

**"A PROLEGOMENA FOR THE THAI CONTEXT: A Starting Point for Thai Theology"**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

The Thai are not interested in systematic theology. This statement puzzled me earlier on in my missionary career but I soon came to realize that even among the faculty of theological institutions, little enthusiasm exists for the subject.

The reason is not too hard to find. Most, if not all, of the theology taught in Thailand, as in most other parts of the region, is Western in origin. This theology was formed and developed historically in the context of the questions, epistemology and philosophy of the Western mind. D. T. Niles once expressed this concern with brilliant imagery. Christianity in Asia, he said, is like a potted plant which has been transported without being transplanted.<sup>1</sup>

More specifically, the thought processes and epistemology of the Thai have generally not developed along Western lines. They hold different presuppositions and world view to that of the West. Furthermore, local theologies which are directly applicable to the Thai mind and culture have not yet emerged.<sup>2</sup> The gospel of Jesus Christ can not yet be said to have become rooted in the Thai mind.

Further, given the make up of Eastern thought, some have also questioned the place or timeliness of *systematized* theology in the Asian context.<sup>3</sup>

What attempts so far that have been made at contextual theology in Asia have by and large been theologies *from below* where primarily the context, rather than revelation, has dictated the agenda. These have generally not been well received by the more orthodox evangelical sector and the result has been a wariness of any form of contextualization.

If we are to be not only orthodox, however, but also effective then the context of the recipient must of necessity be considered. Orthodoxy places importance on revelation, the authority of scripture and attention to the historical faith as handed down to us. Effectiveness places importance on the mode and style of communication within any particular context. Under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the fruit will be not only interest but also excitement as truth is received in the cognitive, affective and evaluative dimensions of the recipient.

**THE NECESSITY FOR THAI THEOLOGY**

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. Elwood, "Asian Christian Theology in the Making: An Introduction," in *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> John Davis, *Poles Apart?* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1993), p. 31-37, 141.

<sup>3</sup> See Douglas J. Elwood for example, "Asian Christian Theology in the Making: An Introduction," in *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), p. 30.

Parallels between theology and the emergence of philosophy in the Thai context may be observed. Some debate has gone on as to whether a Thai philosophy is possible. Dr Soraj Hongladarom suggests that so long as the Thai community reflects upon itself then Thai philosophy is not only possible but it is actually taking place.<sup>4</sup> In a similar manner, so long as Thais reflect upon God and truth related to Him then Thai theology is taking place. Although I have lived and worked among the Thai for the past 23 years, I am acutely aware that in my own pursuit and desire to contribute to Thai theology, I am doing so from a non-Thai, etic (outsider:s) perspective. To the extent that I may be a catalyst to help the Thai to think theologically themselves, however, I shall have made a positive contribution. Further, a collaboration of the etic and emic (insider:s) perspectives may well be the most fruitful route to an orthodox and effective Thai theology.

Dr Kirti Bunchua, a leading Thai thinker and teacher of philosophy at Assumption University notes, however, that it is hard to find a creative Thai philosophy among the Thai. One of the main reasons he gives is that Thais who study Western philosophy are not ready to follow the advancements of Western philosophy to the extent that they can make a positive contribution. He is certain, nevertheless, that Thai thinkers are capable of being creative in the same way as anyone else of other cultures. Thais who were interested in philosophy, however, had to start with ideas developed from the West, which they were not able to fully appreciate nor were they able to contribute to. Dr Kirti believes that the Thai will only truly excel and make a unique contribution to philosophy in their own creative way when they do it in the Thai way and in the context of what the Thais are interested in.<sup>5</sup> His sentiments may be perfectly paralleled to the need for Thais to do theology in the Thai way and in areas that interest them.

While not agreeing with all elements of his theology, M.M. Thomas, an Indian Theologian rightly says that, 'Where a people:s pre-understanding is left alone without bringing it under the service of the Christian Gospel (believers) will remain pre-Christian in their mind and this will affect the whole person in due course. Their response to the Christian faith, being unrelated to their inner thought patterns, will remain limited and immature.'<sup>6</sup> This present study is partly the result of earlier research I made concerning the extent to which traditional Thai beliefs (Buddhism, Animism, Brahmanism) and the Thai social structure influence the Thai Christians' concept of God.<sup>7</sup> The study confirmed that in a variety of ways the Thai Christians' concept of God is influenced by traditional Thai beliefs which produce what I call 'gaps' in his or her belief system. More concerning, however, was that the study also

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<sup>4</sup> Soraj Hongladarom, *How is Thai Philosophy Possible?* (Bangkok: [Online]. Available: <http://pioneer.netserv.chula.ac.th/~hsoraj/web/Thai.html>, 2002)

<sup>5</sup> Kirti Bunchua, *Grabuantat Radap Pratyta Kawng Nak Kit Thai (Philosophical Paradigms of Thai Thinkers) (Thai Language)* (Bangkok: Unpublished Manuscript, Under the Sponsorship of the Thai National Research Institute, 2002), pp. 178-179.

<sup>6</sup> M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM, 1969), p. 303.

<sup>7</sup> The results and framework of this research are published as "Gaps in Beliefs of Thai Christians," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 37(1) (2001): 72-81.

revealed that these gaps are still equally evident despite the length of time the respondent had been a Christian. This clearly displays a deficiency in the content of Christian education in the Thai context. The teaching, predominantly Western in origin and geared more to the Westerners' questions and needs, is insufficient to penetrate the specific areas that the Thais need emphasis, leaving these "gaps" untouched. My burden for contextual theology in the Thai context is that it be developed so as to emphasize those areas specific to the Thai need in order that these and other *gaps* may be addressed.

### **THE NECESSITY FOR THAI SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**

Paul declared to the Ephesian elders that he had not hesitated to proclaim the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26-27). This likely has reference to his two years of daily discussions with both Jews and Greeks in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10) and presumably involved a framework of teaching which encompassed the whole scope of God's revelation. Without proposing a tight logically dependent system of theology, Paul's example may provide a precedent for systematizing theology in other contexts.

Hwa Yung (Principal Seminari Theoloji Malaysia) poses the question that, given the fact that linear logic is not the primary mode of thinking of many Asians, should theology be "systematic" in the Asian context? In reply, he points out that, the preference for linear or non-linear logic is never exclusive in any culture. Rather, it is a matter of relative emphasis. He explains further that, rather than understanding systematic theology in terms of some *a priori* philosophical or other concept, such as existentialism or dispensationalism... what is envisaged is a systematic reflection on the key themes of the Christian faith arising out of a dialectic between text and context, and informed by mission and pastoral concerns... Systematic Theology should not be dropped out of the syllabus of Asian theological colleges and seminaries, says Yung. Asian Christians, Thais included, need a framework within which to think about God's revelation of himself and his activity in the world, in the context of their own cultures and the missiological tasks they face.<sup>8</sup>

Further, a basic presupposition of hermeneutics is the *unity of Scripture*. The Bible, itself, is the best commentator on the Bible. Scripture should be compared with scripture for light on each passage in order to discover the unity of its teaching. Since the whole Bible is true in all its parts the interpreter must seek the unity of the passage under consideration with all other sections of scripture. One cannot determine the meaning of a passage independent of other sections of scripture. Some degree of systematization of Biblical truth is necessary, therefore, whatever the context.

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<sup>8</sup> Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas: The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (New Delhi: Regnum Books, 1997), p. 228.

## FINDING A MODEL

Already stated is the necessity for theology to be both orthodox and effective. Both revelation and context need to be taken seriously. The harmony of these two considerations is of utmost importance and is a most delicate enterprise. Hubbard graphically compares it to the fiddler in *The Fiddler on the Roof* :

Fall to the right and you end in obscurantism, so attached to your conventional ways of practicing and teaching the faith that you veil its truth and power from those who are trying to see it through very different eyes. Slip to the left and you tumble into syncretism, so vulnerable to the impact of paganism in its multiplicity of forms that you compromise the uniqueness of Christ and concoct another gospel which is not a gospel.<sup>9</sup>

Several approaches to doing contextual / cross cultural theology have been categorized. Adams,<sup>10</sup> Schreiter<sup>11</sup>, Hesselgrave and Rommen,<sup>12</sup> all present various models or classifications. Dyrness suggests four models as follows<sup>13</sup>: 1. Anthropological Model, through a thorough understanding and appreciation of the culture (e.g. Asian theologian Choan-Seng Song). The assumption is that God is present in all cultures working out his purposes. This model lends itself to syncretism 2. Praxis Model (e.g. Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutierrez), which likewise takes the culture seriously and more especially sides with those who are oppressed. God's involvement in history is for liberation from all kinds of oppression. While introducing the important category of *practice* as an essential component of theological insight, this method tends to undermine the more spiritual and supracultural elements of the gospel 3. Translation Model (e.g. American ethnotheologian Charles Kraft), which is an attempt to place the Gospel within culture without changing its content. Although God is transcultural, he communicates through culture. The goal, therefore, is to *decode* the message of the Bible so that it can be *re-encoded* so as to be heard in a dynamically equivalent manner as those in the original situation. While in basic agreement with this model, it is still weak in application to specific demands placed upon Christians originating from within their culture itself 4. Interactional Model (Dyrness's own suggestion) consisting of proclamation of the Scripture message in culturally appropriate fashion, taking seriously the life of the evangelist which will speak to the situation of the hearer, and then the needs and aspirations of the culture are to be understood and shown to be important to God who is already working within the culture. The believer then responds to those themes of Scripture that parallel the questions of the culture. It is this fourth

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<sup>9</sup> David Allan Hubbard, *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), p. vii.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel J. Adams, *Cross Cultural Theology: Western Reflections in Asia* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), pp. 73ff.

<sup>11</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 6ff.

<sup>12</sup> David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2000), pp. 151ff.

<sup>13</sup> William A. Dyrness, *Learning About Theology From The Third World* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1980), pp. 25ff.

Model which appears most attractive and is presented diagrammatically in Fig. 1.

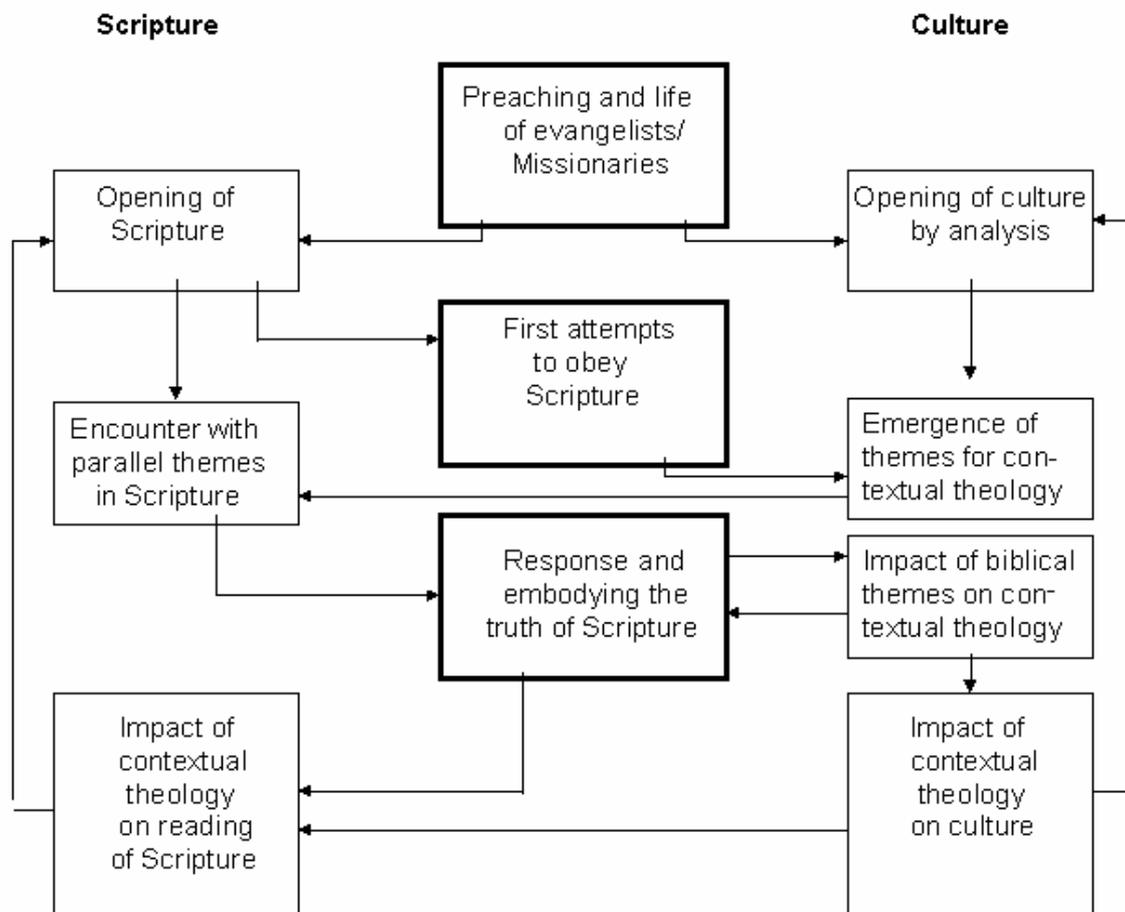


Fig. 1. Interaction Model of Contextualization.<sup>14</sup>

A final helpful model was suggested to me during a personal interview with Bruce Nicholls. His own model is that of a *spiral* moving continuously between God's Word (revelation) and context but going in an eschatological direction. In this way, theology is not static but heading towards Christ's second coming and the establishment of His kingdom.

### INVESTIGATING THAI PHILOSOPHY AND THOUGHT PATTERNS

All theology rests upon presuppositions and principles<sup>15</sup> and these form the basis on which the arguments are amplified. Both the *orthodoxy* and the *effectiveness* of the final work may be predicted from careful analysis of the prolegomena. Indeed Spykman states, 'Show me your prolegomena, and I will predict the rest of your theology.'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Dyrness, *Learning About Theology From The Third World*, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics Volume 1: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 40.

Most theological systems in the west have developed within the context of the prevailing philosophies of the time, and those philosophies have helped shape the prolegomena. An appropriate starting point for developing a prolegomena for Thai Theology, therefore, is a study of Thai philosophy and thought patterns.

The study of Thai thought, however, is still a new subject in academic circles.<sup>17</sup> A seemingly endless stream of books is readily available on Thai culture and religious belief. Source materials on the philosophy and the epistemology of the Thai, however, are extremely rare and almost conspicuous by their absence. Their very absence, however, is in some way an indicator of the thought structure of the Thai, as will be discovered through the contributions of Professor Kirti Bunchua.

My study involved both research in the libraries and archives of Bangkok universities and a series of interviews with some leading Thai thinkers (both Christian and non-Christian). Interview questions centered around the following topics: whether the Thai think predominantly deductively or inductively; why the Thai believe what they believe (epistemology); what is true or real; the role of experience, feelings, reason or revelation as a basis for faith; the Thai world view; conceptual versus empiricism; miracles; mythology among others. Significant findings are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Animism, Brahmanism and Buddhism are the traditional religions of Thailand. Only animism, however, is truly their own, the other two are imports. Often the Thai need a *dependence point* in the form of magical objects made potent through incantations to invoke the spirits. The purpose is to relieve oneself of suffering or to gain success or to protect one from danger e.g. bullets or knives.<sup>18</sup> As people become more educated and modernized, it would be expected that these beliefs and practices which are usually seen as characteristics of peasant society should be phasing out. Research, however, has shown that this is not the case.

The naturally syncretistic Thai have traditionally *added* or synthesized new beliefs into their belief system as opposed to negating or replacing the old. If asked whether they are real Buddhists or not, they would answer that they are Buddhists the Thai way. They are Buddhists with many other world views mixed in. Even though these different world views are inconsistent with each other, they have been able to adjust them so that they fit together as one. The Thai belief system has been described as being like the image of a Jedi with various religions one on top of another. At the base there is animism, on top of that there are the magical beliefs stemming from Brahmanism and Hinduism, and on top of that, Buddhism.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Thirayut Bunmi, *Brawatsat Kwam Kit Kawng Sangkom Thai Chuang Ton (History of Traditional Thai Thought) (Thai Language)* (Bangkok: Seminar Notes 30th September 1986 Quality Research Society, Chulalongkorn University Research Institute, 1986), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Maryat Kitsuwani, *Kwam Chua Tang Durm Kawng Thai (Traditional Thai Belief) (Thai Language)* (Bangkok: Course Notes Thai Culture, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 1980), p. ii. 19, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Nuangnoi Boonyanati, "Fortune (Duang)" In *Key Terms in Thai Thoughts* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1992), p. 56.

Bunmi observes that the Thai's initial attraction to Buddhism was the *heroic* element, following the line of the Thai's belief in the protector spirit. The Thais look for one who is brave, just like the benevolent fathers of the city who were brave and did good. At that time, Thai society was an oral society. Buddhism was spread in the early days by telling the *chadok lon nibad* (a Jataka, that is, one of 500 odd stories of former incarnations of the Buddha) more so than the *lak apitam* (principles from the book of the *Tripitaka* (Three Baskets) which is the Pali canon and the earliest systematic and most complete collection of early Buddhist sacred literature). The point here is that the Thai were not attracted to the principles of Buddhism per se but rather to the *heroic* life of the Buddha himself, viz. the Buddha's self sacrifice, wisdom, majesty (or prestige), patience, steadfastness and tranquility.<sup>20</sup>

While the concepts of impermanence and karma are indeed strong in Thai thought, the idea that since over 90% of Thais are Buddhist, then their philosophy must be Buddhist philosophy has been strongly rejected by some. Dr Kirti says that Buddhist philosophy is not Thai philosophy since it originated in India, not Thailand. He explains that if Thai philosophy were Buddhist philosophy then the Thai would have thought and expanded on it, which they have not. Educated Thai were able to study and divide and memorize the teachings in great detail, but this was not their real interest. They could study and memorize the principles of Buddhism, but they didn't think and expand on them or seek to further define.<sup>21</sup>

Dr Kirti believes that the Buddha's style of teaching and presentation was of the type that would appeal to the Aryan mind, that is to *define*, and research in order to further define. Educated Thai who were able to be creative did so in another channel, that is along the characteristics of the Thai language and according to the innate character of the Thai. What is clear is that these were true thinkers but they thought in a Thai way even though they may not meet the specifications of the Aryan. Dr Kirti's basic premise is that whereas the Westerner likes to *define*, the Thai likes to *narrate*. The Thai are unlike the Westerner in that they do not find a need to define what they see or experience. This is evidenced by the negligible use of the verb *to be* in the Thai language. Their lack of interest in defining may well explain in part why there is so little written about how Thai think or what Thai thought *is*. The Thai, on the other hand, like to *narrate*, that is to amplify, relate or find new ways of expressing the same thing. This ability is enhanced by the language which has little fixed grammar but lends itself to *narration*. Their interest would more lie in the area of what something *does* and how it may affect one. It is at this point that it is believed that the Thai may make a contribution to theology in the Thai way, rather than seeking to contribute within the Western model. It is interesting to note that the Bible itself does very little *defining*. For example, we don't find any summary statement defining what sin *is*, but we do find many explanations of what sin *does* and its effects. Definitions are a peculiar ingredient of western systematic theology.

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<sup>20</sup> Bunmi, *Brawatsat Kwam Kit Kawng Sangkom Thai Chuang Ton (History of Traditional Thai Thought) (Thai Language)*, pp. 21-23.

<sup>21</sup> Bunchua, *Grabuantat Radap Pratyakawng Nak Kit Thai (Philosophical Paradigms of Thai Thinkers) (Thai Language)*, p. 36, 173.

Concerning epistemology, I asked those I interviewed whether the Thai are basically inductive or deductive in their method of “knowing”. Dr Kirti gave this rather stunning reply:

The *deductive* means that you start with the general and you go to the particular. The *inductive* is where you go from the particular to the general. But the Thai argumentation, which I call the *intuitive*, is where you don't have any reason or augmentation, the intuitive is on the inside. You feel what it is. But the argumentation of the Thai people is to jump from particular to particular. And this particular is not based on understanding, but on feeling. What do you feel? A particular feeling to another particular feeling. The Thai move from *particular* to *particular* without working back to the source or principle.

In this way the Thai start from feeling and then they compare it to another feeling. They move from particular to particular without necessarily working back to the general. He illustrated this by explaining that if one sees a river, the inductive mind will ask where the water came from. But the Thai would think intuitively according to their feeling. They would *feel* that the water is useful... and then would think if it were to overflow then there would be trouble... and so on. They would not think of origins but rather the effect of the water on me and how it may affect me in the future.

Let us take another example. Aristotle's logic starts with the term ‘man is mortal’ and argues according to this proposition, that is who man *is*. But the real thought of the Thai is not like this. They have no equivalent to argumentation or reasoning in this way. They are not interested in the ontology of what man *is*. The Thai are more interested in what is the appearance of man? what does he look like? what does he do? how does he act? Then the reasoning of the Thai comes from one's feeling. What do you feel towards this and what do you feel next. Again, quoting Dr Kirti from my interview with him,

For example, when you feel that your mother is very good, you have the feeling that your mother is very good. So if your mother is very good, what do you have to do to her? So the feeling of giving back to her, so you have to do something for her. With the feeling, there is no argumentation, like this is the premise, and this is the conclusion.

Western philosophy has sought, by and large, to control the emotion in order to get clear definition. If one wishes to express one's feelings then they are added on later. But the Thai, who are naturally more emotion than reason oriented, start with the feeling and come to the understanding later. Dr Kirti says that the Thai speaks out the feelings, and when they want to understand, they have to reformulate the feeling into the understanding. Their feelings are communicated through the medium of the Thai language which has developed in a unique way so as to effectively express the emotions and is particularly descriptive. For instance the use of *chai* (heart) with its multitude of combinations. Or else the use of *roo suek* (feel). Instead of asking, ‘what do you know about this?’ you ask, ‘what do you feel about this?’. Instead of a fixed grammar (subject, verb, object) which controls how something should be said (who is the subject, what is he doing etc.), the Thai language is not so exact. Dr Kirti observes that sometimes when they speak,

one may not be aware who or what is the subject. But what is expressed is the feeling, the true feeling of the Thai.

Dr Soraj confirmed the lack of necessity for the Thai to work back to first causes during my interview with him. He said that when they experience something that can't be explained, or something supernatural, they are, of course, very interested. You will find it in the newspapers, especially the popular ones which like to record supernatural occurrences, and people are very interested in interpreting these into numbers so they can buy the lottery. They don't think about what the cause of the miracle is, they don't really care. It could be God himself, but it doesn't matter. They don't have to find some ultimate cause that unites things and brings it into a system.

It is perhaps because of this lack of necessity to define and to work back from particular to general, that enables the Thai to hold opposites in harmony similar to the Taoist *yin-yang*. They have a peculiar ability to appreciate both thesis and antithesis without feeling the necessity for synthesis. Whereas the westerner tends to see things clearly as *either/or* the Thai is more likely to see things as *both/and*. This tendency is illustrated by the syncretism of the Thai belief system and their ability, already observed, to add-on without deleting. They can embrace many things (some of which may be contradictory), rather than having only one absolute truth. This conforms to their non-conceptual tendency since if they were conceptual they would be pure Buddhists instead of syncretistic. The ability of the Thai to hold opposites together, however, may indeed be an area where the Thai can make a significant contribution to theology. There are many areas (such as God's predestination and man's responsibility; the grace of God and the severity of God) where western systematic theology with its emphasis on defining and synthesizing has tended to give unsatisfactory solutions.

The Thai's lack of need to define leads us to a further difference to the Western approach. That is, the Thai way is not to negate but to expand on what is already there.

Since traditionally Thai thinkers were not interested in defining, they were not interested in fixing a meaning clearly and then arguing over who is right and who is wrong. Thai thinkers sought, rather, to give a new understanding to what was already there. With this goal in mind, Thai thinkers do not have the intention to erase what has gone before in order to suggest some new thing in its place, as Aryan thinkers like to do. Rather, Thai thinkers will study the effectiveness of what has already been given and then will think how one may add some new thing to it... We have words of praise for the King more and more without throwing away what went before, and we have much use of the word *spirit/ghost* without thinking it is too much... If anyone wishes to be further creative, then let him be creative according to the way of the Thai who have gone before. That is find a method of expressing something differently from the way it has been said before through the enabling of the Thai language. This is the traditional Thai way of creativity.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bunchua, *Grabuantat Radap Pratyā Kawng Nak Kit Thai* (Philosophical Paradigms of Thai Thinkers) (Thai Language), p. 175.

Dr Kirti warns, however, that by saying something in a creative new way one runs the risk that no-one will understand what is being said. On the other hand, by merely saying it in the old way there is nothing to be proud of - and people will not think the person is wise!!!

The tendency to expand on what has gone before leads us naturally on to the philosophy that views everything as being in a constant state of process. Dr Warayuth Sriewarakul (personal interview) states that,

We just believe in process, we just believe in events. Everything is events, not substance, even though you are a man, a woman, it is an event. So you see that's why the Eastern world's ideas are very close to process philosophy, very close to quantum physics, very close to impermanence where everything is developing.

The Thai are also strongly empirical and experience oriented instead of conceptual. Their enjoyment comes from things to do with action (such as football or other forms of fun), rather than thinking through conceptual ideas. Not only this, but they generally need to experience something before they will believe. Their belief in the spirits is based on encounter, either direct or through a medium, rather than just the concept. A thing is not rational to them if it cannot be understood in practical terms of living. This is evidenced by the fact that almost without exception, coming to believe in God is the result of experiencing something of the power of God rather than assent to a concept or statement. Prasit Ruhkpisut (personal interview) observes that the Thais do not start with what is true (*arai jing*) - they start with power (*amnat*).

The empirical nature of the Thai has implications concerning *revelation* or *illumination* of those things already revealed. Dr Apichart Punsakworasan (personal interview) says that there is no equivalent in the Thai scheme of things to the Christian idea of revelation. The Thai way is to obtain knowledge and this knowledge will lead one through to the desired end. For the Thai, he suggests an empirical, inductive or natural revelation approach at least to begin with. By pointing to things around them one may lead their understanding to the larger concept. This does not preclude revelation or illumination which it is agreed is necessary. But the normal progression is from the ground up rather like in Brahmanism or Buddhism where through gaining knowledge one *rises up* and becomes like a god as distinct to revelation which comes from above and draws one up. If you want to talk to Asians, says Dr Apichart, you must start from *below*. His suggested model for approaching the Thai is seen in Fig 2.

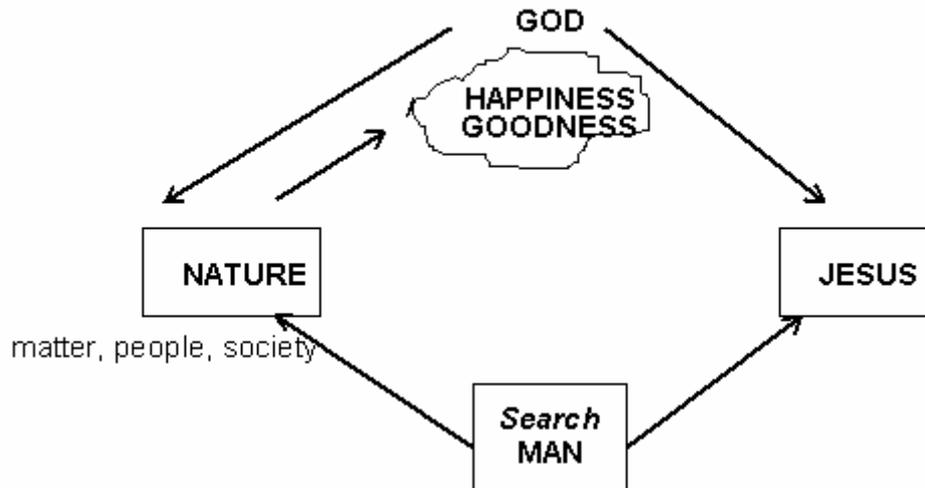


Fig. 2. Dr Apichart's Model for Approaching the Thai.

One should start with their search for happiness and goodness through nature, whether it be matter, people or society. General revelation can be explained as God's presence and the revelation of Himself through natural things. But this is not enough because firstly, it is all relative (relative goodness etc.) and secondly, we all have sin and are ignorant. The special revelation of God through Jesus as absolute good news may then be introduced.

In many respects, the Thai are existential. They are far more concerned with what may affect or benefit them here and now than with the unknowns of the future. The future is uncertain, it is impermanent. The next life is not as important as this one. What matters most to the Thai is what will bring benefit *now*, and in fact *practical personal benefit* is a primary motivation. These are factors which lead most to use their money now, rather than keep it for the future. They seek to enjoy the present. They believe in luck, their stars, and will persuade the spirits to offer them favors - all in order to benefit the here and now. Dr Apichart suggests a further model (Fig. 3), therefore, for approaching or educating the Thai.

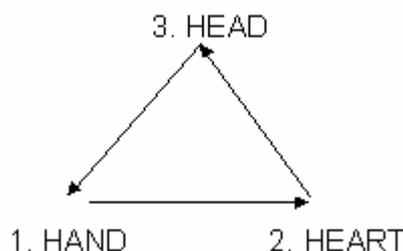


Fig. 3. Dr Apichart's Model for Educating the Thai.

The Thai start with the practical (that is the *hand*). Something beneficial generally needs to be received first which then may influence the *heart* (the affective dimension). From the heart, it is possible to reach the *head* or the mind. Dr Apichart laments the fact that some, however, stop at the heart level and so don't continue to grow. When the *hand* stops, then they discontinue,

which Dr Apichart suggests has been typical of Christians in Thailand for the past 160 years or so.

The above model poses a fundamental dilemma with which I am sure Dr Apichart agrees. The Thai look for salvation from suffering but God offers salvation from sin. The Thai look for immediate benefit now but God has provided Christ crucified and risen. How does one avoid presenting *another* gospel by catering to the hand first instead of the head?

Dr Soraj further laments the fact that once a certain thing is accepted as true, little further investigation takes place. For instance,

Buddhists, or those who believe in Buddhism (which is almost the entire Thai population) believe that the Buddhist teachings are true. So, when the Buddhist religion suggests a philosophical view it is understood to be automatically true, and therefore there is no further discussion. But the foundation of philosophy is that there is no final end to discussion or *argument*.<sup>23</sup>

In a similar vein to what has already been stated, there is traditionally a refusal to admit the validity of *argument* in order to reach truth. Thai Buddhists tend to believe that *reason* is only a reckoning of one's own thoughts, but it is not the correct method to arrive at truth. In that it doesn't use reason or logic nor does it use logical methods of discovering truth, it is in line with an attitude that has dominated Asian thinking, including the Thai, for a long time.<sup>24</sup> Many are of the opinion that *argument* or reason is not the way to prove the truth of religion since reasoning is for those who have not yet *practiced* the principles of religion. Buddhists would tend to say that one cannot reason one's way to the truth, it comes through experience, and then you'll know.<sup>25</sup> Dr Warayuth confirms this, saying:

They have insights from the authorities and the lord Buddha... But... they would try to discover those laws themselves from their practice... they would say that if you would like to discover the truth, you wouldn't be able to talk about it, because it is not a matter of discussion, but a matter of discovering it from practice. In this sense, it is similar to Taoism, where the speaker never knows, the knower never speaks, only the practitioner knows.

One may ask whether this is blind faith or a leap of faith? It is probable that the primary motivation to step out and practice stems from the tradition of their ancestors, or certain authority figures in their lives. But it also infers that there is no point in arguing over concepts or principles. The Thai are used to the empiricism of *doing* something or *experiencing* something and therefore knowing, rather than through rationalism based on conceptual ideas. Not only this, but in their daily lives, feelings and intuition are so important that they are

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<sup>23</sup> Soraj Hongladaran, *Kawp Fah Haeng Pratyā: Kwam Ru, Pratyā Leh Sangkom Thai (The Limits of Philosophy: Knowledge, Philosophy and Thai Society) (Thai Language)* (Bangkok: Under the Sponsorship of the Thai National Budget, 1998), p. 239.

<sup>24</sup> Hongladaran, *Kawp Fah Haeng Pratyā: Kwam Ru, Pratyā Leh Sangkom Thai (The Limits of Philosophy: Knowledge, Philosophy and Thai Society) (Thai Language)*, p. 235.

<sup>25</sup> Hongladaran, *Kawp Fah Haeng Pratyā: Kwam Ru, Pratyā Leh Sangkom Thai (The Limits of Philosophy: Knowledge, Philosophy and Thai Society) (Thai Language)*, pp. 236, 240.

often relied upon to „lead the way” even though there may not be a defining reason. Dr Seree Lorgunpai (personal interview) also observes that the Thai tendency is to want something instantly, which doesn't come through a long process of *reasoning*, and for this there is the willingness to gamble or take a risk.

Dr Kirti, however, observes that the Thai people always have the feeling of fear of the unknown in their life. These unknowns are unpredictable and capricious, you cannot control them. One of the unknowns is the *phii* (spirit). Today they may favor you, but tomorrow they may not. It is not controllable, and you cannot guess what will be. You do not know what each *phii* may want. Even with the Buddhist belief, people live in fear of the unknown and its power. Their fear is not limited to that of capricious spirits, however, as Dr Kirti continues:

You may observe, even among the scholars, in their deepest feeling, the first assumption in their hearts, they have fear in their subconscious. It is a fear of everything. Can I live in this society? Can I live in this world? Can I be at peace? Can I trust my friends and relatives? They will always say that they aren't 100% sure of anything.

And this, maybe, is the racial complex of the Thai people. They want friendship, but they are afraid in their heart that one day you may change your mind. There is always something like that. In the family, between the husband and wife, there is not full trust of each other.

Finally, Dr Seree suggests that what the Thai have been taught and what they do is not the same. They are motivated, he says, by *shame*. They know deductively one thing, but inductively they will respond to *shame*. Although *guilt* may control the heart and mind, it is the outside, or the situation, which will determine the behavior. As far as feelings are concerned, they are more concerned by other people's feelings towards them than they are about their own feelings. Through conforming in this way, they are able to survive in society. If the relationship of Thai Christians with God is a *personal* salvation we will encounter problems when they are confronted with their society. The community is still more vivid to them than God is, says Dr Seree.

## PROPOSALS

The observations recorded above have great implications for the way theology should be done in the Thai context and the emphases that will need to be made in order to make it both orthodox and effective. The following is not yet a developed prolegomena but provides some suggestions and structures that may be used in developing one. It does not embrace all the observations made above but it is hoped that from small beginnings theology will start to be developed, hopefully by the Thai themselves or through the interaction of both Thai Christians and missionaries.

Before moving to presuppositions and methodology, let us look at some important preliminary issues. First and foremost, it is important to emphasize that *revelation*, both general and special, is essential to knowing God and the truth he wishes us to know. This applies to all people, no matter what their cultural background. There is no need to assume that just because there is no equivalent to revelation in the Thai context, that revelation must

take a less significant role. Paul makes it clear that the things of God are revealed to us by the Holy Spirit whom He has given to us (1 Cor 2:10-14). Paul prayed for the Ephesians that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened, that they might know the hope to which God has called them, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints (Eph 1:18-19). Theology does not start with man, but man cooperates with the Holy Spirit in a quest to understand those things that God has revealed to us. Apart from the Holy Spirit, man is impotent to understand and appreciate these things. It follows, therefore, that although the Thai start with experience and concrete issues rather than conceptual ones, a theology from *above* rather than from *below* must be developed. It has already been observed that most contextualized theology in Asia would come under the theology from below category. This wrongly places man, his context and his needs in the center, rather than God.

It is also important that while developing a contextualized theology, we do not neglect the history and tradition of the Church as she has developed through the centuries. The church in Thailand does not stand in isolation to the historic church but is an extension of it. The propensity we have observed for the Thai to *add to* rather than *subtract or negate from* should stand her in good stead as she carries out her task of developing what is unique in her own context.

Logic and reason have often been used in the Western environment to enhance man's understanding of God's revelation. Logic and reason, however, have been found to be limited in both usefulness and accuracy. While they are of some value, the truth of God is much greater and far surpasses the boundaries of logic and reason. For the Thai, intuition, feeling and experience play an important role in their understanding of God and His revelation. It must be remembered, however, that while these will be presented as valuable, they are likewise limited in both usefulness and accuracy.

Although it has been observed that the Thai are primarily empirical and not conceptual, Thai theology must also find a way to embrace concepts and interpretation as revealed in the Scriptures. A statement such as, 'Christ died for our sins' is empirical and historical (Christ died). It is also, however, conceptual and interpretive (for our sins). If Thai theology is not able to embrace the conceptual and the interpretation Scripture gives to itself, it will be an ineffective vehicle for communicating the whole counsel of God.

Traditionally, systematic theology has struggled to find a logical first point from which to commence. Should one begin with God, presupposing a *priori* intuitive knowledge of the existence God, or should one begin with the sources of data whereby we may know God, along a more evidential apologetic line? For the more inquiring mind, the former approach seems less than satisfactory. As for the latter approach, natural data (general revelation) is insufficient to understand who God is apart from the special revelation of the Scriptures, which in turn depends on God for its authority. The latter approach is therefore circular.

In the Thai context, with its lack of emphasis on *defining* and in searching for the *primary cause*, and its ability to hold complimentary ideas in harmony, this may not be too great a problem. One may start with both God and the Scriptures, or else even with points further down the line in the

traditional system (such as man) but where the holistic nature of truth is emphasized rather than a linear approach. All the subjects to be covered, therefore, could be thought of as forming a circle. Any point/subject in the circle could be a starting point, and every subject will affirm the centrality of God. Or putting it another way, all theology must center itself in the Triune God. Rather than a linear string of theological topics, the body of truth may be understood as being circular, where God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is at the center and all other subject matter forms the circumference, each connected and dependent on the hub but also connected to each other. Any point, therefore, may be an entry into the whole.

It is unlikely, however, that the result of Thai theology will be a neat tightly fit system of harmonized beliefs. It is more likely to be a *yin-yang* dipolar of complimentary but opposite ideas. As has already been discussed, the Thai are well able to live with thesis, antithesis but without feeling the need to synthesize. Our understanding of the complimentary nature of truths will constantly develop but never totally harmonize.

Since all methodology is in itself limited, theology in the Thai context must never be thought to have *been* developed but must always *be* developing. Thai theologians should be encouraged and new approaches should be explored. Apart from the limitations of methodology, the ever changing context necessitates the continuing development of theology.

The following *presuppositions* will be held if the theology is to be orthodox. Firstly, it is assumed that God has reliably and innerantly revealed Himself through the Bible which He inspired. While the records are recorded within certain contexts, they are universally profitable for teaching, reproof, and for revealing God to all mankind, whatever the context or time period.

Secondly, it is assumed that both the natural world, being God's creation, and also human experience, are also sources for knowing God and the things He desires us to know.

Thirdly, it is further assumed that within the Bible, nature and human experience, fresh insights and new understandings of God and His will are waiting to be illuminated. These will come uniquely to each in their own context through the interaction of the Holy Spirit, the Bible, nature and human experience.

Fourthly, it is assumed that the Thai will bring their own unique contribution to theology when, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, they interact with the Bible, nature and human experience in a way that is unique to the Thai. I believe there are many insights to both traditional theological ideas as well as new ones, which wait to be unfolded by the Thai. Regarding the field of philosophy, it has already been observed that the Thai are unable to make definite contributions in this field so long as they are required to think philosophically in a Western way. Their unique contribution will come when they are allowed to reflect philosophically in the Thai way. Likewise with theology, the Thai need to be encouraged to reflect and enjoy theology in a way in which they can excel and thereby make their own unique contribution.

The following suggestions are possible methods that may be used to start formulating a Thai theological system. One possible method is to commence with *theological statements* already introduced through Western

theology. As already observed, the Thai do not feel they need to eliminate or negate the old when doing something new. Rather, their creativity centers around building and expanding on the old and thereby forming something new. This starting point has the advantage of linking future Thai theology firmly to the framework of Church tradition and history. Statements such as, 'The Sovereignty of God', 'The Depravity of Man', 'The Church Triumphant', or else statements taken directly from an early Christian creed (such as the Apostles' Creed - see later) may be expounded and expanded on, starting with those most relevant to the Thai's need or interest.

A further possible method is to take the *theological topics or ideas* from the basic outline of Western systematic theology (God, Man, Sin, Christ, Salvation, The Church etc.). Again, the Thai find no need to negate what has gone before. And so this progression of ideas or topics, which has been so useful in systematizing theology in the Western context, may also be used as a starting point for Thai theology. The uniqueness of Thai theology will be the way in which these ideas are developed.

Another possible way to start formulating a system of Thai theology is to use early Christian creeds, and to study them against their historical and contextual backgrounds. This approach is suggested by Hwa Yung:

These creeds, especially the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, and the Chalcedonian Formula, were the first *systematic* formulations of the Christian faith which the Early Church was forced to undertake both to ward off heresy and to instruct its members. Such a study will enable us to see *how the apostolic faith that was being handed down through the Scriptures and traditions was contextually shaped in the process of its formulation by the Early Church*. Having examined that in detail, we can then proceed to ask how the same process might be carried out afresh in the various Asian contexts today.<sup>26</sup>

My own suggestion and preferred methodology combines several of the ideas and observations already mentioned in this article with Dyrness's *Interactive Approach* as the basic model. Theological statements already formulated (such as from a creed or else those basic to systematic theology in the West) are our topics.

First, a theological statement, idea or topic is selected. This may be selected interactively according to the order of interest they are to the Thai. Since our theology is unlikely to concentrate on definitions (since the Thai do not tend to define) our theology could probably start at any topic with the assumption that truth will always witness and lead us to the centrality of God. It is therefore not necessary to start with God and since the Thai are more naturally conscious of *man* and *nature* these may well be selected first.

Second, identify the issues and feelings the Thai have in connection with the selected statement, topic or idea. For instance, if the topic is 'Man', the intuitive feelings of the Thai may include fear, authority, society, honor, shame, usefulness, impermanence, etc. In this way, the intuitive feelings of the Thai are taken seriously and are embedded into the theological method.

Third, identify sources of data - both Biblical and natural which relate to these intuitive feelings. Notice the interactive method of Biblical revelation and

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<sup>26</sup> Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas*, p. 228.

Thai context here. The Scripture passages selected will be primarily narrative and empirical rather than purely doctrinal. These may be to do with the following events 1. Creation 2. Israel 3. Jesus Christ 4. The Cross and Resurrection 5. The Church in Acts. For instance, passages may be selected where a man's *honor* is at stake, or where fear is involved etc.

Fourth, by the leading of the Holy Spirit and with the propensity of the Thai to narrate and describe, the data found in three is amplified upon. Stories may be told and illustrations will abound whether they be from nature, Thai history, current affairs or personal life. Again, the feelings and intuition of the Thai are utilized. While discussion is unlikely to revolve around conceptual definitions of man (continuing to use the example of man as our topic), it is expected that the Holy Spirit will lead and guide the narrator further into the truth about man.

Fifth, conclusions are compared to doctrinal passages concerning the topic at hand. This will bring balance and checks to the conclusions made in four. For instance, having amplified on the fact that man is impermanent and fleeting, the teaching of Peter (such as 'All men are like grass' 1 Pet 1:24) may be used to confirm, or else Paul (such as 'For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality' 1 Cor 15:53) to prompt one to a further cycle of discussion.

While the method suggested here commences with conceptual ideas, the process is quite concrete. The overall process may be described as *inductive*, in which truth is gradually concluded by means of amplification of concrete examples.

It is *interactive* in that it relates to the Thai context by maximizing on Thai feelings and needs and by utilizing the Thai way of philosophizing. At the same time it commences with statements or ideas from *above*, utilizes scripture as its primary source of data, and tests the results against scripture. Thus the theology is constantly *pulled up* to make it a theology *from above*.

Every attempt must be made to keep the theology practical and down to earth. Hovemyr, responding to a question posed by Barth and others whether the truth which is so often expressed in abstract terms in the West... could be more clearly, accurately and adequately expressed in terms of Jesus' life and acts? says that the answer to this question from an Asian horizon is a resounding *yes*.<sup>27</sup> I have suggested that the *events* of Creation, Israel, Jesus Christ, the Death and Resurrection and the Church in Acts should be utilized as sources of data. This corresponds to the *concretizing* of theology suggested by Barth, Hovemyr and others.

Koyama also confirms the need for theology to be practical and empirical, by suggesting the book of James as an appropriate book for the Thai.<sup>28</sup> One's faith must be evidenced by works and true religion means being concerned for the social needs around us. James is *cool*, yet not *hot* in

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<sup>27</sup> Anders Hovemyr, "Towards a theology of the Incarnation in the Thai context" *East Asia Journal of Theology* 1 No 2 (1983): 78-83, p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalow Theology: A Thailand Theological Notebook* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974), Chapter 14.

Koyama's words and has an emphasis on the *impermanence* of the natural realm, corresponding to the world view already held by the Thai.

The Thai respond to concrete examples. They are *hand*→*heart*→*head* oriented. The Interaction Model for contextualized theology suggests the importance of both the preaching and *life* of the evangelists and missionaries. Theology must not be done in a vacuum. Theology will be credible when it is being worked out by those whose lives are consistent with the truths they are preaching. As Gnanakan points out, 'It is only a few who chose servanthood as their role who won the hearts of the masses... can one really separate the writer from his writing?'.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, the absence of written theological texts in a particular context does not necessarily mean that no theology has been done. Listening to the sermons and teaching of the national leaders will reveal that a contextual *vernacular* theology is already emerging. The danger that this may become polarized in one direction highlights the need to form a structure for Thai theology. Depending on the denomination, two topics appear regularly in Thai sermons. Firstly, power encounter, which is consistent with the Thai tendency to start with power. One popular Thai Pentecostal preacher says that in evangelism one must start with power, for instance the power of God to help you in your problems, because that is what 95% of the Thai are interested in. From there one can move on to other areas of Christian doctrine and discipleship. Secondly, relief from, or understanding of, suffering, since many Thai Christians find their understanding of God challenged by the fact that He allows them to suffer.<sup>30</sup> While I don't believe the theological system should center on these points, the fact that Thai *vernacular* theology already emphasizes them is an indicator that they will certainly major quite heavily in the discussion and narration of theological statements and ideas.

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### **SYNOPSIS:**

Most theology taught in Thailand originated from Western thought frameworks. The Thai, however, have a different framework of thinking. This research studies the Thai context in particular the Thai thought structure, philosophy, epistemology and system of belief. Significant results are recorded and methods for approaching theology in the Thai context are proposed.

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<sup>29</sup> Ken R. Gnanakan, "Biblical Foundations: A South Asian Study," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7 No 1 (1983): p. 117.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen C.R. Taylor, "Gaps in Beliefs of Thai Christians" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 37(1) (2001): 72-81.

Doctor of Theology from the International Theological Seminary (Los Angeles). An earlier article based on his research into the influence of Buddhism, Animism, Brahmanism, and the Thai social structure on the belief of Thai Christians was published in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (January 2001) and in Thai in the *Bible Torch Magazine* (journal of the EFT).

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**STATEMENT:**

This article has not been published or offered for publication before.