encounters with Buddhism and animism seems to harken back to a historical point in time when only hundreds of Thai Christians existed. In a modern Northern Thai setting, it is possible for Thai folk Buddhists to become Christians by interacting solely with Thai Christian family members, neighbors, and friends.

The trends identified in my respondent's accounts are examples of how Northern Thai folk Buddhists were successfully evangelized by Northern Thai Christians

⁶⁰Cohen, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand," 124.

⁶¹Ibid., 130.

in this region.⁶² In my sample, Northern Thai respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of relationships between themselves and their Thai friends for the gospel to be understood and believed. These relationships often took place among small groups and congregations populated by Northern Thai Christians. As such, the emphasis of this study is different from Cohen's interest in worldview comparison.

Cohen's work here is especially helpful due to his labeling and categorizing Buddhism and Christianity as axial religions. Though animism may be independently practiced among hill tribes, animism is not considered a separate belief system among my Northern Thai respondents. Their perception of Thai religious tradition includes both modes. Respondents included animistic rituals in their descriptions of former Buddhist practices; hence animism is found syncretistically within the Northern Thai folk Buddhist worldview.

Sugarn Tangsiriatian's "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students"

Sugarn Tangsiriatian's dissertation "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students: A Comparative Study of Christian and Non-Christian Ethnic Thai University Students" is an interview based study of Thai Buddhists and Christians regarding conversion to Christianity.⁶³ Tangsiriatian interacts with the findings of Erik Cohen's "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand: "The Battle of the Axes' and the 'Contest of Power'" and tests Cohen's hypotheses: that Thai people have difficulty converting to Christianity because of their alignment to Buddhism and because of a high

⁶²Many early twentieth century missionaries, for instance, were anti-supernatural in their assessment of indigenous practices. They dismissed animistic ideas as superstitions. This approach fails to account for the very real existence of spiritual powers (Eph 6:12). Cohen, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand," 133.

⁶³Suragarn Tangsiriatian, "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students: A Comparative Study of Christian and non-Christian Ethnic Thai University Students" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1999).

value they place on interpersonal relationships. Tangsiriatian's aim is to determine a way to overcome these barriers.⁶⁴ His research question is "To what extent and in what ways do Theravada Buddhism and the high value placed on interpersonal relationships affect conversion to the Christian faith among ethnic Thai university students?"⁶⁵

Tangsiriatian also tests the conversion model of Rodney Stark and John Lofland, criticizing its step-by-step approach to conversion.⁶⁶ He asks why each element of the model would have similar importance and points out that this model does not account for divine activity.⁶⁷ Tangsiriatian integrates Lofland and Stark's model with a biblical worldview, asserting God's work behind the scenes and admitting that human actors are dependent on God's will for conversions to take place.⁶⁸ God as actor in salvation is an essential component of the Christian worldview lacked by purely sociological models for Christian conversion. Tangsiriatian's adjustment to Lofland and Stark's model is necessary and administered appropriately.

Tangsiriatian's study differs from my own in several ways. While all of his respondents were ethnic Thai, only three of thirty-two respondents attended college in Chiang Mai.⁶⁹ My study is delimited to Northern Thailand. As such, Tangsiriatian's

⁶⁴Tangsiriatian, "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students," 12, 14.

⁶⁵Ibid., 13.

⁶⁶Steps of Stark and Lofland's conversion model are composed of the following: "For conversion, a person must 1) experience enduring acutely felt tension, 2) within a religious problem-solving perspective, 3) which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker, 4) encountering the D. P. [the cult being studied] at a turning point at his life, 5) wherein an affective bond is formed (or preexist) with one or more converts, 6) where extra cult attachment are absent or neutralized, and 7) where if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to extensive interaction." John Lofland, and Rodney Stark. "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective." *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 874, accessed July 26, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2090965>. Tangsiriatian cites their model, which was formulated in reference to their study of a particular millenarian cult on the west coast of the United States. Their model supposes that each step in the process must progress according to increasing numeration, making steps early in the process predisposing conditions for those that come later. Tangsiriatian, "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students," 66.

⁶⁷Tangsiriatian, "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students," 69-70.

⁶⁸Ibid., 96.

⁶⁹Ibid., 109.

study possesses limited parity with my study. Additionally, university students compose his sample, which also includes Thai Buddhists as well as Thai Christians.

Barriers to conversion to Christianity reported by Tangsiriatian's respondents are listed here in order of frequency. These include "Buddhist teaching; the common Buddhist mentality; Buddhism as the religion of the Thai majority; Buddhism as the inherited religion; the Buddhist ritual; and Buddhism as the national religion."⁷⁰ His respondents described Buddhist teachings as including the law of self-reliance, karma, the Buddhist conception of sin, and (mentioned by two respondents) the need to participate in folk Buddhist beliefs like feeding deceased ancestors.⁷¹ Since Tangsiriatian's research question aims to determine if Buddhism was a barrier to conversion for his respondents, his questions for converts differed from those who remained Buddhist.⁷² For his sample of Thai Christians, his interviews include the questions, "Did you practice Buddhism before? If so, how?"⁷³ These questions were similar to my own in that they aimed at eliciting memories of former Buddhist practices. Tangsiriatian's other questions align with Stark and Lofland's conversion model and specifically raise the subject of interpersonal relationships by asking: "Did the Thai value placed on interpersonal relationships hinder you from becoming a Christian? If so, how?," "Did you worry about your relationships with others such as your parents, relatives, friends, professor, etc., while you were considering becoming a Christian? If so, how?," and "Did you worry about those who have *bunghun* to you while you were

⁷⁰Tangsiriatian, "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students," 122.

⁷¹Ibid., 123-27. Answers also included the Buddhist denial of a Creator-God. Ibid., 128. His respondents reported that most Thai Buddhists believe all religions to teach the same basic idea. Ibid., 130-31.

⁷²Ibid., 110-14.

⁷³Ibid., 111.

considering becoming a Christian? If so, who are they that you worried? Why?”⁷⁴ His focused approach leads respondents to consider a predetermined set of topics. Tangsiriatian’s aim is to test Cohen’s hypotheses among his sample population. However, in my own set of interviews, my use of grounded theory excludes any presuppositional theme.⁷⁵ Instead, by answering open-ended questions, my respondents provided raw data from which themes emerged.

Compared to my respondents’ answers, answers of Tangsiriatian’s respondents were more heavily focused on the doctrines of Buddhism as barriers to conversion. My respondents reported their prior animistic and Buddhist beliefs, rituals they performed, and referenced how they learned these rituals. The folk Buddhist rituals practiced by my respondents in Northern Thailand matched the practice of Tangsiriatian’s respondents, specifically a perceived need to feed parents in the afterlife. A widely held Thai value of reciprocation in relationships, known as *bunghun*, is likely a motivator for this practice.

My respondents did not cite specific doctrines of Buddhism as being major barriers to their conversions. However, they mentioned the prevalence of folk Buddhism and its effect on relationships. The differences in Tangsiriatian’s responses and mine may have to do with demographics. His respondents were in university while many of my own respondents pursued vocations without a need for university attendance. Many of my respondents were much older than those interviewed by Tangsiriatian, and all of them lived in Northern Thailand, which has a unique history as the former Lanna Kingdom. Higher rates of Christian adherence in this region compared to the rest of Thailand is evidence of localized cultural differences among Thai people.

⁷⁴Tangsiriatian, “Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students,” 111. *Bunghun* is a culturally embedded expectation of reciprocal giving present in Thai culture.

⁷⁵My questions were focused on the respondents recalling what they deemed important in their former practice and what rituals they performed.

In Tangsirisation's study, one non-Christian respondent and four Christian respondents labelled Buddhist rituals as barriers to conversion.⁷⁶ One of Tangsirisation's respondents focused on the experiential nature of Buddhist ritual, reporting,

My own "self" [is a barrier to conversion]! because the whole twenty years of my life I have had to go to wat (temple), wai-pra (pay homage to monk) . . . If we become Christians, we are cut off from our parents, we will not make merit for them again. We will become ungrateful persons. We were in Buddhism for many years, to change into the Christian faith makes us feel awkward. If we are no longer wai (paying homage) this and that, we are used to wai everything before, even the takean tree . . . We will feel doing wrong to gods.⁷⁷

This phenomenologically-based self-assessment aligns with the prior Buddhist and animistic practice of my respondents. Tangsirisation cites sociological stress as the reason why Buddhists find the majority status of Buddhism a barrier to conversion to Christianity.⁷⁸ Perceived barriers in his findings include the importance of religious traditions and the loss of relationships which results from leaving these prior modes of faith. This parallel reporting from his respondents validates the findings of my study. Six of his non-Christian respondents and two Christian respondents note the inherited nature of Buddhism.⁷⁹ Tangsirisation cites plausibility structures and social pressure as underlying causes of these two answers.⁸⁰ My own findings include family members' influence on respondents' religious practices. My respondents reported this particular barrier (the inherited nature of Buddhism) more frequently.⁸¹

⁷⁶Tangsirisation, "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students," 136-37.

⁷⁷Ibid., 136.

⁷⁸Ibid., 142. He cites eight non-Christian respondents and two Christian respondents as reporting this belief.

⁷⁹Ibid., 143.

⁸⁰Ibid., 144. To this researcher, a parallel between plausibility structures/tradition and social pressure/relationship is apparent. This validation of my findings may be noted.

⁸¹The reader may note that all of my respondents identified as Christians and that Tangsirisation sampled both Thai Christians and Thai Buddhists.

In Tangsiriatian's findings, five respondents considered parental *bunkhun* (reciprocal kindness) a barrier to conversion, while eight non-Christian respondents and five Christian respondents would listen and obey their parents because their parents practiced Buddhism.⁸² These respondents' parents object to Christian conversion, Tangsiriatian explains, because they are Buddhists.⁸³ Only four of his non-Christian respondents were concerned about their friendships changing if they were to convert to Christianity.⁸⁴ Two of Tangsiriatian's non-Christian respondents and two Christian respondents cited fear of rejection from relatives. My respondents reported family members applying social pressure to apostatize and return to Buddhism.⁸⁵ His findings parallel the perceived threat to social solidarity identified by the authors of "Lausanne Occasional Paper 15."⁸⁶ My Northern Thai respondents most often report that they found relationships which facilitated their conversion to Christianity outside respondents' immediate families.

Tangsiriatian's research question tested whether or not Buddhism is a barrier to Christian conversion among Thai University students. His respondents also discussed their perception of Thai Christians. Five non-Christian respondents and two Christian respondents cited Christian evangelism as "aggressive, excessive, nagging, annoying, irritating, pushy, disrespectful, and inappropriate."⁸⁷ Among his Thai respondents, a one-way mode of gospel delivery is unwelcome. My respondents advise that relationships in which the gospel is effectively shared with Northern Thai folk Buddhists should include

⁸²Tangsiriatian, "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students," 146.

⁸³Ibid., 147.

⁸⁴Ibid., 149-50.

⁸⁵Respondent 13, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

⁸⁶"Lausanne Occasional Paper 15," 8.

⁸⁷Tangsiriatian, "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students," 163.

dialogue. Some of his respondents also perceived Christianity as challenging. Two non-Christian respondents and one Christian respondent described a fear of failure at Christian practice.⁸⁸ A belief that Christianity and Buddhism are identical due to religious pluralism was also cited among his sampled respondents.⁸⁹ This misconception among Thai folk-Buddhists is potentially remedied with more exposure to Christians and Christian doctrines.

Tangsirisatian's study includes attractors to Christianity. These are found in the Bible (cited by seven respondents), in their experiences of God answering prayer (reported by half of all converts he interviewed), and from direct divine interventions (noted by four respondents).⁹⁰ The character of Christ inspired two of his respondents and nine were impacted by the care and concern of Christians whom they knew.⁹¹ Through relationships with Christians, two of Tangsirisatian's respondents observed the changed lives of Christians and were impacted positively.⁹² In my findings, respondents cited relationships with Christians as motivators for Christian belief. Opportunities for these impactful relationships to develop took place through interactions with believing family members, through local church attendance, through residence at a Christian dormitory, and by cell group attendance.

⁸⁸Tangsirisatian, "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students," 165.

⁸⁹Ibid., 167.

⁹⁰Ibid., 175-78.

⁹¹Ibid., 179-80. Spiritual seeking was cited by five respondents. Testing God via prayer was noted by six respondents. Two responded to a crisis. Ibid., 182-86.

⁹²Ibid., 186. Seven respondents mentioned a dissatisfaction with Buddhism. Ibid., 187.

Edwin Zehner’s “Unavoidably Hybrid: Thai Buddhist Conversions to Evangelical Christianity”

Edwin Zehner’s dissertation applies an anthropological lens on conversions to Christianity among his sample population of Thai nationals. In his introduction, Zehner notes that the growth of the Thai church has increasingly been tended by the Thai themselves, a trend my data supports.⁹³ His premise is that though Evangelical Christianity eschews syncretism, converts in a Thai setting show elements of a hidden hybridity in their Christian mode of belief.⁹⁴ In his assessment, he critiques Thai testimonies while maintaining a gradual model of conversion. He cites the persistence of prior thinking in new converts; points to the presence of extended interactions between converts and Christians, Christian messages, and Christian communities; raises questions about polyvalence in Christian practice; questions motivations for conversion; identifies similar symbolic elements in Buddhism and Christianity; and reduces evangelism in a Thai setting to marketing that resonates with a Buddhist audience.⁹⁵ His approach differs from the binary, biblical model of conversion utilized in my own study. The binary, biblical model offers answers to his questions about a problem of hybridity among his respondents by prescribing Christian worldview formation and the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. Though the Holy Spirit regenerates and justifies converts at conversion, remnants of their previous worldviews remain and these holdovers are replaced over time through interaction with and application of Christian teaching in the lives of Christian converts.⁹⁶

⁹³Edwin Zehner, “Unavoidably Hybrid: Thai Buddhist Conversion to Evangelical Christianity” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2003), xi.

⁹⁴Ibid., 1.

⁹⁵Ibid., 27-34.

⁹⁶Zehner interacts with the idea of punctiliar conversion and ensuing sanctification on page 78, but maintains a gradual model in his assessment.

Among his respondents, Zehner identifies some converts whose periods of exploration were lengthy until they made a commitment to Christ.⁹⁷ Another type of conversion is experimental, whereby potential converts ask God to answer their prayers, then subsequently utilize his answer as a basis upon which they decide to convert to Christianity.⁹⁸ Zehner calls some conversions casual, where the potential adherent attends Christian meetings without making a commitment.⁹⁹ I disagree with his labeling “casual conversions” an actual conversion or commitment. The potential converts, in these cases, remain Buddhist while only ever considering the claims of Christianity. Emotional conversions are identified as taking place when outbursts of emotion result from interacting with Christian doctrines, or in Zehner’s observations, speaking in tongues.¹⁰⁰ He also identifies social conversions. In this type, he reports that respondents are converted through interacting with Christians and being impressed by their concern and care for them.¹⁰¹ Subsets of these social conversions that Zehner mentions, which I would exclude from actual conversions to Christianity, include *klang chai* conversions and quasi-adoption conversions. In my assessment, these momentary participations in Christian community are merely side-effects of already present Thai cultural values: *klang chai* (outward agreement despite inward disagreement) and *bunghun* (expected reciprocal kindness). As such, social pressure alone can explain what Zehner calls social conversions, and these do not show evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work.

An emphasis on relationships as motivators for religious adherence among Zehner’s Thai respondents was also strongly supported by my own data. Zehner includes

⁹⁷Zehner, “Unavoidably Hybrid,” 85.

⁹⁸Ibid., 85-86.

⁹⁹Ibid., 86-87.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 87-88.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 88. Zehner notes that this trend presented more frequently in his sample than expected.

respondents' attraction when observing Christians' noticeably changed lives after conversion, receiving positive treatment from Christians, noticing Christians' approachability for counseling, or a mixture of these reasons.¹⁰² Zehner identifies love and power as themes that attracted his respondents to Christianity.¹⁰³ His respondents mentioned that they tangibly experience love in the context of relationships and through warm welcomes, smiles, unexpected favors, special attention, inclusiveness despite status boundaries, counseling, and generosity.¹⁰⁴

Zehner found parallels between prior Buddhist practices of wearing amulets for power and the concepts of faith in God he saw among his Bangkok respondents.¹⁰⁵ Their allegiances changed, but in Zehner's estimation, they retained similar approaches to their new object of faith. Zehner also interacts with the idea of local spirits and provides a rich description of how Thai Christians undertake spiritual warfare, noting accounts of possessions and various Christian countermeasures.¹⁰⁶ Present in his accounts were a variety of beliefs about demonology, evidencing the polyvalence of approaches to spiritual warfare in his sample.¹⁰⁷

Zehner concludes by assessing, "Even the most deliberate breaks with the past entail some continuities with the past. There is a bit of unavoidable hybridity in even the most radical of conversions."¹⁰⁸ I find great value in Zehner's observations. However, his anthropological viewpoint identifies problems without offering solutions. I approach my

¹⁰²Zehner, "Unavoidably Hybrid," 91-94.

¹⁰³Ibid., 94-96.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 124-43.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 171.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 222-29, 236. These countermeasures include exorcisms.

¹⁰⁷Zehner maintains an epistemological distance, describing several Christian approaches to dealing with *pii* but does not communicate agreement.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 264.

study from within a Christian worldview. Because of this perspective, I am able to ask Northern Thai respondents to make suggestions for evangelism among Northern Thai Buddhists. With their insights, I propose solutions to Zehner's identified problems.

In Chapter 5, I suggest a list of hypotheses to facilitate evangelism among Northern Thai folk Buddhists and to assist Northern Thai Buddhist Background believers in their journey of sanctification and growth in Christlikeness. Researchers should expect those who convert to Christianity after being steeped in folk Buddhist worldviews their entire lives to unintentionally retain some elements of their former folk Buddhist perspective. This tendency does not invalidate their conversions. Christianity provides the means for their continued sanctification through Holy Spirit led transformation, the instruction of God's word, and the ministry of other healthy believers.

Stanley Tambiah's Northeastern Spirit Cults

Stanley Tambiah bases his 1970 report, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, upon a three-year observation of Thai village life in the Isaan region of Thailand. Tambiah carefully examined rituals performed by Buddhist monks and inspected various rituals related to local animistic beliefs.¹⁰⁹ He administered his study in the village of Phraan Muan, located about ten hours by car from Chiang Mai. Though he collected this data in the late 1960s, his report provides rich descriptions of traditional rituals still practiced today. Tambiah refers to the form of Buddhism he observed in Northeast Thailand as a cosmology, an overlaid Buddhist worldview in which villagers lived and performed various rituals.¹¹⁰ In his reporting of villagers'

¹⁰⁹Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 1. Tambiah's observations are presented and interpreted from a strictly anthropological perspective. Because his data is helpful to provide a parallel set of observations to my own study, I will reference his observations of ritual practice rather than his interpretations.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 32, 41, 53.

practice, *bun* is noted as merit, and *baab* is demerit.¹¹¹ All villagers' ritual actions are assigned to these two categories.¹¹² They sought positive rebirths. Tambiah describes villagers' offerings to Buddhist monks in order to make merit and the individualistic nature of their pursuits. Tambiah also points to a social component of merit-making that reveals an interdependence between "a family, a household or a kin grouping, or even the entire village."¹¹³ This social interdependence he identifies parallels the sense among my respondents that conversion to Christianity is a betrayal of family traditions, namely Buddhism and animism.

Tambiah cites the psychological benefits villagers derived from merit making as a felicitous state of mind.¹¹⁴ These ritual actions and their effects take place within a Buddhist worldview. Consequently, if Christians present Northern Thai folk Buddhists with the gospel and they consider the concept from within a folk Buddhist worldview, these potential converts likely fear leaving family traditions and turning from merit making. Gospel truths, such as Jesus' death on the cross making payment for Christians' sins, make no sense in a Buddhist worldview. Rather than disjointed Christian doctrinal points, Christians ought to present the entire Christian worldview in order to make the claims of Christianity intelligible for Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Because of the differences of belief present in a Northern Thai setting, Christian worldview formation is a lengthy process.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 53.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Ibid., 54.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 54-55.

¹¹⁵My respondents describe relationships with Christians that can weather inevitable disagreements along with a commitment to genuine friendship doing much to facilitate the process of communicating the Christian worldview.

As an example, the folk Buddhist belief in *pii* that is present in Northern Thailand requires reassessment from a biblical worldview. Tambiah explains that in his setting, Northeastern Thai people believed that people become *pii* after death.¹¹⁶ They believed that *pii* are ghosts that either reward or punish human behavior. However, a Christian worldview labels animistic interaction with these *pii* as participation with demons (1 Cor 10:20). Rather than traditional Thai animism that allows for prayers and offerings to these beings for a potentially positive result, the Christian worldview prohibits animistic rituals entirely. Malevolent spiritual beings are in rebellion against God and are capable of deceiving humans. Praying directly to God should replace prior animistic practices that included praying to spirits (2 Corinthians 11:14). Tambiah's study provides helpful descriptions of ritual performances in a rural Northeastern Thai village. Though the location for his research is found outside Northern Thailand, many of the emphases on traditions observed in his setting are also present in my respondents' accounts.

Nantachai Mejudhon's "The Way of Meekness: Being Christian and Thai in the Thai Way"

Nantachai Mejudon considers the history of Christian mission in Thailand, positing a lack of meekness among Christians as why the Thai people remain by and large reticent to accept Christianity. He notes Western missionaries' critical attitude toward Buddhism and identifies a similar critical approach to Buddhism among the Thai church.¹¹⁷ He hypothesizes that missionaries and Thai Christians showing meekness in their evangelism would help Thai Buddhists to be more responsive to the gospel.¹¹⁸ He

¹¹⁶Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 60-61.

¹¹⁷Nantachai Mejudhon, "The Way of Meekness: Being Christian and Thai in the Thai Way" (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 1998), 2.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 3. Regarding relationship, he writes "Missionaries and Thai Christians who: (1) are willing to open their lives and perceive the goodness of Buddhism and Thai culture through intimate dialogue with Buddhists as suggested by Zahniser (1994); (2) who allow the Holy Spirit to convict them

accomplished his study through presenting case studies and interview questions to a sample of Thai converts to Christianity, Thai Buddhists who had heard the gospel but refused to believe, and Western missionaries to Thailand.¹¹⁹ Mejudhon then compared their responses to Komin's Thai value clusters, specifically interacting with meekness.

Mejudhon labels some forms of gospel witness as aggressive from a Thai Buddhist perspective. These communication styles include a one-way transmission of information to Buddhist hearers. This category includes preaching, though he believes that preaching is still necessary in a Thai setting.¹²⁰ Mejudhon offers solutions from within a biblical worldview, since Christians must obediently preach the good news (Acts 10:42). He does not suggest a prohibition but advocates a calibration of the gospel witness to remove offense. Mejudhon writes,

Preaching was an important means of proclaiming the gospel in the New Testament. But missionaries always seem to preach aggressively to the Thai, and the results have not been fruitful. Perhaps if the gospel can be preached in a meek way to the

and draw them to Christ in the first place as recommended by Bavinck (1960); and (3) who create precontact impression formation to reduce uncertainty in intercultural communication will be the ones who first recognize verbal and non-verbal languages embedded in nine value clusters in the daily lives of the Thai . . ." N. Mejudhon, "The Way of Meekness," 51-52. This confidence in God as actor leads to a freedom to dialogue and to find mutual understanding as opposed to only a monologue without concern for the culturally bound way the truth is transmitted and processed by folk Buddhist hearers. Francis Turretin utilized the term *elenctic* a bit differently than this emphasis that Mejudhon draws from Herman Bavinck. Turretin emphasized the nature of apologetics as polemic, specifically aimed at exposing error. James T. Dennison Jr., "The Life and Career of Francis Turretin," in *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), 3: 647.

Herman Bavinck's missiology specifically references this *elenctic* mode of apologetics bringing to shame those who hold a position in error. Herman Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960), 221. Considering the act of confronting error in light of respondent answers that emphasized the need to protect relationships in Thai settings presents a paradox. Is this an instance of *traduttore, traitore* where a concept translated from Dutch to English, and then English to Thai does not maintain the same meaning? More likely is that a properly contextualizing Thai mind read Bavinck's instruction and drew out an application that would work well in a Thai setting. For Christian truth to be understood by a Thai Buddhist, relationship between human participants must be protected. This culturally appropriate approach facilitates the work of God in applying His truth and replacing error in the minds of the lost. If the original meaning of Bavinck's approach was intended for a setting with Western individualists, readers must understand that his original approach was not calibrated for the cultural elements present in northern Thailand. Hence, the format of the message needs to be calibrated for a Thai folk Buddhist audience.

¹¹⁹N. Mejudhon, "The Way of Meekness," 159.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 4.

Thai, Thai people will respond to the gospel, especially those who have developed a good relationship with Christians.¹²¹

He cites New Testament examples as warrant for the one-way communication of preaching, but generally favors dialogue in a Thai setting.¹²² It is impossible to remove all offense from a gospel witness, since Scripture presents the gospel itself as a stumbling block (1 Cor 1:23).

Much of Mejudhon's instruction would be useful for a Western missionary ministering in Thailand. He lays out a framework for intercultural dialogue that emphasizes listening.¹²³ He presents readers with Komin's nine Thai value clusters as a way to aid understanding of the internal character of Thai people.¹²⁴ Mejudhon explains that the Thai people value meekness lived out in relationships with vulnerability.¹²⁵ Thai Christians who fail to be meek and display behaviors considered to be aggressive will break relationships with Thai Buddhists.¹²⁶

The formerly Buddhist Northern Thai respondents I interviewed were all evangelized by Northern Thai Christians. Mejudhon's heavy emphasis on Western modes of evangelism would initially seem to be irrelevant to my study.¹²⁷ However, his approach is helpful. If some aberrant Western cultural ideas were transmitted to the Thai

¹²¹N. Mejudhon, "The Way of Meekness," 4.

¹²²Mejudhon emphasizes Herman Bavinck's understanding of elenctic apologetics, whereby Christian confidence in the ability of the Holy Spirit to enliven the heart of a lost person is present because the Holy Spirit has first performed his transformative work in the one sharing the gospel. Ibid., 6.

¹²³Ibid., 5.

¹²⁴Mejudhon's intended audience is obviously Western. Thai people are already intimately aware of their own values.

¹²⁵Ibid., 7. Here, Mejudhon applies an apologetic technique of Herman Bavinck. The Christian should apply themselves to living in light of biblical truth before presenting these doctrines to a Thai person. For instance, if resistance is encountered when discussing the doctrine of sin, a Christian can empathetically answer questions and talk of their own experience with forgiveness and repentance.

¹²⁶Ibid., 52.

¹²⁷Mejudhon's third chapter is a lengthy assessment of various Western missionary efforts in Thailand, measuring these against his idea of meekness. Ibid., 97. He also recounts evangelistic efforts of several Thai believers. Ibid., 132.

Christians along with the gospel, these should be abandoned in favor of an orthodox presentation of Christianity. Evangelism contextualized for a Thai setting is more readily intelligible to Thai Buddhists. Mejudhon often references relationships in his writing and feels that improved relations between Christians and Thai Buddhists will further the gospel in Thailand. As was noted in my interviews, Mejudhon admits that relationships with Buddhists may decrease over time for Thai Christians.¹²⁸

Regarding the themes identified in my Northern Thai Christian respondents' answers, Mejudhon does not interact with the traditions of Buddhism or animism as heavily as he does relationships.¹²⁹ He focuses his thesis on cultural offenses that Western relational forms may cause among Thai Buddhists and he suggests meekness as the way to remedy relational breakdowns. As such, Mejudhon interacts with Buddhism and animism as traditions, but only tangentially. He addresses shame among Thai families when family members convert to Christianity, leaving family religious traditions.¹³⁰ This shaming was also mentioned by my respondents who experienced social pressure to return to previous modes of religious adherence.

To counter these challenges to new converts to Christianity, Mejudhon suggests that new believers present their families with transformations in their own lives in order to display the inner work of God.¹³¹ He writes,

It is the duty of the church and the new believers to help communities and their families in the early stages of cross-cultural communication to understand this change. The perception of the families and friends is aggravated by the convert's joining the church, by which he often alienates himself from his family and friends who look upon him as a traitor to the community. The main results, therefore, are:

¹²⁸N. Mejudhon, "The Way of Meekness," 68.

¹²⁹Mejudhon cites the Buddhist idea of impermanence as a way to explain resistance among Thai Buddhists to change their tradition. *Ibid.*, 82-83. In chap. 4, he records the answers of asking Thai Christians, Thai Buddhists, and Western missionaries their opinion of Buddhism, but this is done as a means to gauge their meekness. *Ibid.*, 252.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, 83.

¹³¹*Ibid.*

(1) the Christian believer is socially ostracized, (2) the antagonism of his family and community toward Christianity becomes a barrier to their evangelization, and (3) joining the church is interpreted as joining an alien community.

Christians should solve this problem by establishing and maintaining rapport with the family of the inquirer early, explaining to them that the new believer remains a member of his family in the community, even though he has transferred his faith to Jesus Christ.¹³²

Respondents' accounts in my study include similar descriptions of this problem. My respondents lament the difficulty for Buddhists and Christians to be friends and noted that Buddhists need to see differences in converts' lives in the context of relationships before they can understand Christian conversion.

Mejudhon interacts with the historical example of Luang Petch Songkram, a prolific Thai evangelist in the early twentieth century:

He did not witness to strangers or preach or give tracts on the street like some missionaries, but he called his relatives and friends and about thirty others, who were also baptized. He performed his Christian witness unconsciously along the web of his social networks and knew that the gospel must go first to his own relatives and friends. Group conversion resulted.¹³³

Mejudhon observes that this Thai convert's evangelism was successful because he had credibility with his hearers and utilized existing social networks to share the gospel effectively in his Southern Thai setting.¹³⁴ Mejudhon's summarization of his findings includes the following advice for Christians in Thailand:

Missionaries and Thai Christians suggested that they should: (1) not compare religions, (2) understand that witnessing is a process, (3) build relationships in Christian witness, (4) create interest and find felt needs, (5) not push Buddhists in Christian witness. Thai Christians added more elements: (1) do not mention Buddhism at all, (2) allow Buddhists to absorb the gospel bit by bit, (3) do not say Buddhism is satanic, (4) do not say, "If you do not believe in Christ, you will go to hell."¹³⁵

¹³²N. Mejudhon, "The Way of Meekness," 83.

¹³³Ibid., 133.

¹³⁴Ibid.

¹³⁵Ibid., 259.

These prescriptions seem to take a long view of Christian witness in a Thai setting. Thai Christians must overcome a lack of understanding about Christianity in their hearers with a great deal of patience and tact.

Mejudhon stresses protecting relationships with Thai Buddhists, but only overtly mentions the problem of Christianity's unintelligibility to Thai Buddhists one time in his writing.¹³⁶ It might be that the problem of unintelligibility is a greater problem than that of aggressiveness. If Northern Thai Christians are able to anticipate misunderstandings in their folk Buddhist hearers, their presentation of the gospel will likely be better received.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe plausibility structures as a defining feature in worldview formation and maintenance.¹³⁷ Northern Thai folk Buddhists suspend their doubts about Buddhism in their daily lives. Conversely, Christianity's challenges to Buddhist truth claims are met with suspicion. Furthermore, since individual doctrines of Christianity are only properly understood within a Christian worldview, Buddhists who initially hear the gospel or other biblical teaching will unavoidably assess and misunderstand these truths from within their traditional folk Buddhist belief system. The ministry of the Holy Spirit, exposure to the Bible, and faithful evangelism from Christian friends over time is the best remedy for the gospel's apparent unintelligibility among Northern Thai folk Buddhists.

Wan Petchsongkram's *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*

Wan Petchsongkram's *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree: Some Observations on Communicating the Christian Faith in Thailand* discusses a Thai perspective on the

¹³⁶N. Mejudhon, "The Way of Meekness," 232.

¹³⁷Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Open Road Media, 2011), Chapter 3, "Society as Subjective Reality," "1. Internalization of Reality," "c. Maintenance and Transformation of Subjective Reality," Logos.

claims of Christianity. Petchsongkram was formerly a Buddhist monk. As a Christian chaplain, he found that teaching the message of Christ “in all its wholeness” with an understanding of the Buddhist context in which it is communicated is necessary.¹³⁸ He identifies one challenge for Thai people: along with the gospel and discipleship, many “Westernisms” have also been transmitted to the Thai church.¹³⁹ These Western elements are incompatible with a Thai setting. He presents the criticism, that the Christianity passed to Thai people was too Western, with a proposed solution: “What is wanted, therefore, is a church that both has appeal for Thai people because it speaks in their own cultural idiom and is also an authentic expression of full Christian faith.”¹⁴⁰ Petchsongkram suggests adjusting Thai Christianity to better fit Thai modes of life and decries the lack of a truly indigenous church model.

Since Buddhism influences speech, thought-forms, and feelings of the Thai, he cautions Christians who witness using non-Thai methodology, citing a fear of unintelligibility.¹⁴¹ If Petchsongkram’s suggestion would lead to the eschewing of church services and Bible studies in favor of sporadic church attendance based upon a yearly festival calendar, my data disagrees with this suggestion. Christian education should not be considered Western since it is actually an ancient biblical practice. The account of Respondent 9, who attended a church for four or five years without understanding the gospel, seems to provide a counter example to Petchsongkram’s identified problem. Upon attending a focused Bible study (clearly Christian education), Respondent 9 gained

¹³⁸Frances E. Hudgins, “preface” in *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree: Some Observations on Communicating the Christian Faith in Thailand*, Wan Petschongkram, ed. and trans. Francis E. Hudgins (Bangkok: Thai Gospel Press, 1975), IV, accessed July 14, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/post/docs/Bo_Tree.pdf.

¹³⁹Hudgins, “preface” in *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, III.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

¹⁴¹Ibid., IV.

a true understanding of the gospel and was transformed by God's word, leading to her conversion.¹⁴²

Regarding plausibility structures, Petchsongkram raises valid concerns about Christian loan-words from Buddhism.¹⁴³ *Baab* has wildly different meanings when used by Buddhists than it does when describing the Christian conception of sin. These calques can cause undue confusion in a Northern Thai setting. Petchsongkram also criticizes the folk Buddhist tradition that emphasizes Buddha image worship over and above the teachings of the Buddha, claiming that this dependence makes the doctrine of self-reliance a façade.¹⁴⁴ Petchsongkram's description of folk Buddhist practices includes worship of Buddha images and is similar to the former practice of my respondents.

In *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, Petchsongkram focuses on the traditional beliefs of Buddhism present in Thailand. After describing Thai beliefs about the teaching of the Buddha, his *dhamma*, and the non-self, he reflects on Buddhists' understanding of the Christian God, explains karma, compares heaven and *nibbana*, and provides a discourse on how Thai Buddhists see Thai Christians and miracles.¹⁴⁵ Petchsongkram writes from a Christian worldview. His aim is to share his apologetic approach with his readers. To accomplish this, he provides descriptions, critiques, and suggests best practices.

Petchsongkram prohibits Christians to use prophecies from a Buddhist source that supposedly point to Jesus' second coming.¹⁴⁶ His advice ensures that Thai Christians would not unintentionally affirm a folk Buddhist worldview, leaving Thai folk Buddhists

¹⁴²Hudgins, "preface" in *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, III.

¹⁴³Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, 1.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 10, 15, 26, 38, 48, 53, 62.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 6.

to consider the claims of Christ from within their traditional worldview alone. Instead of this clumsy approach to evangelism, one in which Christ is alien and unnecessary to the hearers, Christians should communicate the entirety of the Christian worldview. He writes, “The church in Thailand today absolutely must learn to give a reason for her faith in intelligible and convincing terms.”¹⁴⁷ By achieving doctrinal clarity in evangelism, Northern Thai Christians would be able to evangelize their family and neighbors more effectively.

My interview questions for this study of Northern Thai Buddhist background believers focus on eliciting respondents’ recollections about their lives as Buddhists and descriptions of rituals they performed. As such, a phenomenological focus in my respondents’ accounts differs from Petchsongkram’s doctrinal focus. Animism is not a major focus of Petchsongkram’s writing, though it was a prominent component of my Northern Thai respondents’ accounts. Furthermore, Petchsongkram does not address the social solidarity discussed by the “Lausanne Occasional Paper 15.” Instead, he addresses the doctrinal positions of individual Buddhists. Consequently, Petchsongkram does not mention that a major way Thai religious traditions are passed is through relationships with family members. Petchsongkram also did not present relationships with others as motivations for religious adherence. Instead, Petchsongkram’s focus is to present his readers with a set of apologetic tools that assist in making Christianity intelligible to Thai Buddhists.

Interaction with Missionary Writings

Because none of my respondents mentioned Western missionaries being integral to their own conversions, this section describing Western missionaries’ observations is limited.

¹⁴⁷Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, 65.

Kenneth Wells' *Thai Buddhism*. Kenneth Wells was the first Western missionary to return to Northern Thailand after World War II.¹⁴⁸ His incredibly detailed description of Thai Buddhist religious rituals includes the character of Theravada Buddhist doctrines, Buddhist temples, as well as many prominent rituals that make up the festival calendar.¹⁴⁹ His careful portrayal of Thai Buddhism in the mid-twentieth century comes from his own first-hand observations and is primarily descriptive in nature. Wells notes,

Most Buddhists . . . accept their religion as a heritage of beliefs, teachings and customs which, in time of rejoicing or death, meets emotional needs and provides answers to the mysteries of life. It supplies a doctrine of man, a metaphysics of moral law, and an ultimate goal. For daily living it provides means for making merit for self or others, devotional exercises, austerities, esthetic enjoyment, and assurance of safety and good fortune by means of devotion, good conduct, amulets and verbal mantras. Popular religion includes village processions with banners and music, community pilgrimages to favorite shrines, and temple festivals with decorations, orchestras, and diversions. The worshipers are relatives of the monks, and monks and laity are tied together by ties of custom and reciprocal services. By gradual adjustment through the centuries, Buddhism has become indigenous in Thailand, its concepts and practices being in accord with the expectations of its adherents. The followers did not formulate the teachings, but came to require of religion such answers and rites as Buddhism could provide.¹⁵⁰

Wells' ritual-heavy presentation of Buddhism among lay-Buddhists is notable for his inclusion of ties between monks and laity through family relationships as well as merit making activities. Wells notes that local monks are from the families still living in the village, a helpful distinction. This kinship tie to local monks is an observation that none of my respondents mentioned in their accounts, though several did recall friendship with monks and noted important relationships between themselves and their Buddhist families and friends. Wells' descriptions validate my identification of relationships as motivators for religious adherence. Many of the festivals and ceremonies he describes are not

¹⁴⁸Kenneth Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand, 1828-1958* (Bangkok: Church of Christ in Thailand, 1958), 165.

¹⁴⁹Kenneth Wells, *Thai Buddhism: Its Rites and Activities* (Bangkok: The Christian Bookstore, 1960), 32, 44, 85.

¹⁵⁰Wells, *Thai Buddhism*, 6-7.

solitary affairs, and so readers may observe the interpersonal and interdependent nature of Buddhism in Thai society. At a community and family level, the practices of Buddhism are encountered together with others.

Alex Smith's *Siamese Gold*. Smith's detailed study of church growth in Thailand begins with a historical discussion of the earliest Western missionaries in Thailand. These pioneers faced a Buddhism syncretized with indigenous animism, practiced by commoners, and supported by edict of the Thai king.¹⁵¹ Smith traces the development of the church, recording a dramatic initial growth in Northern Thailand and the relatively slow growth elsewhere. He points to instances where native believers in Petchaburi (a province in the south) had dramatic growth based upon "bold witness, open testimony, and deliberate persuasion of relatives and friends."¹⁵² He cites reports from the Board of Foreign Missions that include Thai converts' efforts to share the gospel based upon their own experiences with gospel privileges and benefits.¹⁵³ His motivation for writing is to provide future evangelistic endeavors with lessons from the past mission and church history of Thailand.

Smith recalls periods of persecution in the past, when the porous character of traditional Thai religion allowed apostate Christians to return to their prior practice and previous status.¹⁵⁴ This problem remains in Northern Thailand, since Buddhism and animism are still default settings into which nearly all Northern Thai are born. Becoming a Christian requires conversion. Smith also advises his readers that some circumstances make it easier for Thai Buddhists to receive the gospel. He notes that if rural Thai

¹⁵¹Alex G. Smith, *Siamese Gold: The Church in Thailand* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1982), 29.

¹⁵²Ibid., 118.

¹⁵³Ibid.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 159.

Buddhists move to a city, Christians should understand that this is a season during which Christian friends can provide relational support and share the gospel with increased effectiveness.¹⁵⁵ My respondents also mentioned the interpersonal aspect of evangelism. They emphasized interactions with Northern Thai Christian friends in their testimonies.

Philip Hughes' *Proclamation and Response*. Philip Hughes surveyed Northern Thai Buddhist and Christian students at Payap University in the early 1980s and includes the results in *Proclamation and Response: A Study of the History of the Christian Faith in Northern Thailand*. His results shed light on motivators for religious adherence among Northern Thai Buddhists and Christians. Though his survey focuses only on students, his locational delimitation being narrowed to Northern Thailand makes his data particularly useful as a comparative source for this study. Hughes writes that,

Instead of identifiable groups of people becoming Christians, there are individuals here and there. Some of these are people who have experienced the care and concern of Christians, particularly when facing some problem of one kind or another. There are people who find a home in the Christian community through friends and relatives, or for a variety of other reasons.¹⁵⁶

Hughes administered his survey to 386 Thai Buddhists students, 71 Thai Christian theology students, and 42 Protestant missionaries working with the Church of Christ in Thailand. In interviews of 30 Thai pastors, Hughes mentioned that they believed their parishioners defined salvation as eternal life or happiness but did not connect this doctrine to Christ's sacrifice on the cross.¹⁵⁷ Hughes characterized the acceptance of the gospel in Northern Thailand as,

the Good News of the Gospel in Northern Thailand has been the news of a God who has power over malicious spirits, and a God who can heal sicknesses and diseases.

¹⁵⁵Smith, *Siamese Gold*, 293.

¹⁵⁶Philip Hughes, *Proclamation and Response: A Study of the History of the Christian Faith in Northern Thailand*, 2nd ed. (Chiang Mai: Payap University Archives, 1989), 46.

¹⁵⁷Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 47.

The Gospel is the Good News of acceptance of people who have been rejected by society; the news of patronage and support for people who felt they needed help.¹⁵⁸

He notes that, compared to the Western missionaries, his Thai Christian students placed a higher valuation on their relationship with God as a benevolent spiritual power rather than the forgiveness of sins won for them through Christ's propitiatory death on the cross.¹⁵⁹ Christian missionaries surveyed placed the highest emphasis on forgiveness of sins. An apparent difference in soteriological valuation between missionaries and Thai Christians exists in Hughes data. It is possible that for some of these students, their understanding of the gospel was incomplete or marked by misunderstanding due to vestiges from their prior Buddhist worldview. On this topic, Nantachai Mejudhon wisely comments:

¹⁵⁸Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 53. Hughes discusses Northern Thai Christians' theological understanding in a way that makes it sound like they did not understand the gospel to be about forgiveness of sins. He describes his observation, "the Gospel is wider than the forgiveness of sin." *Ibid.*, 54. However, based on his description, it seems that many of Northern Thai did not accept the gospel as the forgiveness of sin *and* spiritual power from God. Perhaps some only understood or interacted with the latter. This is a negative outcome, since spiritual power in this life is a kind of sign that would point to the truth of the message of the Gospel but is not the totality of the message itself. (Luke 11:16) Hughes points to the cultural context of Northern Thai people and their desire to be freed from spirit oppression as being a primary motivator for many converts to Christianity. *Ibid.*, 57. He presents a complex picture of the various kinds of responses to Christianity among Northern Thai Buddhists. If his assessment is correct, a wise observer who wishes to present modern Northern Thai Buddhists with the gospel would do well to anticipate this potential misunderstanding. The gospel certainly includes elements of honor/shame, freedom from spiritual oppression, and other elements, but must include God's offer of forgiveness of sins through the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as central to the gospel. The bad news of our need for forgiveness must be shared and understood before the good news of Jesus as savior makes sense. Jesus cannot be transplanted to the Buddhist worldview. Faithful gospel witnesses must share the entirety of the Christian worldview. Folk Buddhists must be made aware of the Christian worldview and invited to live in a world defined by the testimony of Scripture.

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 48-49. It is clear that some elements of a folk Buddhist worldview, in which sins against a biblical God are not present, were still lingering in the minds of these Christian theology students found in Hughes' data set. I hypothesize that most of these students went on to be pastors and did not significantly adjust their beliefs. If so, this is a generation that has influenced the church in Northern Thailand for nearly forty years. Mejudhon points to relationship with missionaries as the means through which this doctrinal error can be corrected over time. I see a problem with this proposed solution. In my respondent accounts, no Western missionary figured prominently in their testimonies. Just as Thai family and neighbors practiced folk Buddhism and passed on the traditions to respondents, respondents' friendships and relationships with Thai Christians were prominent means through which hearing the gospel and effective discipleship took place. It does take time for Western missionaries to communicate a biblical worldview to adherents. However, a Westerner is not necessary in the equation, as soteriology is a biblical concept. When Thai Christians who properly understand the biblical worldview evangelize and disciple their family, friends, and neighbors the result will be a greater number of healthy Thai Christians and churches. It seems to me a better solution would be to motivate and mobilize properly disciplined Thai Christians to form meaningful relationships with others and to present the gospel in a way that can be understood by folk Buddhists. The Thai church, and not Western missionaries possesses the onus and the proper cultural understanding to confront error and invite their neighbors, family, and friends to walk in truth and in the context of relationship.

This may be the reason why missionaries have kept on witnessing and preaching, passing the message of the gospel through the cognitive domain of the Thai. Missionaries must overcome their difficulty with differences in numerous religious words between the two religions. Words such as God, sin, love, and salvation produce different meanings in the minds of the Thai. Time for diffusion of the gospel may be required. This may be one reason why sharing the gospel with Buddhists in a short period of time and challenging them to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior brings frustration to missionaries as well as to Thai Christians.¹⁶⁰

Hughes provides a history of Christian mission in Northern Thailand that critiques missionary methods, alerts readers to initial misunderstandings of Thai converts, and describes the character of the church in this region. Hughes explains that potential converts were initially unconvinced that sin was a major problem, despite the urging of missionaries.¹⁶¹ These potential converts obviously still viewed this concept from within a folk Buddhist worldview. With no perceived need for forgiveness, they still relied on merit making or a fortuitous rebirth. If so, their original plausibility structure was unmoved. Hughes points to the relative newness of Christianity in the region at the time and raises the question of why a convert would have left a familiar tradition to try a relatively unproven mode of religious adherence.¹⁶² Though Protestant Christians have lived and ministered in Thailand since the early nineteenth century, the Northern Thai still do not consider Christianity to be a Thai tradition and associate it with foreigners. This problem of perception remains a challenge to the furtherance of the gospel in Northern Thailand.

Herbert Swanson's *Khrischak Muang Nua*. Herbert Swanson wrote his history of the Northern Thai church in 1984. The author compiled this focused account after teaching a history of Thai Christianity course at Payap College.¹⁶³ In it, Swanson

¹⁶⁰N. Mejudhon, "The Way of Meekness," 92.

¹⁶¹Hughes, *Proclamation and Response*, 16. The reader may note that *baab*, the Thai word for moral disobedience in a Buddhist context, is also used for sin, offense against a holy God in a Christian context.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶³Swanson is an excellent historian but does not hold to an orthodox position of Christian exclusivism. In his introduction, he writes "'salvation' is not dependent upon ascribing to a set of

describes the advent of Christianity and its disruptive presence in Chiang Mai in the 1860s:

the spread of a system of faith alternative to that of the traditional society threatened the very heart of a society in which all facets of life inseparably integrated themselves with the religious faith of society. Traditional society allowed for only one system of faith, one so intimately connected to the rest of life that it functioned as the unquestioned ground for society and culture. One could not participate in the society fully or meaningfully without being rooted in that ground. An alternative system of faith immediately threatened all facets of social and political life including the systems of allegiance and power.¹⁶⁴

Swanson cites this societal disruption as one of the primary causes for martyrdom of two of the first Northern Thai Christian converts. The author, writing from his own theological conviction, explains that a critique of Buddhism led to isolation from wider society for the missionaries and their converts. Swanson posits that early missionaries aimed to break down relationships between their converts and those they knew who remained in Buddhism. He writes,

the mission believed that the animist/Buddhist faith of traditional society was “idolatrous” and therefore an affront to the holiness and majesty of God . . . Since traditional faith sat at the core of all social life, this attitude meant that the missionaries felt alienated from northern Thai society and sought to alienate their converts from that society as well.¹⁶⁵

In addition to Buddhism, animism was also a factor that continued to impact the first converts to Christianity. Swanson reports,

The missionaries sitting with Nan Inta as the Session of the Chiang Mai Church finally reinstated Noi Chai, convicted of “complicity with spirit worship” to full

theological propositions (including the proposition that only Christians are saved) but, rather, has to do with reorienting one’s life along an axis of servanthood and self-giving.” Herb Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua, A Study in Northern Thai Church History* (Chiang Mai: Herb Swanson, 1984), introduction, accessed June 8, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=43. This position falls short of the message of Christian Scripture and the intent of countless Protestant missionaries who spent their lives to win disciples of Jesus among the Northern Thai people. Despite this position, his book holds historical value for assessing past interactions with the two themes: tradition and relationship, in Thai mission history.

¹⁶⁴Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, chap. 2, accessed June 8, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=44#c1.

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

membership after two years. In early December 1876, Ma Noo suffered suspension from communion for the same charge of “complicity with spirit worship.”¹⁶⁶

The presence of old modes of worship among their unconverted family and neighbors remained a concern for Northern Thai Christian converts in the initial generation. As seen in these early missionary reports, a strict discipline was upheld for the earliest Northern Thai Buddhist background believers.

Swanson also points to a problematic lack of access to Christian Scripture in the early Northern Thai Church and the omission of regular Bible study or theological training that kept the earliest converts from becoming self-theologizing participants in the early Northern Thai church. He explains, “Consequently, what theological expression [the early Northern Thai church] had either came from mission or from pre-Christian traditional beliefs.”¹⁶⁷ Swanson claims that missionaries did not address beliefs in *pii* (local spirits) or in the folk Buddhist concept of the afterlife, and so the converts simply passed on the gospel without consideration for many of the elements of their previous worldview.¹⁶⁸ This lack of proper contextualization inevitably contributed to unintelligibility regarding Christianity among the wider Northern Thai populace, slowing church growth.

Early missionaries’ emphases on evangelism rather than discipleship in Northern Thailand also contributed to this arrangement. The early Northern Thai church was growing in number, but disciple making was not as heavily emphasized. Hughes claims that a patron-client arrangement came to define the early church, with the missionaries as patrons and beleaguered converts as their clients. Persecution from wider society meant that converts saw their missionary instructors as patrons who could protect

¹⁶⁶Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, chap. 2, accessed June 8, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=44#c1.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., chap. 4.

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

them from very real harm.¹⁶⁹ This description fits Swanson’s criticism, that the earliest Northern Thai converts were evangelized but not disciplined, converted but not taught to theologize, and isolated from those they had the highest potential of winning for Christ.

Herbert Swanson’s analysis of the early Northern Thai church recounts growth and the successes of the past. He also includes descriptions of the pressure experienced by initial converts. This phenomenological lens is useful to understand the experiences of modern Northern Thai converts who leave a majority faith and become Buddhist background believers. Though many more Christians are present in Northern Thailand today, this social pressure and the potential loss of relationships upon conversion is still present in my Northern Thai Christian respondents’ accounts.

David Lim’s *Sharing Jesus . . . series of books.* This series aims to provide Christians with proper resources for evangelism and discipleship among Buddhists. Several chapters within this series focus on interacting with Thai Buddhists. In *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World*, Paul DeNeui’s chapter “Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists” describes the presence of spirit houses and amulets indicative of Northern Thai folk Buddhism.¹⁷⁰ He refers to Buddhism’s domain as primarily death and the afterlife and animism as interacting with day to day events.¹⁷¹

DeNeui challenges his readers to admit that God is already at work among Thai Buddhists and suggests that the greatest barriers to conversion are social, not religious.¹⁷² By presenting this position on God preparing potential converts to hear the

¹⁶⁹Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua*, chap. 4, accessed June 8, 2018, http://www.herbswanson.com/_get.php?postid=44#c1.

¹⁷⁰Paul DeNeui, “Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists” in *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World*, ed. David Lim and Steve Spaulding (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2003), 121-24.

¹⁷¹Ibid., 125. DeNeui spent a great deal of time in Northeast Thailand and writes from his experience. This is the same region studied by Stanley Tambiah, who wrote *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeastern Thailand*.

¹⁷²Ibid., 130.

gospel, he emphasizes the work of God in the act of salvation. When faithful gospel witnesses evangelize, it is God who provides regeneration and salvation. Thai people place a high value on relationships, and even after God has transformed a new believer through conversion, Christians must take care to disciple them properly according to Thai social expectations. DeNui also suggests a corrective to labelling animism as superstition, citing the existence of spiritual beings, the Bible's call to spiritual warfare, and the real deliverance from oppression when animists turn to Christ.¹⁷³

In *Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World*, Alex Smith discusses the transfer of merit that takes place among folk Buddhists when they provide offerings to feed their deceased relatives in the afterlife.¹⁷⁴ When Thai men become monks, their mothers receive some of the merit accrued for this action.¹⁷⁵ The author attempts to create a bridge between this transfer of merit and the act of propitiation accomplished by Christ for his disciples. In assessing his approach, I caution against a direct parallel. The concept of merit only exists within a Buddhist worldview. The idea of Jesus' righteousness applied to one who has saving faith in him is only properly understood in a Christian worldview. As such, these are not direct parallels and Christians would do well to teach the entire Christian worldview, regardless if distant similarities exist in other religious systems with which hearers are more familiar.

Alan Johnson, in "A Contextualized Gospel for Thai Buddhists" describes the state of Thai Buddhism as practiced by

intellectual Buddhists, who emphasize philosophical aspects, liberal Buddhists who try to conform Buddhism to modern life, folk Buddhists who practice traditional Buddhism in its modified animistic form, and nominal Buddhists, who consider

¹⁷³DeNui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists" in *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World*, 137.

¹⁷⁴Alex Smith, "Transfer of Merit in Folk Buddhism" in *Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World*, ed. David Lim and Steve Spaulding (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 105.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 109.

themselves Buddhist by virtue of being Thai but do not participate in Buddhist practices or ceremonies.¹⁷⁶

Nearly all of my respondents' prior practices best fit into the folk Buddhist category.¹⁷⁷

Johnson continues his discussion, interacting with Wan Petchsongkram's admonition to make Christian ideas intelligible to Thai Buddhists by providing a Christian meaning to any loan word used within a Christian worldview.¹⁷⁸ His approach to gospel witness includes assessing familiar Thai cultural concepts from a Christian worldview.¹⁷⁹

Because worldview formation is arguably the main task in Christian discipleship, his advice is useful.

Ubolwan Mejudhon, in "The Ritual of Reconciliation in Thai Culture: Discipling New Converts," describes the relational disruption between converts and their families that takes place when a Thai folk Buddhist converts to Christianity.¹⁸⁰ Parents are shamed by converts' public acknowledgement of their new status as Christians. Mejudhon describes the predicament of the folk Buddhist parents. They take offense at their child refusing to ask them for advice about Christianity, worry about the friendships their children have made at the local church, and are ignorant of Christian doctrines.¹⁸¹ He describes the anger and rejection that comes when new converts follow instructions to witness aggressively with their already offended relatives, violating the social solidarity

¹⁷⁶Alan Johnson, "A Contextualized Gospel for Thai Buddhists" in *Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World*, 186.

¹⁷⁷Respondent 4 reported that she did not perform Buddhist rituals. It is possible that she could have been considered nominal. Introversion, as described in her testimony, is a possible cause for this absence of ritual practice. Folk Buddhism is a default setting in Northern Thailand. Despite her refusal to take part in some rituals, she formerly identified as a Buddhist and reported being influenced by her mother to perform candle rituals.

¹⁷⁸Johnson, "A Contextualized Gospel for Thai Buddhists" in *Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World*, 194.

¹⁷⁹The prominent Thai cultural value of loyalty to parents is referenced to show that rejecting the Christian God as Creator is a sin. Ibid., 201.

¹⁸⁰Ubolwan Mejudhon, "The Ritual of Reconciliation in Thai Culture: Discipling New Converts" in *Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World*, 217.

¹⁸¹Ibid., 218.

that was previously in place.¹⁸² He continues to explain that converts who experience this loss of fellowship with their families often turn to the local church to meet relational needs, isolating themselves from their already existing social relationships.¹⁸³ Mejudhon identifies a need for reconciliation between Thai Christians and their parents. He writes “respecting interdependency creates bonds between new converts and their social networks.”¹⁸⁴ In a Thai setting, maintaining this cultural value helps Thai Christians promote healthy relationships with families and opens potential avenues for the transmission of the gospel along already existing social networks.

In *Sharing the Gospel Effectively in the Buddhist World*, Nantachai Mejudhon revisits the topic of meekness as a strategy for helping the Thai church regain credibility with Thai Buddhists offended by what he calls an aggressive evangelism style.¹⁸⁵ He suggests an emphasis on deep relationships, indigenous strategies for gospel witness, a renewal of credibility for Christians and their institutions, care for those in need, and an understanding that families are the best targets for evangelism in a Thai setting.¹⁸⁶ Alan Johnson also presents an emphasis on evangelism through social networks in “Structural and Ministry Philosophy Issues in Church Planting among Buddhist Peoples.”¹⁸⁷ In his experience as a missionary to Thailand, Johnson initially focused on evangelizing individuals with very little fruit from his efforts. He later began working through personal networks and centering his ministry strategy on small groups and lay leader led ministry,

¹⁸²U. Mejudhon, “The Ritual of Reconciliation in Thai Culture: Discipling New Converts” in *Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World*, 218.

¹⁸³Ibid.

¹⁸⁴Ibid., 246.

¹⁸⁵Nantachai Mejudhon. “Meekness: A New Approach” in *Sharing Jesus Effectively in the Buddhist World*, ed. David Lim, Steve Spaulding, and Paul H. De Neui (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 185.

¹⁸⁶Ibid.

¹⁸⁷Alan Johnson. “Structural and Ministry Philosophy Issues in Church Planting among Buddhist Peoples” in *Sharing Jesus Effectively in the Buddhist World*, 263-64.

which garnered more success.¹⁸⁸ He found that Thai Christians who presented the gospel zealously and passionately were effective in that they were also sharing their lives with their hearers.¹⁸⁹ He summarized his methodological goal as “High Potency + Close Proximity + Clear Communication = Maximum Impact.”¹⁹⁰ Johnson presents several ideas for facilitating a church planting movement among Buddhists.

Alex Smith presents a chapter assessing the Thai church from a church growth lens in “People movements in Thailand.”¹⁹¹ He describes Catholic and Protestant missions, incorporating membership rolls from various ministries, including missionary efforts among tribal peoples. Jim Morris describes a Thai people group-based movement in his chapter “A People Movement among the Pwo Karen in Northern Thailand.”¹⁹² Buddhism influences some of these tribal people, but by and large, they live as animists. His strategy for ministry among this population includes meeting felt needs through medical ministry, creative Bible storying to share a complete biblical worldview, and includes social network-based evangelism and discipleship.¹⁹³ However, since this people group is not ethnically Thai, Morris’s observations have limited parity with my study.

Each of these chapters contain an emphasis on the importance of relationships in a Thai setting. Authors also describe Thai folk Buddhism and caution that the gospel will not be communicated intelligibly if Western Christians are unaware of the character of the Thai socio-religious setting. Nantachai Medjudhon’s guidance for helping Thai Christians reconcile with their families most closely parallels my finding that Thai folk

¹⁸⁸Johnson, “Structural and Ministry Philosophy Issues in Church Planting among Buddhist Peoples” in *Sharing Jesus Effectively in the Buddhist World*, 266.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., 268-69.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 269.

¹⁹¹Ibid., 283.

¹⁹²Jim Morris, “A People Movement among the Pwo Karen in Northern Thailand” in *Sharing Jesus Effectively in the Buddhist World*, 328.

¹⁹³Ibid., 342.

Buddhism is passed most often from parents to their children. Offense takes place because converts have rejected their families' traditions. Since these are books written in English for a Western audience, much of their content consists of strategies to bridge cultural divides between Western missionaries and Thai Buddhists. Since I interviewed former Thai folk Buddhists evangelized by Thai Christians, these cultural barriers were not a major issue in my respondents' testimonies.

Marten Visser's "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand." This quantitative study aims to catalog Thai church growth that took place since the publishing of Alex Smith's *Siamese Gold* in the early 1980s. Through the use of questionnaires, Visser collected demographic data from churches throughout Thailand.¹⁹⁴ He examines individual conversions as well as the corporate growth of Thai churches. His demographic data provides a helpful context for this study, notably that "most of the growth of Protestantism in Thailand is through conversion."¹⁹⁵ Visser describes the process of an individual moving toward the point of Christian conversion, citing Engel's scale.¹⁹⁶ When properly contextualized for a Northern Thai setting, evangelism resembles purposeful Christian worldview formation and is best undertaken in the context of gospel-centered relationships.

Visser discusses the traditional worldviews of Thai people and identifies animists' higher likelihood of becoming Christians compared to the likelihood of Buddhists' converting to Christianity. Regarding conversion, he compares the likelihood of various groups' converting: Buddhists and atheists, Ethnic Thai and Tribal Thai, Theravada Buddhists and Mahayana Buddhists, and Buddhists living in a district with

¹⁹⁴Marten Visser, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand" (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 2008), 11.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 59-60, 103. Visser reports that 65 percent of his respondents came from non-Christian families.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., 47.

many Christians compared to those living in a district with few Christians. For the most part, Visser's comparisons are broad in focus compared to that of this more focused study.¹⁹⁷ Based upon his assessment, folk Buddhists in Chiang Mai clearly have a higher likelihood of becoming Christians than those living in the rest of Thailand due to their increased exposure to the gospel.

Visser expresses an inability to determine the degree to which traditions are a barrier to conversion using quantitative methodology.¹⁹⁸ However, his demographic study does confirm that older Thai people are more likely than young Thai to become Christians.¹⁹⁹ He also presents a trend that, while obvious, validates the importance of church attendance in my own findings: "the odds of a Thai living in a village with a church becoming a Christian are at least 84 times greater than the odds of someone living in a village without a church."²⁰⁰ Exposures to Christians and to the gospel dramatically increase the likelihood for conversions. These findings aid in making distinctions between Northern Thailand and the rest of the country.

Visser finds it more likely that Christian Thai parents would influence their children to become believers than it would be for Christian Thai children to influence their parents toward conversion.²⁰¹ Readers may understand reciprocal relationship orientation, *bunkhun*, as a likely cause of this trend. He explains that "for 40.3 percent of all converts a relative (including spouse) was the most influential person in their

¹⁹⁷Visser, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand," 107-11.

¹⁹⁸Ibid., 111. Visser presents statistics regarding church growth that compare Northern Thailand and Bangkok. Though Northern Thailand has a higher percentage of Christians, his data shows that numerical growth of the church is occurring at a faster rate in Bangkok. Ibid., 116. His quantitative method is well suited for this type of data collection.

¹⁹⁹Ibid., 124. This trend is surprising.

²⁰⁰Ibid., 127.

²⁰¹Ibid., 128.

conversion, while for only 10.6 percent a friend was most important.”²⁰² This trend was not mirrored in my respondent accounts. It is likely that in Chiang Mai, where my research takes place and where numbers of Christians are higher than in the rest of Thailand, that the likelihood of interacting with Christian friends increases. In other parts of Thailand, a relative lack of Christians means that relationships with family members, which are already deeply valued, would present potential converts with the most likely avenues for transmission of the gospel. Visser also presents data supporting the claim that that Thai pastors are more effective evangelists than Western missionaries, and that missionaries are more effective than Thai laity. However, due to the large number of Thai laity, most conversions are through the witness of Thai lay-Christians.²⁰³

Visser’s data contains respondents’ reflections regarding what influenced their conversions. Twenty-six percent reported influence mainly by personal testimony, 20 percent by Bible study, 16 percent by life example, and 11 percent by a sermon.²⁰⁴ He also cites printed media, in book form, being more effective than other forms of media, including television or radio. Visser is unable to confirm if the media his respondents were referring to is the Bible or other Christian media.²⁰⁵ He summarizes findings most pertinent to this study as

point[ing] towards the importance of personal relationships, and therefore to the limited effectiveness of impersonal ways to evangelize. It was already noted in this paragraph that ethnic Thai with Christian relatives are hundreds of times more likely to become Christians than others. A comparable finding was done when the factor distance to a church was researched. People living in a village with a church are almost 100 times more likely to become Christians.

Analyzing the communication process between Christian churches and potential converts also pointed to the importance of personal relationships. 70 percent of all converts say that the main influence in their conversion was not a church leader, but

²⁰²Visser, “Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand,” 130.

²⁰³Ibid., 133.

²⁰⁴Ibid., 134.

²⁰⁵Ibid., 135.

a lay person. Finally, the effectiveness of printed media, which are fit to use within a social network, over non-printed media, which are more impersonal in nature, points in the same direction.²⁰⁶

His findings, unsurprisingly, show that churches with warm relationships between members grow more than churches without this characteristically Thai value in place.²⁰⁷

Also unsurprising is that Thai churches with members who evangelize grow more than those that do not.²⁰⁸ Visser's respondents also report that growth occurs among members of Thai churches once involvement in small groups reaches 30 percent.²⁰⁹

Visser's respondents relate that relationships with Christians were motivators for their conversions to Christianity. Regarding Visser's interaction with the theme of relationship, he introduces an interesting idea from subculture theory, namely that people's thought patterns and convictions tend to conform to those with whom they form groups.²¹⁰ My respondents provide rich descriptions of this kind of solidarity among Thai Buddhists, likely enabled by Thai social smoothing, throughout their accounts.

Challenges Faced

One challenge for me to overcome as a researcher was the nature of Thai Buddhism itself. Since Theravada Buddhism is monastic, one may expect that the former lay-Buddhists I interviewed would have interacted with Buddhism solely as lay-seekers of merit, givers of offerings, and visitors of temples. However, several respondents had experience as monks themselves. The porous nature of the Thai *Sangha* means that some could wear the robes of a monk for a short time and then could live as laity.

²⁰⁶Visser, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand," 138.

²⁰⁷Ibid., 145-46.

²⁰⁸Ibid., 147.

²⁰⁹Ibid., 158.

²¹⁰Ibid., 38.

Another challenge regarding folk Buddhism in Thailand has to do with syncretism. At times, respondents would pray to the Buddha for protection from spirits. Other respondents would offer food to the spirits to engender blessing. Some believed being indwelt by these spirits brought temporal blessing. Northern Thai Folk Buddhism is porous, and the folk Buddhist worldview includes these local spirits and animistic rituals that adherents perform to interact with them.

Perhaps the subtlest challenge that remains is cultural differences between my Northern Thai respondents and myself, a Western researcher. Thankfully, my interpreter possesses experience working with Westerners and provided me with helpful descriptions of Thai cultural elements that bridged gaps in my knowledge. He also assisted me in valuing relationships with respondents according to their Thai sensibilities. Cultural elements that are unique to this population include *klang chai*, which protects social relationships by deference. The concept of saving face was also present.

Several respondents mentioned life transformations that have to do with money. They claimed to be free from debt or being free from spending too much money as part of their Christian testimony. Nantachai Mejhudon contrasts the materialistic lifestyles of Westerners to the generally austere Thai mode of life. He criticizes some Thai Christians for being “carnal” in seeking to be free from debt. He characterizes carnal Thai as asking

“Can your God help me get rid of my debt?” Devout Buddhists who deny the materialistic worldview and live ascetic lives may consider Western missionaries as persons who have a great deal of *gilade* (desire). They are considered to be carnal persons. Buddha taught his followers to live with a few necessary things as Christ commanded his disciples.²¹¹

Since several of my respondents reported financial freedom after their conversions, I should address Mejhudon’s criticism. I disagree with his negative assessment in regard to the respondents I encountered. Their experiences of freedom from former debts provide a

²¹¹N. Mejhudon, “The Way of Meekness,” 80-81.

testimony of God freeing them from oppressive obligations, both financial and hamartiological. Several respondents seemed to be transformed and freed from their former thinking that led them to fall into debt in the first place. According to their accounts, they are now experiencing financial blessings and attributed these newfound freedoms from debt to the work of God in their lives.

Conclusion

This chapter contains an interpretation of identified themes from respondents' accounts and an interaction with pertinent literature. This interaction provides validation of both trends identified in the testimonies of Buddhist Background Northern Thai respondents: relationship as a motivator for religious adherence and tradition. Since this dissertation uses grounded theory to identify these trends in the modern-day testimonies of Northern Thai Buddhist background believers and is written from a Christian worldview, it is a unique contribution to extant literature on this topic. Table A2 provides a visual summation of interaction with literature presented in this chapter.

In the next chapter, I present suggestions for ministry among a Northern Thai Theravada folk Buddhist population. I discuss respondents' answers to the questions "What would be something important to include when sharing the gospel with a Buddhist?" and "What is something that would prevent Thai people from coming to Christ?" alongside lessons drawn from their testimonies. In Chapter 5, I aim to present respondents' advice for sharing the gospel alongside other perspectives drawn from literature in order to formulate a list of best practices for ministry among Northern Thai folk Buddhists.

CHAPTER 5
EMERGING STRATEGIES FOR EVANGELISM

Introduction

This chapter utilizes trends drawn from respondents' accounts and pertinent literature to formulate a list of hypotheses to be tested by Northern Thai Christians when evangelizing their folk Buddhist family members, friends, and neighbors. The stated goal of this dissertation is to answer the research question, "What trends are present in the testimonies of formerly Buddhist Northern Thai Christians?" In Chapter 3, I identified the crosscutting themes: relationship as a motivator for religious adherence and tradition. These themes are then interpreted alongside pertinent literature in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 contains a list of proposed best practices based upon the implications of these identified themes.

Testing these hypotheses for evangelism among this target population lies outside the scope of this dissertation. The onus for reaching Northern Thai Buddhists for Christ most clearly falls upon Buddhist background believers living in and around Chiang Mai. These Northern Thai Christians intimately understand the thinking of their Northern Thai folk Buddhist families and friends because of their past experience as folk Buddhists. They do not face the same cultural barriers as do Western missionaries living in Northern Thailand. Their relational networks with family members, friends, and neighbors are already in place. In order to test these hypotheses, portions of this study must be translated and distributed to Northern Thai Buddhist background believers whose

motivation, conviction, and equipping are initiated and sustained by God for the task of gospel witness.¹

Respondents' testimonies are primary sources for developing these hypothetical best practices. In this chapter, I share respondents' reflections and their identifications of motivators and barriers for evangelism, followed by six suggestions for evangelism among Northern Thai folk Buddhists.

Descriptions of Themes in Thai Traditions

Multiple respondents identified Buddhism and animism as Thai traditions. Thai traditions are identified as barriers to the gospel among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Northern Thai folk Buddhists who participate in folk Buddhism unavoidably develop a non-Christian worldview. Widespread acceptance of the folk Buddhist worldview is a major reason for the apparent unintelligibility of the gospel among this target population. These Northern Thai traditions also act as barriers because of social pressure to conform to familial and societal values. The following excerpts from respondents' testimonies serve as explicit examples of this tendency toward social conformity among Northern Thai folk Buddhists.

Tradition

When he was a folk Buddhist, tradition motivated Respondent 10 to take part in religious rituals:

¹Western missionaries ought to expend their efforts toward discipleship among Northern Thai Christians rather than serving primarily as evangelists. By benefit of being native to the region, Northern Thai Buddhist background believers are in a much better position to impact their family, friends, and neighbors for Christ. Western missionaries evangelizing Northern Thai folk Buddhists will unintentionally cause many more misunderstandings in the mind of their hearer. Western missionaries risk causing much more unnecessary offense due to cultural distance. Western missionaries also carry cultural baggage based on historical instances of poor behavior of other Westerners. The rationale for my suggestion is to remove as many unnecessary offenses as possible from gospel presentations in Northern Thailand. Because the gospel transcends all human-made cultures, the gospel always offends. However, this same gospel that offends American and Thai sensibilities also frees us to live for God's glory. The gospel is the only source of true freedom from the sin that holds humans in bondage.

When I was young, I went to the temple, like normal people. Like Buddhist people. I didn't understand. I went to the temple because of tradition. Grandma and grandpa took me to the temple. I went to the festivals.²

In Respondent 10's former mode of religious practice, understanding the meaning behind rituals was not as important as was his participation in the rituals. He conformed to the practice of his family members and his identity as a Buddhist was reinforced. Respondent 7 similarly reported,

In Thai culture, we have traditions. If someone does not join in with the tradition, some people will think she is not a good person. Like gossip. They ask, "Why doesn't she go to the temple?"³

These expectations to take part in folk Buddhist practices are instances of social solidarity among Buddhists.⁴ In the *samsaric* folk Buddhist system, Buddhists strive to secure a better rebirth for themselves by seeking merit. Making merit serves as the motivation lying behind nearly all of the rituals of Buddhism. Meritorious rituals also benefit their temporal lives by earning the approval of Buddhist parents, family members, and neighbors. Terry Muck discusses the *samsaric* (within the endless cycle of rebirths) practice of a lay-Buddhist:

At the *samsaric* level, Buddhist laypeople do things that earn them positive *karma* (merit) such as feeding and clothing monks (*bhikkhus*) and attending temple services for protection and veneration of the images of the Buddha. Such merit-making activities, if assiduously followed, lead to better rebirths, the theoretical aim of which is to enable the people leading those lives to continue to work on the more important problem of their enlightenment.⁵

²Respondent 10, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017. Respondent 3 reported a nearly identical answer to the question "Why did you perform the rituals?" He told me, "I saw my grandpa and grandma go to the temple and people from the neighborhood and the people from the village went to the temple also. It is like a tradition." Respondent 3, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

³Respondent 7, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017. Respondent 7 cited tradition as the reason why she performed Buddhist and animistic rituals.

⁴"Lausanne Occasional Paper 15," Report of the Consultation on World Evangelization Mini-Consultation on Reaching Buddhists held at Pattaya, Thailand from 16-27 June 1980, Sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 3, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-15>.

⁵Terry C. Muck, "Buddhism: History, Beliefs, Practices," in *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices*, ed. Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland, and Gerald R. McDermott (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 84.

Respondents report that Folk Buddhist families view earning merit favorably and they believe that earning merit helps folk Buddhists reach heaven.

Northern Thai folk Buddhists practice animism concurrently with Buddhism and also consider animism to be an indigenous tradition. When I asked Respondent 13 why he formerly performed animistic rituals, he answered,

Tradition. Because my parents did like this. Parents would take and show for the children. “You have to do it like this.” Because I respect my father. I don’t know about the rituals because I don’t understand the meaning of the ritual, but because my father told me I had to do [them].⁶

Respondent 19 identified Thai traditions as a barrier between Northern Thai folk Buddhists and saving faith in Christ:

I have talked to Thai Buddhists about Jesus, they said they don’t know about God and the Jesus story before. Because traditions they have to go to the temple. Their culture teaches them they have to go to the temple. Make merit.⁷

Northern Thai folk Buddhists are immersed in a culture that rewards conformity to Thai traditions.

Respondents at times reported relational upheaval that occurred when they became Christians. Respondent 4 described a general fear of leaving the familiarity of folk Buddhism:

Most Thai Buddhists are afraid to change. Change to believe something other than Buddhism. Afraid of “Oh, I have to do a new tradition.” Some Thai people would like to do an old tradition.⁸

Respondent’s testimonies revealed that Thai traditions, Buddhism and animism, are often transmitted by family members. Family members, friends, and neighbors place

⁶Respondent 13, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

⁷Respondent 19, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 11, 2017. Respondent 3 identified a similar barrier, citing, “Culture and tradition. Ordinary faith. . . . Give food to the monk. Thai people have to go to the temple.” Respondent 3, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017. Respondent 7 identified “Tradition and Buddhism culture” as barriers. Respondent 7, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

⁸Respondent 4, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

expectations upon adherents to take part in these traditions. These expectations are barriers to the gospel.

Relationship as a Motivator for Religious Adherence

Respondents also often referenced relationships as motivators for religious adherence in their testimonies. In Northern Thailand, relationships serve as vehicles to pass on traditions. Thai traditions, because of social solidarity, also partially define these relationships.

The family of Respondent 11 motivated her to take part in animistic rituals. Each year, they tasked a different female relative with the duty of serving as a spirit medium. When her family urged her to be possessed by this spirit, she refused, resulting in a loss of fellowship. She was disowned because she rejected their animistic tradition. She instead converted to Christianity. In this case, her relationship with family members depended on her taking part in animistic rituals.

Respondents' parents were influential, passing along these Thai traditions in the context of familial relationships. *Bunkhun* is a profound gratitude present in Thai children's interactions with their parents. This Thai relational aspect motivates children's participation as folk Buddhists as a means to honor parents. The mother of Respondent 12 taught her to *wai* the bones of her relatives. She reflected, "I did everything that she told me to do . . . followed her. I was quite a good Buddhist, also."⁹ Folk Buddhist practices were integral to her relationship with her mother. Similarly, Respondent 19 described the mixture of animism and Buddhism his parents passed onto him:

My parents told me when I go to the temple, I have to listen and respect the monk . . . and another ritual, to worship. I took a chicken to worship the spirit, *pii*. Because my dad is a strong believer in the spirit[s]. Every time he starts to do

⁹Respondent 12, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017. The *wai* is performed by bowing with palms together.

something, like makes a new farm, he would worship and pray with the *pii* before. In Thailand, we think about the *pii* giving a blessing for the farm.¹⁰

Respondents reported that these folk Buddhist traditions are transmitted primarily through close family relationships.

Thai people also possess a high ego orientation while greatly valuing relationships with one another.¹¹ They protect relationships by helping one another to save face through the practice of *klang chai*. Their need to save face affects their participation in Thai religious traditions. Northern Thai people are generally folk Buddhists because they are most likely born into folk Buddhist families. This shared expectation influences relationships with folk Buddhist family members, friends, and neighbors. A rejection of shared values found in communal religious traditions causes relational upheavals and offenses. The presence of face saving tendencies and *klang chai* among Northern Thai folk Buddhists discourages conversions to Christianity.

Descriptions of Themes among Aspects of Conversion to Christianity

While administering interviews in October 2017, I asked respondents the following questions: “What would be something important to include when sharing the gospel with a Buddhist?” and “What is something that would prevent Thai people from coming to Christ?” Their answers to these questions are emic perspectives on strategies for Christian evangelism among Northern Thai folk Buddhists.

Respondent 1, after reflecting on his testimony in the context of our interview, subsequently led a folk Buddhist friend to Christ.¹² My hope is that by interacting with these hypotheses and refining best practices through testing, many more Northern Thai

¹⁰Respondent 19, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 11, 2017.

¹¹Sunatree Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns* (Bangkok: Magenta Company, 1991), 133.

¹²Respondent 1, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

Christians will be emboldened to evangelize and disciple more often and more effectively in their Northern Thai setting.

Respondent 1 discussed the one-on-one discipleship relationship that led him to become a Christian. His pastor counseled him and presented him with the gospel. He explained, “I had a problem [at work]. I was worrying. The pastor invited me. ‘If I receive Jesus and become a Christian, God can help.’ I became a Christian after three months.”¹³ He entered into a gospel-centered relationship with his pastor and together they examined the Bible. For three months, he studied the Scriptures with his pastor. The doctrines of Christianity challenged his formerly folk Buddhist worldview and overturned his beliefs regarding the truthfulness of Thai traditions.

Respondent 10 shared his own valuation of relationships in the form of advice to Christians regarding evangelism:

You have to show yourself. Show God’s love. God has love. Help the people. Ask about their problem. Help them. Make relationship with the people, their needs, their problems.¹⁴

These two anecdotes display a strategy that considers both identified themes in respondent accounts: tradition and relationship as a motivator for religious adherence. Because Northern Thai folk Buddhists struggle to understand the gospel at first hearing, they greatly benefit from repeated opportunities to observe God working in the lives of Christian friends. Respondents often advised that Christians developing strong relationships with folk Buddhists facilitates conversions. In gospel-centered relationships, Christians teach folk Buddhists the Christian worldview, give opportunities for folk Buddhists to ask questions about Christian doctrines, and repeatedly invite them to accept the gospel. In short, folk Buddhists learn about the traditions of Christianity and are invited to participate and believe. This kind of consistent gospel witness in the context of

¹³Respondent 1, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

¹⁴Respondent 18, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 10, 2017.

genuine friendships is a powerful epistemological tool for furthering the gospel in Northern Thailand.

Emerging Strategies for Evangelism Suggested

The following best practices are based upon interaction with respondents' accounts and secondary literature. I present these as hypotheses to be tested in the context of gospel witness between Northern Thai Christians and their folk Buddhist family members, friends, and neighbors.

Northern Thai Christians Must First Depend on Christ for Transformation and Repentance before Subsequently Articulating this Posture to folk Buddhists

Multiple respondents reported that folk Buddhists perceive Christianity as difficult, requiring a cessation of drinking and smoking through willpower alone. Though the valuation of drinking and smoking over allegiance to Jesus is indicative of profound mis-prioritization in the thinking of these folk Buddhists, their perspectives also betray a deep misunderstanding of Christianity. If Northern Thai folk Buddhists find Christianity to be unintelligible, this is likely due to their assessing individual Christian doctrines from within a folk Buddhist worldview. To remedy this misunderstanding in others, Northern Thai Christians ought to communicate phenomenologically oriented presentations of the gospel by sharing their testimonies along with a description of the Christian worldview. By describing their roles as actors in God's larger story, Northern Thai Christians will communicate the entirety of the biblical worldview to their families, friends, and neighbors. Importantly, they will be able to highlight their dependence on the

Holy Spirit, potentially overcoming this barrier to belief: the idea that Christianity is mere moralism.¹⁵

Northern Thai folk Buddhists misunderstand Christianity as practiced by their Christian family members, friends, and neighbors. This is partially due to their misassessment from within a Northern Thai folk Buddhist worldview. Another source for these misunderstandings comes from the rigor and zeal of late nineteenth century Western missionaries. Though these men and women were faithful gospel witnesses, they also unavoidably passed a church culture to their converts influenced by the standard of temperance appropriate in their homeland.¹⁶ The Chinese evangelist, John Sung, compounded this problem when he led a 1939 revival meeting in Northern Thailand. He emphasized a purity of outward life that separated his followers from Western missionaries, from other Christians, and from their Buddhist neighbors.¹⁷ Rather than joyfully witnessing among the lost, these historical Northern Thai Christians tended to isolate themselves and were subsequently misunderstood from a distance.

Unfortunately, a perception that Christians are set apart based upon outward behavior alone sometimes persists among Northern Thai Buddhists to this day.¹⁸ Northern Thai Christians ought to practice repentance, but not based upon a standard of behavior found outside the Christian Scriptures.¹⁹ Their posture before folk Buddhists

¹⁵Respondent 20 admits that some Northern Thai Christians are only friends with other Christians. She observes the difficulty for Buddhists to make true friendships with Christians. Other times, Thai Christians will share the gospel with Thai Buddhists, but their lives do not look different. Sometimes, Christians have not taken the time to let the Buddhists get to know their lives. According to Respondent 20, Thai Christians should not be prideful, as is the practice of some, but should instead be humble. Respondent 20, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 12, 2017.

¹⁶Philip Hughes, *Proclamation and Response: A Study of the History of the Christian Faith in Northern Thailand*, 2nd ed. (Chiang Mai: Payap University Archives, 1989), 31.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 31-32.

¹⁸Respondent 14 reported that abstaining from smoke or drink, as is often associated with Christianity in Thailand presented a lack of freedom in the eyes of folk Buddhists. Respondent 14, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

¹⁹Their repentance from sin and their practicing of righteousness ought not to be based upon anything other than the conviction of their own conscience as it is informed by Christian Scripture.

might require some reassessment and self-reflection to determine if an outward sheen of moralistic behaviors is present. If so, it becomes necessary to assess whether this approach pleases God or if it is primarily meant to superficially distinguish Christians from their folk Buddhist neighbors.

A moralistic competition with practitioners of other religions can never be won. Two religious systems' differing means and ends are only understood in relation to dissenting claims to transcendent truth. Each is unintelligible when observed from the other side. In other words, the grass of Christianity does not appear greener to folk Buddhists.²⁰ Moral standards in Buddhist and animistic traditions passed down from family members and present in local culture influence Northern Thai folk Buddhists. For example, killing animals accrues negative karma in a folk Buddhist worldview. However, according to Christian truth claims, humans are able to raise and consume animals as a food source without offending their Creator. Despite this fundamental disagreement, overlaps in moral teachings exist between Northern Thai Christianity and folk Buddhism.

Instead of tangential approaches that involve comparisons of practices, Northern Thai Christians ought to point to the source for their hope. They should purposefully manifest their filling with the presence and love of God in relationships with folk Buddhists. Living to love and glorify God should motivate and define the Christian lifestyle. Respondent 12 stresses the importance of allowing God to produce life change before focusing on relationships with others.²¹ With this same conviction, Northern Thai believers may draw near to their families, friends, and neighbors with a personal

²⁰Respondent 10 described the ignorance of many Buddhists about what the Bible teaches regarding Jesus. Folk Buddhists misunderstand Jesus to be like a Buddha, but in a different religion. "They don't know the God of creation," he asserted. "The most important thing: Explain about who Jesus is and who God is. Creator of the world. And the Creator created me and [He] created them too." Respondent 10, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

²¹Respondent 12, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

testimony to the power of the gospel *and* purposeful instruction about the Christian worldview.

Respondent 8 summed up the challenge of presenting the gospel to those entrenched in a folk Buddhist worldview, admitting his complete dependence on God's transformative work in the thinking of folk Buddhists:

The Thai people, they are all of them Buddhist. They become Buddhist by family, not his own thinking, not their own idea. They don't study more. They don't study that. The reason why. They aren't clear about the work of the Buddha. The idea about you must help yourself. No one can help you, but you have to help yourself. It is the word of the Buddha. If you have done bad thing, you have a bad result. No one can help. This is the idea. It's a big idea. That you must help yourself. If you have done something bad, you've got a bad result. Because Buddhists believe in the law of cause and effect. So no one can stop this work, only God.²²

Since some Northern Thai folk Buddhist observers feel that Christianity is too hard, Northern Thai Christians should take opportunities to explain that living as a Christian *is* impossible based upon human effort alone. Unless God regenerates the hearts and minds of believers to place their highest value in Jesus Christ, Godward desires remain absent. Living the Christian life abundantly requires the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers, regeneration, sanctification, the fruit of the Spirit, the armor of God, and other spiritual treasures described in Scripture. If these elements of a Christian worldview are not first believed by Northern Thai Christians, they cannot be practiced and passed on to their folk Buddhist family members, friends, and neighbors. These elements are only genuinely believed and practiced through the Holy Spirit's influence. Explanations and assurances of God's good will toward men such as these also ought not to be communicated from a distance in a Northern Thai setting. Northern Thai Christians should instead transmit these to folk Buddhists in the context of gospel-centered relationships.

²²Respondent 8, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

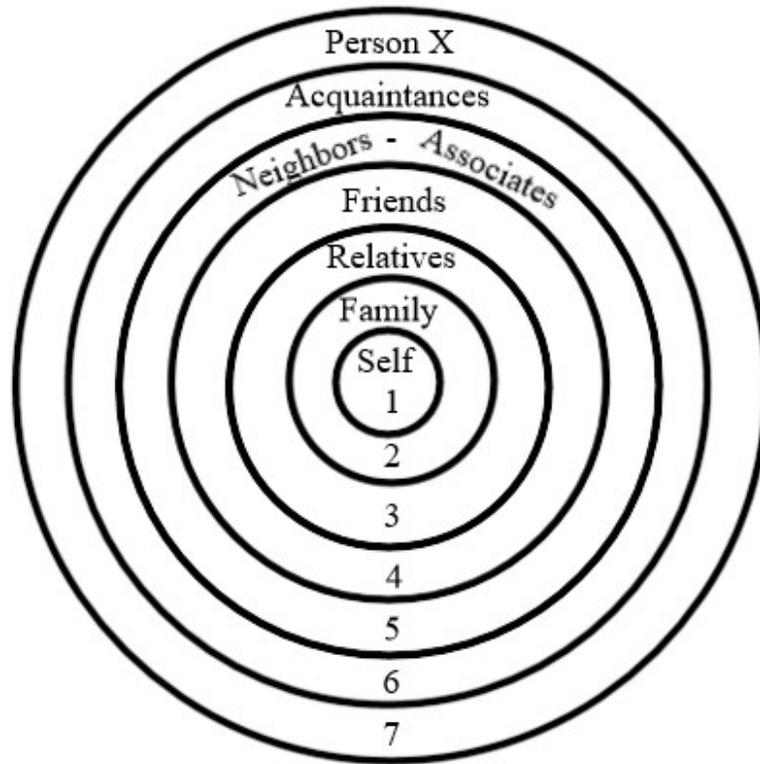


Figure 3. Oscar W. Thompson's Concentric Circles of Concern

The cultural setting of Northern Thailand lends itself very well to the evangelism strategy of W. Oscar Thompson, as presented in his book *Concentric Circles of Concern: Seven Stages for Making Disciples*. His approach values relationships as vehicles for the transmission of the gospel based upon the example of New Testament Christians. Of his methodology, Thompson writes, “The gospel of Jesus Christ began to spread through relationships in ever-growing circles.”²³ His model of evangelism is represented by the above diagram. Thompson directs his readers to get their own lives right with God before moving outward from the center, and to share with their families and friends before they aim to share with person x, a stranger.²⁴ Since the Northern Thai

²³W. Oscar Thompson and Carilyn Thompson Ritzmann, *Concentric Circles of Concern: Seven Stages for Making Disciples*, ed. Claude V. King (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 16.

²⁴Ibid.

respondents I interviewed describe the need for relationships to be present between themselves and Northern Thai Buddhists with whom they share the gospel, the utilization of already existing social networks provides hearers with opportunities for a credible gospel witness.

In a Northern Thai setting, Christians may struggle to share the gospel with their parents because of real offenses due to breaches of *bunxhun* expectations. Thompson writes, “Many of us come to study evangelism to go from Circle 1 out to Circle 7 to salve our consciences because there are ruptured relationships in Circles 2 through 6 that we prefer to skip over.”²⁵ His approach resembles Ubolwan Mejudhon’s advice for Thai Christians to reconcile with parents in order to repair strained or broken relationships.²⁶ This kind of care for existing relationships enables Thai believers to live out the gospel for their families and friends more effectively.

Thompson’s emphasis on relating first to God before bringing the gospel to others is also mirrored in advice given by my respondents. Throughout respondents’ testimonies, they mention that Christians’ changed lives provide evidence for the work of Christ. Respondents listed freedom from debt, a spirit of generosity, and freedom from spiritual oppression as temporal benefits in their lives because of their participation in the gospel. In some cases, tension with folk Buddhist family members may increase because of religious differences. In other cases, these Holy Spirit-filled believers gained better relationships with their families since their hearts and minds were transformed in a Godward direction.²⁷

²⁵Thompson and Thompson Ritzmann, *Concentric Circles of Concern*, 20.

²⁶Ubolwan Mejudhon, “The Ritual of Reconciliation in Thai Culture: Discipling New Converts” in *Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World*, ed. David Lim and Steve Spaulding (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 246.

²⁷Respondent 14 was afraid of evil spirits before her conversion. Since becoming a believer, these fears abated. Respondent 7 described arguments with her husband before she was a believer, replaced by peace after her conversion. She told me her life is like a hand turned over, moving her own hand to further describe the radical change.

Respondent 12 explains that her faith in Christ changed her, allowing her to keep cool with her emotions, to obey more, to save money, and to be more generous.²⁸ Respondent 13 explains that his family was happy after he became a Christian.²⁹ Before he became a believer, his mother would often worry. Upon his conversion, Respondent 13 told her that everything is from God and that she should not worry. He shared the gospel with his mother and sister and they became Christians. When respondents' family members responded positively to evangelism their lives were also transformed for the better.

Northern Thai Christians Should Make Every Effort to Form Gospel-Centered Relationships with Buddhist Family Members, Friends, and Neighbors

Most of the Northern Thai Buddhist background believers I interviewed are first generation Christians. Several respondents' testimonies show that maintaining relationships with Buddhist friends and family members may result in persecution. This persecution silenced the gospel witness of some of my respondents. Maintaining relationships with folk Buddhist family, friends, and neighbors without gospel witness does not lead to their conversions. However, God used the consistent witness of a few of these respondents to bring individual family members and friends to faith in Christ. Referencing the research of Martin Visser, Jurjen de Bruijne writes, "Thai people who have a Christian family member are hundreds of times more likely to become a Christian than those without Christian family members."³⁰ Believing family members of respondents proved to be effective evangelists and utilized their strong relational ties to

²⁸Respondent 12, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017. Being cool, emotionally, is a virtue in Thai culture.

²⁹Respondent 13, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

³⁰Jurjen de Bruijne, "Conversion: Discovering the Conversion of Thai Buddhists towards Christianity" (MA thesis. Ede Christian University for Applied Sciences, 2010), 4.

share the gospel effectively, as respondents' testimonies show. However, with so few Christians in Northern Thailand, evangelism must extend beyond family relationships for wider impact. When Christian family members are not present, Christians' deep relationships and true friendships marked by trust are fruitful avenues to transmit the gospel.

Because Thai people place such a high value on interpersonal relationships, Thai Christians must be sure to order their valuation of relationships appropriately. They ought to value their relationship with God above relationships with family members. They should value his purposes for folk Buddhist friends and family members more than their own approval in the eyes of these friends or family members.³¹ Intentionality and dependence on the Holy Spirit in these relationships will ensure that Northern Thai Christians live as channels of blessing through the gospel. Several suggestions to improve this intentionality include the following.

Lay-leaders should receive church-level training and accountability for evangelism and discipleship. My first suggestion involves training and accountability at the local-church level. It is not enough only to believe the gospel (Jas 2:14-17, Matt 28:19-20). Northern Thai converts to Christianity are responsible to communicate the gospel of grace, just as they themselves heard it and believed. Resulting misunderstandings and offenses that evangelizing believers might face because of their identifications with Christ are both intimidating and uncomfortable. This is especially true for Thai Christians whose inward Thai characters place such a high value on relationships. Because these challenges are common in a Northern Thai context, instruction regarding verbal witness is important.³² Silence in the face of persecution will

³¹Romans 12:18 directs believers to make every effort to live peaceably with others. However, if folk Buddhist family and friends refuse to reciprocate, this is outside of the believer's control. Relational strife is at times inevitable.

³²Respondent 18 provides a list of essential practices for effective evangelism, including

not promote knowledge of the gospel among Northern Thai people. Respondent 19 describes a widespread ignorance of the gospel among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. He explains, if a Thai Buddhist happens to know a Christian, they only know that he is a Christian, but not why he believes in Jesus. Christians are a minority throughout Thailand, and without deep relationships and evangelism, these misunderstandings persist.³³ Additionally, tracts are a way to effectively communicate the gospel in the context of relationships.³⁴ Above all, Northern Thai Christians must seek to approach their family members, friends, and neighbors with the gospel in a way that makes sense and avoids unnecessarily offending their hearers.³⁵

Northern Thai Christians should maintain relationships with folk Buddhists.

A second suggestion is for Northern Thai Christians to maintain relationships with folk Buddhists. Buddhist background Northern Thai believers possess a Christian

showing God's love to Thai Buddhists, helping them, asking about their problems, making relationships with them, and understanding their needs and problems. He makes a practice of visiting Buddhist friends, bringing food, and telling his testimony.

³³According to Respondent 2, when sharing the gospel with a Thai Buddhist, relationship is most important. She advises "Don't just share about salvation. Make relationship." Thai people, she said, do not understand about Jesus or the gospel. Thai culture has long defended against foreigners. However, if they understood about Jesus, they would change to believe in Him. She explains, "You have to find a way to explain the gospel to the Thai people." Respondent 2, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

³⁴Marten Visser found that tracts are more effective in a Thai setting than either television or radio because they are passed along in the context of relationships. Marten Visser, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand" (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 2008), 134-35. In a Northeastern Thai setting, Chansamone Saiyasak explains the importance of not only hearing the gospel, but relating to a Christian living out the gospel. Regarding a radio ministry, this researcher writes, "While radio is a good tool for introducing the Isan people to Christianity, the radio broadcast ministry is only effective evangelistically when the broadcast is followed by an evangelist who can build relationships with the interested listeners." This parallel finding from a different region of Thailand might also be said of the Northern Thai setting. Chansamone Saiyasak, "A Fresh Look into the Expansion of Protestant Christianity in the Isan Region of Northeast Thailand," (unpublished paper, n.d.), accessed April 27, 2018, http://www.academia.edu/4795918/A_Fresh_Look_into_the_Expansion_of_Protestant_Christianity_in_the_Isan_Region_of_Northeast_Thailand?scrlybrkr=48e94faf. Respondent 7 also found that tracts are a positive way for her to share the gospel with folk Buddhist friends and family. Respondent 7, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

³⁵Nantachai Mejudhon explains that "Missionaries and Thai Christians who deal aggressively with Buddhist friends when it comes to the matter of religion, usually must endure shaky relationships. Generally speaking, the longer they are Christians, the fewer Thai Buddhist friends and relatives they have. This seems to be a fact in many Thai churches in Thailand." Nantachai Mejudhon, "The Way of Meekness: Being Christian and Thai in the Thai Way" (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 1998), 67-68.

worldview that differs from the folk Buddhist worldview of their family and friends. This leads to experiences of discomfort or rejection because of their new status as Christians.³⁶ If folk Buddhist family members are open to maintaining relationships with converts and do not shun new believers, these Christians are still subjected to criticisms such as “Christianity is a foreign religion.”³⁷ From the perspectives of their folk Buddhist family members, Northern Thai converts to Christianity refuse to take part in reciprocal gratitude with their relatives and fail to meet Thai standards of *bunghun*.³⁸ These refusals result in offenses.³⁹ Ubolwan Mejudhon’s suggestion for purposeful reconciliation is a helpful one.⁴⁰ He advises taking familial offense seriously and making amends with offended parties while still maintaining Christian identities and gospel witness. These humble petitions to folk Buddhist family members for forgiveness because conversions to Christianity have offended them are non-intuitive pathways when observed from a

³⁶Respondent 17 suggests that Christians should foster relationships. Buddhists, he said, are afraid to be Christians. They are afraid to betray their families and want to respect their parents. He said “We do something wrong if we become Christians. We feel like we are a bad boy.” Respondent 17, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 10, 2017.

³⁷Respondent 6 values relationship when sharing the gospel. He describes more regularly sharing the gospel with his cousins, aunts, and uncles with whom he already has relationships. Barriers regarding conversion to Christianity include culture and traditions. Respondent 6 says, “Buddhism teaches that the Thai people have to do everything by themselves. You can live by yourself. Have to do everything by yourself. . . . Thai people don’t trust everyone. It is not easy to trust. Some Thai people do, but most Thai people do not trust.” He also lists family tensions as a major barrier. “The first Christian in a family betrays the family. If someone in Buddhism transfers to Christianity, the father or mother say you betray the family and betray Buddhism as well.” Because his sister was the first Christian in his family, she broke their parents’ hearts. He relates that Thai Buddhist parents believe converts to Christianity do something wrong and that Christianity belongs to foreigners. Respondent 6, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

³⁸Respondent 11 values making relationships and encouraging Buddhists when they encounter problems. She also mentions that a fear of betraying family and being ungrateful to one’s family was something Thai people found to be a barrier to becoming Christian. Respondent 11, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

³⁹Respondent 15 describes generational pressure to continue in Buddhism when one’s father, mother, and grandmother all Buddhist. Thai Buddhists have a strong belief reinforced in their thinking by family members. She said that they are told “. . . Buddhism [will] make [your life better]. You have to go to temple. You have to see [the] monk. You have to make merit. And then your next life will be made good.” Respondent 15, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 10, 2017.

⁴⁰U. Mejudhon, “The Ritual of Reconciliation in Thai Culture: Disciplining New Converts” in *Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World*, 246.

Western perspective. However, Mejudhon's proposal protects Thai sensibilities and encourages adherents' participation in the gospel concurrently.

The parents of Buddhist background Northern Thai believers worry that they will not receive food in the afterlife, as continued temple offerings of food and money are customary in folk Buddhist traditions.⁴¹ These parental worries about the afterlife will not be resolved unless a) their children apostatize and return to folk Buddhism, or b) these parents also convert to Christianity. Maintaining a gospel witness from children to parents is the only positive way to remedy these kinds of offenses.

Upon conversion, an ontological transformation takes place for the Northern Thai Christian. In their experience, believers remain Thai and still retain relationships with their family members. However, their deepest loyalty is transferred to Christ and his kingdom. They take on deeper identities as sojourners on the earth and ambassadors for Christ (1 Pet 2:11). Gregg Allison emphasizes the teaching of 1 Peter 2:12 alongside verse eleven, citing a paradoxical relationship between the church and the world.⁴² Converts' relationships with families, friends, neighbors, and nation are not severed at conversion. The nature of these relationships is irrevocably transformed because of the gospel.

Northern Thai Christians should feel free to attend some Thai ceremonies, but not participate. A third suggestion is the continued attendance at Thai ceremonies by Northern Thai Christians. In their testimonies, many respondents mentioned that they continue to attend Thai ceremonies. While there, they interact with

⁴¹Respondent 16 relates that many Northern Thai believe that their parents need food in the afterlife. She describes the tension, "If you are a Buddhist you will take food to your parents. If you are a Christian, who will do it?" Though folk Buddhists worry about this, Christians, she says, know they will go to heaven to worship and praise God there. Respondent 16, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 10, 2017.

⁴²Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. John S. Feinberg, Foundations of Evangelical Theology Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 467.

folk Buddhist family members, friends, and neighbors. This practice is different from the behavioral standard imposed on the earliest Northern Thai converts by Western missionaries. Maintaining relationships by attending folk Buddhist festivals in which family ties are renewed or Buddhist funerals in which the dead are meaningfully remembered is important to Northern Thai Christians.⁴³ Continued attendance at these events assists them in maintaining their family roles and Thai identities.⁴⁴ While at these events, respondents are able to present folk Buddhists with their Christian identities while

⁴³Respondent 7 suggests fostering relationships with Thai Buddhists by asking about their problems, their lives, and families. Afterwards, she told me she would testify of how God helped her. Barriers to faith she mentions include tradition and Buddhist culture. The Thai people with whom she shares in the village only know about Buddhism and are unaware of Christianity. Many folk Buddhists have questions for which Thai Christians do not know the answers. For instance, upon death, Buddhists do not like Christians to burn their bodies in Buddhist temples. A complication arises due to this prohibition, as many villages have no land for which to bury the bodies of deceased Christians. She told me that some churches have land, but many villages do not, which remains a problem. Festivals were listed as major occasions when respondents would attend the temple. Thai festivals like Songkran and monthly days of observance, also known as Buddha days, were mentioned as occasions that would draw respondents, their families, and their neighbors to their local temples. Donald Swearer writes of the function of these festivals in Thai observance, "In more general terms, however, participation in festivals and ritual events related to the Buddhist calendar or community celebrations that have been appropriated by Buddhism help to constitute members of Theravada Buddhist societies as a unified moral community. Buddha's Day (Visakha Puja) and New Year's are two such events. The lunar New Year celebration in the spring that marks the end of the dry season and the onset of the monsoon rains, has been incorporated into the Buddhist festival calendar. Many New Year celebration activities take place at Buddhist temples and monasteries. Pilgrimage to sacred sites believed to enshrine relics of the Buddha may also occur during the New Year season symbolizing a renewal of sacred physical space as well as sacred time. This month-long sacred season culminates with Visakha Puja that celebrates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, thus linking the advent of Buddhism with the beginning of the lunar year and the renewal of the agricultural cycle.

These annual festivals of New Year and Visakha Puja provide participants with a sense of membership in a universal Theravada Buddhist community." Donald K. Swearer, "Theravada Buddhist Societies" in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 89, accessed July 13, 2018, doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195137989.003.0009.

⁴⁴Respondent 1 explains that when he attends a Thai ceremony, he does not *wai*. He sits still and does not do anything. Respondent 1 also mentions that when Thai men are ordained as monks, observers are expected to *wai* almost the entire time. He explained "If the monk prays, if someone will ask me, 'Why don't you *wai*?' I say, 'I am a Christian.'" Respondent 1, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017. Respondent 7 attends funerals but does not *wai*. She tells family members that she is a Christian. She washes dishes and serves in the kitchen. Once, her cousins asked, "Why did you forget yourself? Why did you forget your culture to believe in Jesus?" She responded by giving them a gospel tract that contained polemics against magic. Respondent 7 explained that she did this whenever someone asked her about Christianity. Through her evangelism, her mother and brother have become Christians. Respondent 7, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017. Respondent 12 explained that at first, attending Thai ceremonies was a problem for her because her entire family is Buddhist. They would say she was ungrateful to the family. Recently, however, things have changed. When the time comes for her to take part in giving offerings to the monk, as is the expectations for female relatives, an uncle or other relative will step in, "She is Christian, she cannot do this thing." She explained that she recently feels more understood by her family. Respondent 12, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017.

avoiding participation in Buddhist or animistic rituals.⁴⁵ While at folk Buddhist funerals, multiple respondents mentioned that they serve their families by washing dishes in the kitchen. Northern Thai Christians should maintain these subservient roles and humble postures along with a verbal gospel witness.

If Northern Thai Christians seek to form gospel-centered relationships with family members, friends, and neighbors, applying Oscar Thompson's *Concentric Circles of Concern* provides a hopeful path. However, one major aspect in Thompson's writing requires adaption in order to best address the needs of Northern Thai folk Buddhists. His primary target population is modern North Americans with some exposure to a Christian worldview. Most Northern Thai people possess a folk Buddhist worldview and are largely ignorant of the Bible or of Christian doctrines. Thompson recounts an interaction with one of his students to illustrate the relative ease with which sharing the gospel may be accomplished when Christian worldview foundations are laid. After receiving counsel to share boldly with a relative, his student reported,

It was the first time I had ever shared the gospel, and [my relative] was saved. When I confronted him with the simple truth, do you know what he said? . . .
'You know I never could buy all of this religion bit because people would never tell me what they were talking about, and I was too proud to ask.'
That's it. Just talk to people in a normal voice and tell them what Jesus has done for you and can do for them. Confront them with who Jesus is, what sin is, and how God has provided for forgiveness of sin.⁴⁶

This Holy Spirit motivated conversation produced the fruit of conversion so rapidly because foundations for the gospel were already in place in the mind and heart of this relative. In a Northern Thai setting, folk Buddhists initially assess the gospel from a folk Buddhist worldview. Their need for Christ's sacrifice for sin is not at all readily apparent if folk Buddhists' worldview tells them that they must accrue merit and avoid accruing

⁴⁵Performing the *wai* to a Buddha image is an act of idolatry that figures prominently in respondents' accounts of former religious practice.

⁴⁶W. Oscar Thompson and Carolyn Thompson Ritzmann, *Concentric Circles of Concern: Seven Stages for Making Disciples*, ed. Claude V. King (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 180.

karma according to Buddhist ideals. As such, Northern Thai believers should expect a lengthy process of Christian worldview formation in their hearers before God brings them to a point of regeneration.

Northern Thai Christians Should Think about Evangelism in Terms of Worldview Revolution

Multiple respondents told me that for their gospel witness to be effective, Christians in a Northern Thai setting should not criticize Buddhism.⁴⁷ This approach involves presenting Christianity positively while acknowledging, but not polemicizing Buddhism.⁴⁸ As a Western observer, I first misunderstood this caution from Thai believers as a weak position potentially motivated by a desire to avoid persecution.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Respondent 13 advises “Don’t talk about idols. Who is better. Don’t talk about who is better. [Buddha or Christ] Don’t tell Buddhist people to throw out their life or the thing that they respect. Don’t tell them to throw away idols . . . amulets. Don’t say ‘Don’t go to the temple.’ Don’t talk like that.” Instead, Respondent 13 advises telling folk Buddhists stories from the Bible and inviting them to know about the biblical God. If they knew the truth, he says that they’d be more interested and motivated to learn. Respondent 13, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 8, 2017. Respondent 20 mentions that some Thai Christians do not know how to talk with Buddhists. They provide Buddhists with polemics, telling them that they do not need to respect idols or the Buddha image. She says “Sometimes [Christians] invite them to follow Jesus suddenly. And that makes the Thai Buddhists confused, because they don’t understand about Christianity before. If Christians do that, some Thai Buddhists don’t like it.” Respondent 20, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 12, 2017.

⁴⁸One aspect of the relationship-focused evangelism present in respondent’ testimonies is the absence of overt polemics. Generally, respondents were invited to consider positive components of Christianity rather than to escape from Buddhism or animism. This fits the suggested pattern of meekness-oriented evangelism of Nantachai Mejudhon, who advocates presenting Christianity in terms of benefits and cautions against criticizing Buddhism. N. Mejudhon, “The Way of Meekness: Being Christian and Thai in the Thai Way,” 48.

⁴⁹I apologize here for my initial confusion. This error on my part, frankly, is one more example to display the immense barriers for Western Christians attempting to navigate culture among this population. My mistake was corrected by listening to Northern Thai Christians’ explanations of why they approached folk Buddhists in this way. I strongly suggest a strategy of discipleship and encouragement from Western missionaries among Northern Thai Christians. I caution against an emphasis on Westerners being the front-line evangelists in modern Northern Thailand. Several reasons exist for this caution: First, Northern Thai Christians are capable of sharing the gospel effectively on their own. Second, a need exists for Northern Thai folk Buddhists to perceive Christianity as a Thai religion. Third, the differences between Western Christian missionaries and Northern Thai folk Buddhists are cultural *and* religious in nature. Much offense takes place when Westerners make cultural missteps among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Because of an ignorance about social cues and subtle valuations present in Northern Thai culture, unnecessary offenses may be multiplied that do not have anything to do with the necessary offense of the gospel. Instead of a pioneer mentality, Western missionaries ought to see the Thai church as the primary “sent ones” in their cultural setting. Missionaries should take part in critical contextualization, where dialogue with indigenous believers leads to fruitful strategies for witness and discipleship among this population. The process of disciple making takes time. There is still a need for Western missionaries to go and spend their entire lives ministering among the Northern Thai. My suggestion here is not intended to devalue the unique gifts and calling of Western missionaries who minister among the Northern Thai. Instead, I suggest an

However, over time, my interaction with respondents' testimonies and pertinent literature convinced me otherwise. This meek approach actually allows folk Buddhist hearers opportunities to hear and interact with the Christian worldview without presenting undue offense, since hearers are doing so from within a folk Buddhist worldview.

Observing natural phenomena confirms some truth claims from a Christian worldview. Other truth claims of Christianity are wholly transcendent and demand faith from adherents who possess limited information. Similarly, folk Buddhism contains claims about everyday life alongside non-confirmable assertions concerning ultimate reality. When Northern Thai Christians share transcendent truths with folk Buddhists, they would do well to approach this task with humility. Ted Cabal presents a perspectival position he calls "critical certainty" in regard to one's place in a Christian worldview.⁵⁰ He calls Christians to affirm the phenomena that humans share as part of their co-existence *and* to affirm Christian truth claims. In a Northern Thai setting, where Christians are in the minority, this position allows Northern Thai Christians to present the gospel as intelligible in the context of common ground between gospel witnesses and folk Buddhist hearers. This common ground may include observations that both parties can readily affirm, such as "Suffering exists."⁵¹ Interpreting the meaning of these phenomena

approach that takes seriously the observable ability of the Northern Thai Christians to be the face of Christianity in Northern Thailand.

⁵⁰Ted Cabal, *The Worldview Concept as Evangelical Tool* (Evangelical Theological Society Papers, Ets-4856, 1996), 14, accessed July 27, 2018, doi:10.2986/tren.ETS-4856. Uncritical certainty or uncritical uncertainty, he writes, are flawed positions that do not afford the same benefits as does critical certainty. A history of the concept of worldview as a philosophical concept is also presented in Cabal's work. For additional discussion of this concept, see David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.) For discussion of worldview and evangelism, see Charles Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013).

⁵¹Through merit making, folk Buddhists believe their present circumstances might be improved. Donald Swearer explains, "The physical presence of the sangha also provides the context for merit-making (*punna*), which is one of the most important ways Buddhism addresses the problem of suffering and the attainment of worldly success. Although the Buddha taught that the ultimate resolution to the ontological problem of suffering (*dukkha*) was the achievement of nirvana, Theravada Buddhism also addresses the wide variety of injustices and inequities everyone experiences in daily life. These injustices and inequities are explained by the teachings of karma and rebirth (*samsara*). From a karmic point of view one's condition in life results from the balance between good and bad deeds and intentions in past lives as well as those in one's present life. Meritorious actions that benefit and support the sangha, ranging from morning food offerings and major financial gifts to ordination as a monk, positively affect one's karmic

from a Christian worldview, as opposed to a folk Buddhist one, provides folk Buddhists with instruction about the Christian worldview.⁵²

Christian truths exist whether or not humans assent to their reality. In a Northern Thai setting, a majority of hearers disagree with the Christian worldview. They instead maintain folk Buddhist worldviews. Rectifying this situation requires a worldview revolution in the minds of folk Buddhists.⁵³ This kind of influence on the beliefs of others is not something that humans are able to affect alone. Respondent 15 communicates a dependence on God in her evangelism by praying and knowing that the Holy Spirit goes with her when she shares the gospel. She shows evidence of trust and an awareness of God's presence. This dependence on the Holy Spirit is an essential element of all effective evangelism. Initial gospel witness in a Northern Thai setting might take the form of teaching on the Christian worldview. Attempting to incorporate only some components of the Christian worldview into the existing folk Buddhist worldview is ill-advised. Presenting the entirety of a Christian worldview, as recommended throughout this study, is best undertaken over time in the context of relationships.

balance and, therefore, one's condition in present and future existences." Donald K. Swearer, "Theravada Buddhist Societies" in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*, 88-89.

⁵²Suffering is synonymous with *samsaric* existence in Buddhism. The only way out is by accruing merit and avoiding the accrual of karma. In a Christian worldview, suffering is a result of mankind's sin against God. A promise of future freedom from sin exists and is only fulfilled in Christ. The presence of *pii* also require assessment from a Christian worldview. Andrew Skilton writes "It is an incontrovertible fact that, in all Asian cultures where Buddhism has been established, Buddhism co-exists alongside cults of gods and supernatural entities of all kinds." He points to the presence of non-human elements often present in Buddhist worship and the temporal benefits that worshipping these may bring "Such interaction is instrumental, insofar as the figure thus honoured is so with the intention of gaining benefits that are within its disposal." Andrew Skilton, "Buddhism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 338-39, accessed July 14, 2018, doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199644650.013.004. The Northern Thai interaction with *pii* fits within Skilton's description. Addressing these from a Christian worldview involves teaching about the existence of demons and spiritual warfare.

⁵³Respondent 10 references the family of Respondent 6 and their care for the Thai people. He mentions that Thai people do not want to lose face, and that Thai people do not accept others who change because of Jesus Christ. In his own village, he pointed to social cohesion as a barrier: ". . . they call themselves Buddhists because they don't want to look different from the other people. But they don't understand Christianity. If you [convert] to [be] a Christian, the people who are Buddhists, will ask you why you do a different thing. You won't be the same as us." According to Respondent 10, fear of others and fear of betraying one's family are barriers to conversion. Respondent 10, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

Important aspects of the Christian worldview include God as person and creator, the role of humankind as image bearers, the problem of sin (*baab*) as offense against a holy God, the perfect life and sacrifice of Christ as a propitiation for the sins of Christians, the promise of future glorification in heaven with God, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers, and the reality of spiritual warfare. These doctrinal points stand in contrast to folk Buddhist beliefs that include the dispensability of a personal deity, the non-self, a cyclical nature of time and the cosmos, *baab* as breaking a moral code that accrues karma, a law of self-reliance, rebirth, and the presence of *pii* (spirits) that help or harm humans.

The folk Buddhist worldview is pervasive in Northern Thailand. Local ethics, self-identity, and family roles are heavily influenced by Buddhist ideals.⁵⁴ Paul Hiebert defines worldview as “fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives.”⁵⁵ If Buddhism may be categorized as an axial religion, there is difficulty in approaching Northern Thai folk Buddhism directly as a religious system with any kind of power-encounter.⁵⁶ Criticizing the Buddhist worldview and comparing it to Christianity when folk Buddhism is all that hearers know cause undue offense. These offenses arise in part because the Christian worldview is not understood. Criticizing their folk Buddhist

⁵⁴Respondent 4 provides an apologetic approach to sharing the gospel that includes a correction to what she believes to be Thai misperceptions about Christianity. Christianity is not a religion, she explains, “Jesus is real. Jesus is still alive. When Jesus comes to your life. Jesus can change your life and help your life. Jesus loves you.” Thai Buddhists, she says, are scared of losing their old tradition to have a new one in Christianity. That’s why she points to Jesus instead of Christianity as a religion. Also, she references the moral component of Christianity that many Buddhists are scared to follow. Folk Buddhists, she explains, are confused by Christian denominational difference among Protestants and differences between Protestants and Catholics. Respondent 4, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017.

⁵⁵Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

⁵⁶Erik Cohen. “Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand: The ‘Battle of the Axes’ and the ‘Contest of Power.’” *Social Compass* 38, no. 2 (June 1, 1991): 117.

worldview confronts ego orientation among Northern Thai people.⁵⁷ Rather than polemics, a much better approach for Northern Thai Christians is friendships with folk Buddhists that include phenomenologically oriented presentations of the Christian worldview.⁵⁸ For Northern Thai folk Buddhists, Christian doctrines are hard to understand at first. Over time, Christian truth claims begin to make more sense as the entire Christian worldview is taught. Commitments to gospel-centered friendships from Northern Thai Christians help sustain relationships with folk Buddhists marked by initial disagreement.

Northern Thai Christians Should Encourage Folk Buddhists to Pray to God for Specific Needs, for Healing, and to Seek Answers to Heart-Level Questions

Some respondents recalled that in their former folk Buddhist experience, Christians approached them and challenged them to pray to God about their felt needs. When they prayed, God answered their prayers with provision, healing, and assurance. The brother of Respondent 8, who was already a Christian, gave him a copy of the Gospel of Matthew. Respondent 8 began attending the nearest church to his village. A month later, he was alone at his farm when he suffered a stroke. Despite the isolated location of his farm, he eventually received help. Respondent 8 recalled praying for God to preserve his life, “God, oh help me. Help me. I don’t want to die.”⁵⁹ He relates that God provided him with a miraculous healing and preservation. Respondent 5 accepted Christ immediately after her miraculous healing which took place at a church service

⁵⁷Sunatree Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns* (Bangkok: Magenta Company, 1991), 133.

⁵⁸Respondent 19 feels that making relationships is the most important practice when sharing the gospel. When sharing the gospel in his hometown, he takes time to explain some basic Christian doctrine and shares his testimony without pressuring anyone to make an immediate decision. He stresses the need to maintain Thai social expectations, specifically *glang chai*, when talking with an older person. Respondent 19, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 11, 2017.

⁵⁹Respondent 8, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

while she was still a Buddhist. Her arm had a painful tumor. When she raised her arm in order to receive a blessing from God, it was miraculously healed. She recalls, “Immediately, I decided to receive Him, because . . . I challenged God.”⁶⁰

Though asking God to meet felt needs is not saving faith in and of itself, these actions are gateways to trusting God in small ways, potentially leading to belief in the gospel and identification with Christ. Exercises in faith present respondents with several considerations. The first consideration is that the Christian God is a personal God who hears prayer. Second, His power over the affairs of men is absolute and he is able to answer prayer. Third, this God who hears and answers prayer is self-giving and offers more than momentary or temporal blessing. These statements are a collection of worldview components that lay foundations for the gospel. Through the gospel, God offers himself and invites humans to take part in his plan for his glory and their eternal benefit.

After receiving God’s answers to their prayers, folk Buddhists are confronted by relational interactions with God that challenge their previous beliefs and present them with confirmations of a Christian worldview. During this time, it is important that Christian friends or family members provide support and evidences of God’s work in their own lives through sharing testimonies. These phenomenologically oriented descriptions of the Christian worldview offered by trusted friends and family members allow folk Buddhists to interpret God’s answers to prayer from a Christian worldview. In addition to sharing testimonies of what God has done for them, Northern Thai Christians should invite folk Buddhists to interact with the Bible in small groups, to observe Christian worship at church, and (if appropriate to the life-stage of the folk Buddhists) to form deeper relationships with Northern Thai Christians by living at Christian dormitories.

⁶⁰Respondent 5, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 5, 2017.

Respondents' testimonies include answers to prayers and thankfulness for God's blessings which precipitated their turning to Christ. God's answers to respondents' prayers continue after their conversions. Respondent 16 explained that she had moved to Bangkok for a job, and that if she had not been a Christian, her life would have resembled her friend whose life was then marked by having many boyfriends and lots of drinking. She said, "God protected me from that. If I didn't know Jesus Christ, maybe I'd be pregnant with a boyfriend. Lots of bad things if I didn't know Jesus. God protected me different than my friend."⁶¹ After receiving a scholarship to come to Chiang Mai, she left her non-Christian boyfriend in Bangkok. Now she feels blessed by God. She asserts, "Right now I have a little land and a house. I came from a poor family. God has blessed me so much."⁶²

Respondent 8 reflected with sorrow on his wife's lack of thankfulness and a corresponding loneliness he felt before becoming a believer. He and his wife lived apart for five years. This saddened him, but his spirits improved after his conversion. He mentioned several hymns he heard in a local church, that he cried upon hearing them. One of the songs, "The Altar," turned his heart back to his wife. The message of the song is to purify the "the worship place in your heart" and to return to family members, forgiving them, and bringing them to the church.⁶³ These instances of answered prayers reveal God's continued work in respondents' lives. Sharing these anecdotes in the context of describing a Christian worldview provides folk Buddhist hearers with additional motivations to relate to the Christian God.

⁶¹Respondent 16, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 10, 2017.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Respondent 8, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

Northern Thai Christians Should Invite Folk Buddhists to Attend Cell Group Meetings, to Gather with Worshipers at Churches, or to Live in Christian Dormitories

The gospel is most clearly communicated in a Northern Thai setting by Northern Thai Christians who maintain gospel-centered relationships with folk Buddhists. Respondents described various settings that facilitated the formation of their Christian faith. These include cell group meetings, church services, and Christian dormitories. In these settings, respondents were able to interact with Christians and learn about the Christian worldview.

A cell group is a collection of Northern Thai Christians that meets to intentionally interact with the Bible, dialogue, and pray. Cell group meetings are not formal church services and do not include sermons. It is likely that lay-Christians populate small groups. At church services, attendees would similarly be able to interact with Northern Thai Christians. However, at church services, they are likely also exposed to a pastor's teaching and corporate worship. Respondents who mentioned attending church services as folk Buddhists did not always recount their conversions as immediate. Consistent exposure to God's word and a higher potential for encountering evangelism means that church attendance likely increases opportunities for Northern Thai folk Buddhists to hear, understand, and believe the gospel.

In corporate worship, folk Buddhists encounter sermons in which a trained Christian minister expounds a portion of the Bible. Ideally, times of prayer and invitations to believe the gospel are also present in church services. Respondent 1 explained that weekly church attendance is more frequent compared to Buddhists' temple attendance, and that many Buddhists would rather work on Sundays. A loss of income concerns Folk Buddhists. Again, this reveals the priorities of folk Buddhists when they evaluate Christianity from their own worldviews. Respondent 12 reported that folk Buddhists believe Christianity to be a religion for rich people, based on missionary

lifestyles, and that they could not be friends with Christians since they themselves are poor. Actual relationships with Thai Christians through church or small group attendance would likely help these folk Buddhists overcome their surface-level barriers to the gospel.

Christian dormitories exist in significant enough numbers in Northern Thailand to be mentioned as viable settings for Christians to build relationships with folk Buddhists. Respondent 18 recalls that when he lived in a Christian dormitory as a folk Buddhist, he met his wife, who was already a Christian. Positive interactions with Christians and their invitations to pray to God led him to saving faith in Christ.

Northern Thai Christians Should Begin to Disseminate the Idea that Thai Christianity has Traditionally Been Practiced in Thailand

A perception exists among Northern Thai observers that Christianity is a foreign concept in their setting. However, Buddhism is considered a Thai tradition. Christianity originated in the Middle East. American missionaries brought Christianity to Thailand. The Theravada form of Buddhism practiced in Northern Thailand originated in Northern India and was brought to Thailand by Sri Lankan monks. Buddhism arrived hundreds of years before Christianity. Partially because of its longevity, and partly because the influences of Buddhism and animism are so pervasive in Thai culture, the folk Buddhist worldview holds sway over most Northern Thai.⁶⁴

⁶⁴Respondent 3 identifies Thai culture and traditions as barriers to faith in Christ. Thai people give food to the monk and feel that they have to go to the temple. They are afraid they'll not have food when they pass away, and defend these beliefs against Christianity. Furthermore, some Thai believe Christianity is a foreign religion, belonging to the *farang* but not the Thai people. (*Farang* is the Thai word for foreigner.) Respondent 3, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 3, 2017. The relationships of Buddhist parents to their offspring are influenced by the Northern Thai folk Buddhist belief that they themselves will survive their own deaths and continue in the afterlife as dependent beings. According to the belief, their children would need to continue in Buddhism if they would have food in the afterlife.

If folk Buddhists continue associating Christianity with foreigners, this barrier for the gospel in Northern Thailand will persist. Douglas Jacobsen writes, “Christianity began in Asia, and it remained a predominantly Asian religion for many centuries. Jesus was Asian, and so were all his immediate followers.”⁶⁵ The gospel transcends cultures, but folk Buddhists in Northern Thailand assess the gospel from their local perspectives. Readers may recall that Western missionaries were not present as evangelists in my respondents’ testimonies. Taken at face value, their absence is evidence that Northern Thai believers are taking ownership of front line gospel witness for their families, friends, and neighbors.

Modern Northern Thai Christians ought to study and disseminate the biographies and ministry histories of prominent Thai Christians from the past.⁶⁶ By educating themselves on historical Thai participation in the gospel, Thai Christians will further indigenize their faith in their own thinking. They ought to present historical examples of Christianity as an indigenized faith traditionally practiced and transmitted by faithful Thai believers. With biographical evidence to back up their claims, Northern Thai Christians can emphasize Thai participation in the gospel and hopefully overcome this perceived barrier in the minds of Northern Thai folk Buddhists.

Conclusion

The gospel message is powerful and transformative. Regarding relationship focused evangelism, Robert Coleman writes,

⁶⁵Douglas Jacobsen, *Global Gospel: An Introduction to Christianity on Five Continents* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 147.

⁶⁶I make this suggestion with the hopeful assumption that historical biographies of Thai believers are available. Northern Thai believers are best able to identify these biographies, collect them, and determine the format and quality of historical records according to local needs and considerations.

That is why we must say with E. M. Bounds that “men are God’s method.” Until we have such people imbued with his Spirit and committed to his plan, none of our methods will work.⁶⁷

Respondent interviews show that it is generally through relationships with Northern Thai Christians that formerly folk Buddhist respondents heard the gospel and became Christians. Regarding the prevalence of Thai traditions and their hold on Northern Thai people, Respondent 8 told me, “no one can stop this work, only God.”⁶⁸

Christianity is a minority faith in Northern Thailand. As such, few Northern Thai possess a clear understanding of the gospel or the Christian worldview. The Apostle Paul discusses the need to hear the gospel and the means through which God transmits his truth in Romans 10:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Rom 10:14-15 ESV).

I humbly offer these suggestions for Northern Thai Christians to evangelize. I base them upon my respondents’ emic perspectives as my primary sources of information. These proposals are hypotheses based upon their descriptions of Northern Thai folk Buddhists’ widespread ignorance of the Christian worldview.

For Northern Thai folk Buddhists to understand the gospel, much patient instruction regarding the Christian worldview must take place. Northern Thai Christians should continue to faithfully share the gospel with family members, friends, and neighbors. Folk Buddhists best learn about the Christian worldview in the context of gospel-centered relationships with Christians. As respondents’ interviews reveal, these relationships are facilitated by participation in cell groups, attending church services, and potentially through living in Christian dormitories. My suggested approaches to evangelism in Northern Thailand consider the themes of tradition and relationship as a

⁶⁷Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2006), 97.

⁶⁸Respondent 8, interview by author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 6, 2017.

motivator for religious adherence identified in respondent accounts. These proposals also address the unique cultural components of Northern Thailand, as informed by secondary literature. My hope is that these proposals will aid Northern Thai Christians at better overcoming barriers to the gospel in a Northern Thai setting and that these suggestions for gospel witness will bear much fruit by the power of the Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Chapter 1 of this dissertation states the research question, “What trends are present in the testimonies of formerly Buddhist Northern Thai Christians?” To answer this research question, I interviewed twenty Buddhist background Northern Thai believers in October 2017 and administered grounded theory to their testimonies in Atlas.ti. I identified two trends in respondents’ testimonies: tradition and relationship as a motivator for religious adherence. Identifying these trends is key for understanding the character of folk Buddhism in the region. The existence of these trends among Northern Thai folk Buddhists also influences the character of interpersonal relationships in the region. Interaction with pertinent literature reveals that folk Buddhism does not solely influence the character of Northern Thai people. Instead, innately Thai character qualities among this population shape the transmission and practice of folk Buddhism.

Northern Thai Christians are practitioners of a minority religion in this region. Because of the unique characters of Northern Thai folk Buddhists, Northern Thai Christians must take care to approach their folk Buddhist family members, friends, and neighbors with the gospel in a way that avoids unintelligibility and undue offense. Respondents, as Buddhist background believers, helpfully reflected on their own former practices and offered suggestions for evangelizing Northern Thai folk Buddhists based upon their emic perspectives. This research hypothesizes that two trends in respondent testimonies, tradition and relationship as a motivator for religious adherence, are primary

reasons why such care must be taken in presenting the gospel among Northern Thai folk Buddhists.

Tradition

Northern Thai Respondents identify Buddhism and animism as Thai traditions that act as barriers to the gospel. These belief systems exist as a syncretistic whole and compose a form of folk Buddhism unique to the region. This Northern Thai setting was formerly the Lanna kingdom. Historical factors continue to influence the shape of modern religious practice there.

Chapter 2 describes the history of the Lanna kingdom. Earliest records of Lanna include the presence of animistic rituals assimilated when local rulers served as patrons to monks who practiced a Sinhalese form of Buddhism. Over time, most kings persisted as patrons of Buddhism, building *chedis*, commissioning Buddha statues, and practicing Buddhism themselves. When a king aligned himself with animistic ritual practices, as was done by Sam Fang Kaen, Buddhist practice declined in Northern Thailand. Undeterred by this lapse of patronage, local Buddhist monks sought out support and reinforcement from Sri Lanka and responded by teaching Sinhalese Buddhism throughout Thailand.

Because of the prominence of Buddhist patronage in Lanna, a mismanagement of civic funds caused a kingdom-wide economic decline, which led to invasion from neighboring kingdoms. The Lanna kingdom was overtaken and Chiang Mai was left desolate in 1776. Eventually, the Thai king annexed the region, exerting his rule and influence on Northern Thailand from Bangkok. Outside pressures such as trade with the British and technological advances such as railroads and telegraphs also made Northern Thailand more accessible. Until the early twentieth century, the isolated nature of Northern Thailand meant that the sub-culture of the former Lanna kingdom was largely protected from the influence of the Thai government and Bangkok culture. Today, the

nation of Thailand has incorporated Chiang Mai. Still, Northern Thai folk Buddhism retains local animistic traditions that existed in the historical Lanna kingdom.

The Northern Thai region has a higher percentage of Christians than does the rest of Thailand. Protestant missionaries arrived in Northern Thailand in the late nineteenth century and began evangelizing folk Buddhists. The introduction of Christianity in Northern Thailand is credited to the fruitful ministry of Daniel McGilvary and other pioneer missionaries in the region. Though Christianity has always been a minority faith in Northern Thailand, the footprint of Christianity there includes a large number of churches, Christian institutions of higher learning, and (notable in several respondents' testimonies) the presence of Christian dormitories. Christianity's lengthy history in the region is arguably a Northern Thai tradition. Despite the historical practice of Christianity among Northern Thai people, respondents report that Northern Thai folk Buddhists do not consider Christianity to be a Thai tradition and instead associate Christianity with foreigners. They label Buddhism and animism Thai traditions because of their lengthy histories and prominent influences on local culture. Folk Buddhists in the region consider these traditions to be effectively indigenous to Northern Thailand.

In reality, the practice of animistic rituals predates the practice of Buddhism in Northern Thailand. Earliest records of the Lanna kingdom reveal that power structures originally included animistic rituals and were overtaken or assimilated into kings' practices of Buddhism. Related folk Buddhist power structures among Northern Thai people continue today. Folk Buddhists experience these interpersonally. In Northern Thailand, those who seek the accrual of merit for transcendent purposes receive acceptance and affirmation from other folk Buddhists. Animistic practices involve the worship of local spirits known as *pii*, which are experienced temporally by folk Buddhists in the region. These worldview-forming traditions are passed down through family relationships, reinforced through interactions with folk Buddhist friends, and are expected components of folk Buddhists' participation in Thai society.

Relationship as a Motivator for Religious Adherence

Relationships among folk Buddhists in Northern Thailand contain expectations for ritual participation. Parents teach their children folk Buddhist rituals, hoping that they will continue these traditions. Failure on the part of children to continue in folk Buddhist traditions leads to a perceived loss of face for the family. This offense has to do with strong emphases on ego-orientation in Thai character. Refraining from taking part in folk Buddhist rituals entails a violation of *bunghun*, the expected reciprocal kindness present between Thai parents and their children. Northern Thai folk Buddhist parents also maintain a belief that they will require food in the afterlife. This expectation requires their children to make posthumous offerings to Buddhist monks on their behalf. The existence of these expectations and the resulting ostracization when these expectations are not met constitutes an identifiable social solidarity among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Relationships among Northern Thai folk Buddhists are motivators for ritual performance.

Respondents related that family relationships most often influenced their participation in folk Buddhist religious traditions. However, human expectations are not the sole motivators for folk Buddhists to maintain these ritual practices. Respondents reported *pii* causing sickness and death of family members. These terrifying effects of improper animistic ritual performance are visceral reminders for Northern Thai of the power that their traditional beliefs have over them. Because animistic belief systems do not rely on formal texts, as do Buddhism and Christianity, these animistic beliefs are passed on through first-hand experiences, by the examples of family members and friends, or through the instruction of folk Buddhist monks.

This dissertation includes interaction with respondents' testimonies. Respondents most often described their introduction to the gospel through friendships with Northern Thai Christians. Nearly all respondents I interviewed are first-generation

believers. These respondents broke with family traditions, upsetting the social solidarity of their folk Buddhist families. For Northern-Thai folk Buddhists, conversion to Christianity involves overcoming such barriers. These barriers consist of folk Buddhist traditions and relationships with family and friends accompanied by expectations for folk Buddhist ritual performance. This dissertation is descriptive in that it highlights the character of folk Buddhism in Northern Thailand. I wrote this dissertation from a Christian worldview and in it, I provide prescriptive elements to promote acceptance of the gospel among Northern Thai folk Buddhists.

Since the Northern Thai respondents I interviewed strongly value relationships, great care must be taken to meet interpersonal expectations present in their setting. Living as a Christian is counter-cultural in Northern Thailand and brings shame on the families of new converts. Northern Thai Christians' conversions are interpreted as personal rejections of families, since conversions constitute breaks with families' traditions. Furthermore, Northern Thai folk Buddhists believe that association with a foreign religion takes place, since Christianity is not considered to be a Thai tradition. A problem of perception exists because Northern Thai folk Buddhists associate Christianity with Westerners.

Suggestions for Evangelism

Perhaps the most counter-intuitive finding from this study is the degree to which Christianity's association with Westerners remains a problem in the minds of Northern Thai Christians. Because folk Buddhism in Northern Thailand is practiced within an interconnected web of relationships, conversions to Christianity unavoidably include repentance from formerly shared allegiances and loyalties. These refusals to participate in folk Buddhist rituals are often perceived as betrayal by Northern Thai folk Buddhists. A continued disassociation of Christianity with accepted Thai modes of existence poses a problem that Northern Thai Christians ought to directly address. Folk

Buddhists are not the only parties able to identify what constitutes a Thai tradition. Northern Thai Christians have a heritage of indigenized Christian faith that ought to be formally incorporated in their self-identities. Then, Northern Thai Christians may emphasize the historical evidence for Christianity as a Thai tradition in relationships with folk Buddhist family members, friends, and neighbors.

I offer several hypotheses aimed at furthering the gospel in Northern Thailand. Western missionaries in Northern Thailand should seek to disciple, equip, and encourage existing populations of Northern Thai Christians rather than serving primarily as evangelists among folk Buddhists. Especially in Northern Thailand, the population of Northern Thai Christians is large enough to impact those with whom they have already developed relationships. As Northern Thai Christians are encouraged to utilize their existing social networks, the gospel will move along a path that is more acceptable in the minds of relationship-focused Northern Thai. As Northern Thai people increasingly become the face of Christianity in the region, the perception that Christianity is a Northern Thai tradition among Northern Thai folk Buddhists *and* Northern Thai Christians will increase.

In writing this admonition, I am painfully aware of my own identity as a Western missiologist. I offer this suggestion to Northern Thai Christians for overcoming association with Westerners by broadcasting Thai church history as a tentative and humble proposition. My suggestion for Western missionaries to serve primarily as disciplers among Northern Thai Christians is similarly offered as a proposition for Northern Thai Christians to consider and test. Without my self-delimitation and reliance on emic perspectives, this dissertation would seem to be a rather hypocritical exercise. I modestly affirm that the Northern Thai Christians who provided their testimonies are experts in their setting and my efforts here are an attempt to partner with them to accomplish our shared goals.

My hope is that Northern Thai Christians, who already understand that their existing relationships with family members, friends, and neighbors provide the best path to transmit the gospel to Northern Thai folk Buddhists, would formalize and actualize this knowledge by engaging in more and more evangelism and discipleship among this target population. Even if Western missionaries are more adept at sharing the gospel clearly, accompanying baggage brought by Westerners reinforces an existing barrier to acceptance among Northern Thai people: the perception that Christianity is a foreign religion. As such, missionaries in Northern Thailand should calibrate their efforts to best serve the purposes of Christ in the region.

Presenting the Christian worldview to Northern Thai folk Buddhists is a task with unique challenges. Because the folk Buddhist worldview is a lens through which Christian doctrines are initially assessed by folk Buddhists, Christians ministering in Northern Thailand ought to expect a lengthy process of teaching the Christian worldview before the gospel becomes intelligible. An emphasis on relationships among Northern Thai people also means that a message's acceptance is strongly associated with how folk Buddhist hearers relate to the messenger. The gospel is best transmitted along existing relational pathways.

Christians should continue to attempt some non-relational means of gospel witness, but barriers of unintelligibility due to traditional elements in Northern Thai culture are most effectively broken down in the context of gospel-centered relationships. I propose that training in Christian worldview formation among Northern Thai Christians would aid their efforts to evangelize more effectively among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. As Northern Thai Christians share the entire Christian worldview over time in the context of gospel-centered relationships, barriers of unintelligibility are overcome. For Northern Thai Christians, a lengthy process of maintaining gospel-centered friendships also allows for the credible communication of the gospel to folk Buddhists.

Suggestions for Future Research

This dissertation focuses on the phenomenological recollections of Northern Thai Buddhist background believers. Findings reveal that Northern Thai folk Buddhists do not believe Christianity to be a Thai tradition. A fruitful avenue for future research might be the formal development of a program aimed at equipping Northern Thai Christians to answer this specific criticism.

This program might be one designed to inform Northern Thai Christians about church history specific to their region. Special emphases ought to include education on the “Thai-ness” of Christianity. Biographies of Northern Thai Christians from history would give modern Northern Thai Christians stronger associations with previous generations of Northern Thai believers with whom they share cultural connections. Lessons from the past practices of these historical Northern Thai believers ought to include transferrable concepts that promote properly contextualized evangelism, discipleship, and strategies to overcome context specific barriers to conversion. As with North American church history, not all lessons from the past of Northern Thai Christianity are positive. Some examples may be presented as parables to be avoided. If possible, presenting these as case studies would allow for student-led reflection and assessment.¹ Since many Northern Thai Christians are formerly Buddhist, this program should contain purposeful instruction regarding the entirety of the Christian worldview and careful comparison of Christian doctrines with folk Buddhist beliefs. This course of study would allow Northern Thai Christian participants to assess their own understandings of the Christian worldview and would also better equip them to share Christianity with folk Buddhist family members, friends, and neighbors.

¹Modern day testimonies from Northern Thai Buddhist background believers might also serve as case studies with which to facilitate evangelism among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Hypothetically, respondents could provide their testimonies for inclusion in a small, twenty page Thai-language booklet. These booklets of testimonies might encourage Northern Thai believers and assist efforts for evangelism in the region. Northern Thai Christians might consider presenting these cases in the style of Ichabod Spencer’s *A Pastor’s Sketches*.

Another suggestion for future research is interviewing groups of respondents in different locations throughout Thailand using this same list of interview questions. Eliciting the testimonies of respondents from Northeast, Central, or Southern Thailand would helpfully provide contrast to this study and would likely produce region-specific ideas about best practices for evangelism based upon the differences in local cultures and demographic trends in these respective regions.

Conclusion

Northern Thai Buddhist background believers' testimonies include prominent trends: tradition and relationship as a motivator for religious adherence. Implications of these trends ought to be considered when undertaking Christian ministry among folk Buddhists in Northern Thailand. Innate characteristics of ego orientation and a strong relational orientation influence the practice of folk Buddhism among Northern Thai people. Social expectations among Northern Thai folk Buddhists include participation in folk Buddhist rituals. The same family relationships through which folk Buddhism is most often transmitted are in-turn partially defined by elements of a folk Buddhist worldview. This dissertation considers respondents' testimonies and suggestions for fruitful ministry in Northern Thailand alongside pertinent literature. This study presents readers with descriptions of Northern Thai folk Buddhism and prescribes several hypotheses for effective gospel witness among this target population: Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Northern Thai Christians must navigate their own Christian practice and maintain positive relationships with family members, friends, and neighbors despite their own refusal to take part in folk Buddhist rituals. These Northern Thai Christians ought to live as relationally-engaged sojourners who invite family members, friends, and neighbors to join them in living out a distinctly Christian Thai tradition in their Northern Thai setting.

APPENDIX 1
DEMOGRAPHICS

Age and Occupation

The first question asked of respondents was, “What is your age and occupation? Answers to the first part of this question ranged from nineteen years old to seventy-nine years in age. In order from youngest to oldest, respondent ages at time of interview were reported as 19, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 40, 42, 44, 46, 51, 52, 53, 56, 58, 64, 68, 79, and 79 years.

Time since Conversion

The third question concerned how long each respondent had been a Christian. Answers ranged from a period of two to forty years. Answers, in order from smallest to largest were 2 years, 2.5 years, 4 or 5 years, 5 years, 5 years, 6 years, 7 or 8 years, 7 or 8 years, 8 years, almost 10 years, 13 years, 15 years, 15 years, about 15 years, 20 years, 20 years, 21 years, almost 30 years, 35 years, and 40 years.

APPENDIX 2

OPEN CODING FREQUENCY REPORT

Table A1. Open Coding Frequency Report

Codes	Buddhism	Animism	Aspects of Conversion to Christianity
Fear of <i>Pii</i>		6	
Festivals/holidays	12	1	
Influence from animist		3	
Influence from Family	17	21	3
Magic		5	
<i>Pii</i> Worship: Occasional or Festival		17	
Spirit Possession		11	
Attendance Buddhist Temple	24		
Became a Monk	4		
Buddhist Doctrine	4		
Buddhist/Christian Syncretism	2		
Did Not Perform Buddhist Rituals	3		
Influence from Buddhists	9		
Made Merit	9		
Meditation	8		
Negative Assessment of Christianity	3		

Table A1- continued

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Buddhism</i>	<i>Animism</i>	<i>Aspects of Conversion to Christianity</i>
Offer Food to Monk for Deceased Parent	5		
Offer Food/Money to Monk/Temple	9		
Offer Children to Monk for Healing	1		
Prayed as a Buddhist	4		
Respect to Deceased Person	2		
Respect Monk	3		
Ritual for Luck	4		
Ritual Funeral For adherent	1		
Service as Temple Boy	4		
Thai Tradition	2		
Use of Buddha Amulet	3		
Use of Pali	5		
Wai to Buddha Idol	9		
Wai to Respect Buddha	8		
Christian Dormitory or Christian School			3
Church Attendance			16
Direct Invitation to become Christian			6
Healing			2
Invitation to Christian Festival/Party			4

Table A1- continued

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Buddhism</i>	<i>Animism</i>	<i>Aspects of Conversion to Christianity</i>
Invitation to Pray to God			6
Joined Cell Group			6
Negative Assessment of Buddhism			6
Studying Bible or Christian Book			9
Totals	155	64	61

APPENDIX 3

INTERACTION WITH PERTINENT LITERATURE

Table A2. Interaction with Pertinent Literature

--	<i>Interacts with theme: Relationship</i>	<i>Interacts with theme: Tradition</i>	<i>Written from an Orthodox Christian worldview</i>	<i>Use of Grounded Theory</i>	<i>Focuses on a Northern Thai Setting</i>	<i>Interacts specifically with Ethnic Thai</i>	<i>Modern day Setting</i>
“Northern Thai Theravada Folk Buddhism through the Eyes of Buddhist Background Believers”	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sunatree Komin’s <i>Psychology of the Thai People</i>	X					X	X
“Lausanne Occasional Paper 15”	X	X	X				X

Table A2- continued

--	<i>Interacts with theme: Relationship</i>	<i>Interacts with theme: Tradition</i>	<i>Written from an Orthodox Christian worldview</i>	<i>Use of Grounded Theory</i>	<i>Focuses on a Northern Thai Setting</i>	<i>Interacts specifically with Ethnic Thai</i>	<i>Modern day Setting</i>
Erik Cohen's "Buddhism and Christianity in Thailand"		X				X	
Sugarn Tangsirisatian's "Factors Relevant to Conversion among Thai University Students"	X	X	X			X	X
Edwin Zehner's "Unavoidably Hybrid: Thai Buddhist . . ."	X					X	X
Stanley Tambiah's <i>Northeastern Spirit Cults</i>	X	X				X	

Table A2- continued

--	<i>Interacts with theme: Relationship</i>	<i>Interacts with theme: Tradition</i>	<i>Written from an Orthodox Christian worldview</i>	<i>Use of Grounded Theory</i>	<i>Focuses on a Northern Thai Setting</i>	<i>Interacts specifically with Ethnic Thai</i>	<i>Modern day Setting</i>
Nantachai Mejudhon's "The Way of Meekness"	X		X			X	X
Wan Petchsingkram's <i>Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree</i>		X	X			X	X
Kenneth Wells' <i>Thai Buddhism</i>	X	X	X			X	
Alex Smith's <i>Siamese Gold</i>	X	X	X			X	
Philip Hughes' <i>Proclamation and Response</i>		X	X		X	X	
Herb Swanson's <i>Khrischak Muang Nua</i>	X	X			X	X	

Table A2- continued

--	<i>Interacts with theme: Relationship</i>	<i>Interacts with theme: Tradition</i>	<i>Written from an Orthodox Christian worldview</i>	<i>Use of Grounded Theory</i>	<i>Focuses on a Northern Thai Setting</i>	<i>Interacts specifically with Ethnic Thai</i>	<i>Modern day Setting</i>
David Lim's <i>Sharing Jesus . . .</i> series	X	X	X			X	X
Marten Visser's "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand."	X	X	X		X		X

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ABSTRACT

NORTHERN THAI THERAVADA FOLK BUDDHISM THROUGH THE EYES OF BUDDHIST BACKGROUND BELIEVERS

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The research in this dissertation reveals that the testimonies of Northern Thai Buddhist background believers include two themes: relationship as a motivator for religious adherence and tradition. These themes are present in shared descriptions of their former practice as folk Buddhists. These themes are also prominent in their testimonies of how they came to Christ and in their current practices as Christians. Chapter 1 presents the research question and methodology. The research question is “What trends are present in the testimonies of formerly Buddhist Northern Thai Christians?” Methodology includes literature review, interviews, narrative analysis, and grounded theory.

Chapter 2 contains a description of historical folk Buddhism and recounts the history of Christian mission in Northern Thailand. This chapter presents the reader with historical instances of many ritual forms that are present in respondents’ accounts.

Chapter 3 includes respondents’ answers to interview questions and organizes them according to two themes: relationship as a motivator for religious adherence and tradition. Their answers provide composite narratives of how respondents left folk Buddhism and became Christians. Chapter 4 includes interaction with themes identified in respondents’ accounts and pertinent literature.

Chapter 5 is composed of suggestions for ministry and evangelism among Northern Thai folk Buddhists based upon identified themes from respondents’ accounts

and pertinent literature. Chapter 6 summarizes findings and emphasizes the importance of relationships as motivators for religious adherence. Also highlighted is the prominent place of traditions among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Concluding chapters discuss the importance of understanding these themes for researching Northern Thai folk Buddhism and for furthering Christian missions in Northern Thailand. This dissertation highlights the need for Northern Thai Christians to form gospel-centered relationships when evangelizing and making disciples among Northern Thai folk Buddhists. Also emphasized are traditional elements of the folk Buddhist worldview that act as barriers to Christian evangelism and discipleship in Northern Thailand. Because this dissertation is written from a Christian worldview, suggestions intended to further acceptance of the gospel among Northern Thai folk Buddhists are included.

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