Thai Christian Converts and Traditional Supernaturalism: The Conflict of Intersecting World Views[1]

by Edwin Zehner

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Note: The author welcomes comments, suggestions, and requests for clarification. Send them to him at Department of Anthropology, McGraw Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853.

ABSTRACT

Thai converts to evangelical Christianity consider themselves to have rejected an old religion or way of" life for a new set of beliefs. Yet those beliefs intersect in intriguing ways. Thai Christians and non-Christians both tend to believe in the supernatural, to the extent of believing in the existence of some of the same supernatural entities. But they differ in their assessment of the moral nature of those entities and their relations to humans. This article explores the contours and intersections of the two sets of beliefs, and the way the differences are played out in talk ebout the supernatural, and in the practice of and responses to proselytization.

Introduction

In evangelical churches around the world, conversion is presented symbolically as a movement from a soiled past to a bright new future. "Old things have passed away, behold all things are becore new," as the apostle Paul put it (2 Corinthians

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5:17). At conversion an individual enters a world of newly experienced realities, new motivations and values, and new possibilities. He or she has become a new person, who, leaving behind the old man with its sinful desires, strives for new goals.

Yet despite this "leaving behind" of a past, this exchange of "new lives for old," to use Margaret Mead's well-known phrase, many converts remain at least partial participants in their old world of meanings, activities, and social networks. The change involved in conversion, in other words, is less than complete.

The convert remains a participant in the old world in at least three ways. First, most converts continue participating in the same activities. Unless those are activities of a type that the church disapproves, they keep the same jobs, go to the same schools, and play the same games as before. Second, they remain in the same social networks, have the same relatives and many of the same friends, and usually have the same sense of obligations towards others in their social network. Third, they retain some of the beliefs and strategies of thought, argumentation, and classification that they had held in common with others who did not convert.

All of these continuities set up potential tensions between the two "worlds" inhabited by the convert. When an individual converts in isolation from others in his or her social network -- and this is the typical situation of the convert both in

Thailand and in North America -- then those aspects of the cultural and social webs that are shared can heighten the tensions arising from those aspects of cultural understanding that are not shared.

In this paper, we explore some of the tensions and cross-cutting conceptions of the supernatural that arise from a conversion to Christianity in central Thailand today. Our observations here stem from nearly four years of study and active participation in a fast-growing Pentecostal church in Bangkok. This is a church founded, funded, and administered by Thai nationals entirely at their own initiative, and under policies that the Thai leaders set themselves. After noting the expectations that this church has for its converts, we will compare its views of the supernatural with those prevalent in the religion of most Thai and Sino-Thai found in Bangkok. Finally, we will briefly note some of the ways that this overlapping set of shared yet contrasting beliefs is played out in differing action strategies and in conflicts and misunderstandings between those who have and have not become Christians.

Setting

First, let us note the setting of our study. Protestant missionaries have actively proselytized in Thailand since the early to mid 19th century. Their efforts have borne greatest fruit in the northern part of the country, where around the turn

of the twentieth century Presbyterian missionaries gained several thousand converts among the Lao principalities centered on Chiengmai that were then in the process of becoming integrated into the central Thai state. These converts, together with several hundred Protestants in south and central Thailand, became the base of what is now the Church of Christ in Thailand. In the first half of the twentieth century the Protestant churches in Thailand experienced little growth, and at the outbreak of World War Two the combined membership of all Protestant denominations was still less than 10,000, with eighty percent of these in the northern provinces. Only around 750 residents of Bangkok are thought to have been Protestants at the time.

This picture changed after World War Two, partly due to an increase in the number of foreign missions active in the country, and partly due to changes in the structure of Thai society itself. Over the four decades from 1950 to 1990 the growth of the Thai Protestant churches has been persistently higher than the natural rate of increase, and over the past two decades its average annual growth rate ha been accelerating despite a gradual drop in the national birth rate. From a combined membership of under 10,000 in 1945, the Protestant community grew to 15,500 in 1950, 24,500 in 1960, and 36,000 in 1970 (Smith 1982:265). At this point, the rate of increase began to accelerate. By 1978, reported membership had nearly doubled,

growing from 36,000 to 59,000. Preliminary figures suggest that from 1978 to 1988 membership increased nearly 150 percent, growing from 59,000 to 147,000 (Clark 1989:2). If accurate, these figures represent national church growth in the 1980s at an average rate of increase of 8% per year.[8] This rate of increase ranks the Thai Protestant churches with Protestant churches in Korea, Latin America, and Singapore in terms of rate of growth.

Leading sectors of Protestant church growth in the 1980s appear to have been work among hill tribes such as the Akha, the Karen, and the Lahu in north and northwest Thailand. But growth also appears nationwide, particularly in urban centers and in the Northeast. In Bangkok alone, reported average Sunday church attendance doubled from 1984 to 1988, rising from 10,000 to

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[8] I should note, however, that I have yet to see the raw data on which these data are based. A number of factors, if present in quantity, could have led to overestimation of the rate of increase. For example, some denominations that earlier reported only full members may have redefined their membership figures to include children and adherents. Other groups, such as Hope of Bangkok, may have taken to reporting inflated membership and attendance figures as a matter of habit. Furthermore, some local congregations are individual members of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (an interdenominational organization akin to the National Association of Evangelicals in the United States), while also belonging to denominations that are themselves members of the EFT, and in those cases members are likely to have been counted twice.

Even so, the reports of accelerating growth cannot be discounted entirely. Rick Clark's recent figures seem to be in line with the rates of increase reported as of 1986 by Christian and Missionary Alliance missionary George Wood (1988), and they would seem to be congruent with the recent proliferation of Bible training institutes in Thailand, as well as with the generally rising optimism among church and mission personnel of all denominations.

Tribes

20,000. Church membership in Bangkok may already be as high as 40,000 (Clark 1989). In that city, growth appears to be occurring across the board, in all kinds of Protestant churches. But it is most noticable among independent or semi-independent churches led by strong local pastors or elders who are frequently Pentecostal or charismatic in practice. In Bangkok in 1988 four of the seven largest congregations were Pentecostal churches that had been developed within the previous eighteen years. The Hope of Bangkok Church, where I focus this study, was the fastest-growing of all. Founded in late 1981, it had already grown by mid-1988 to an average attendance of 1200, and it claimed at that time a membership in excess of 3000. In addition, by late 1989 it could count some 50 satellite congregations of various types throughout the country.

Consider the implications of these rates of growth. First, at the time that we speak, most Thai Protestants are first generation converts who have been Christians for less than ten years.[3] They were not socialized into Christianity in their family, but they learned it from the church leaders, from their friends, or through personal study. And since many of them have

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[3] This is calculated by taking the 1978 aggregate Protestant church membership, increasing the figure at a 2% compound annual rate for ten years, subtracting the result from the 1988 figure, and then comparing the result. By this method, slightly over half of the Protestants in 1988 would be converts within the decade. If there were a way of accounting for Protestants in 1978 who later left the church, the percentage of 1988 Protestants who are new converts would be slightly higher.

progressed rapidly to positions of leadership, they have had to learn their Christianity quickly. Second, the denominational mix of Thai Protestantism is changing. At the end of World War Two, some 90% of the Thai Protestant community was accounted for by the Church of Christ in Thailand, and none of the Thai Protestants were Pentecostals. By 1978 the CCT accounted for a bare majority, and Pentecostals and charismatics had become a significant force. In 1990 the CCT accounts for as little as 30-35%. of the Protestant community, while a quarter to a third of all Thai Protestants may already consider themselves Pentecostals or charismatics. Third, the socio-geographic locus of the Protestant community is changing. Forty years ago 80%. of the community could be found among Thai living in the six northern provinces, and the Bangkok churches, although politically important, were numerically insignificant. At present, however, Bangkok churches account for a quarter of the Protestant community, and an increasing proportion of Protestants can be found outside the Northern region, especially in the Northeast. The fourth implication follows from the first three. Because of the structural re-ordering of the Thai Protestant community, only in an increasingly small segment of the church can we expect to find a Thai Christian culture that has been worked and reworked through generations of re-enculturation centered in the village or the kinship network. Instead, for many Thai Christians the reinterpretation of tradition is an urgent, personal, church-

directed process worked out on a somewhat ad-hoc basis in counseling groups, Sunday schools, small mid-week services, and chance meetings among friends. It is a process that is worked out while dealing with real problems and perceptions faced by individuals who live, both culturally and socially, in two worlds at once. As a result, while the religious symbols, practices, and metaphors used by the Christians may be foreign in origin or universal in formulation, yet the applications to which they are put are sometimes uniquely local.

World View Change

As understood at Hope of Bangkok, conversion to Christianity involves a total cognitive and experiential reorientation. The new convert assents, at least in theory, to belief in such concepts as God, Jesus Christ, eternal life, sin, salvation, heaven, and hell. At least on the level of supernatural reality, converts are said to experience a new life, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, joy, peace, answers to prayer, new perspectives on their problems, new motivations for living, and a new fellowship with God. Since this is a Pentecostal church, most converts can expect to go on to experience a baptism of the Holy Spirit, marked by the initial evidence of speaking in tongues and by the experience of new power for living and spiritual growth. Over eighty percent of the people attending Hope of Bangkok on a given

Sunday will claim to have had such an experience.*

Conversion also involves taking up a distinctive set of ritual and behavioral practices that the convert is expected to observe faithfully. The Christian is expected to attend Sunday worship and mid-week cell group meetings faithfully. At least when I was there, the church would prefer these weekly observances to include a mimimum of two Sunday worship services, Sunday School, a mid-week cell group meeting, and possibly a prayer meeting. In addition, the convert should read the Bible and pray on a daily basis. Converts are expected to engage in a regular habit of worship and praise expressed in singing and prayer both individually at home and collectively with other Christians. Many converts typically engage in periods of fasting and prayer, of lengths ranging from a single skipped meal to several days at a time. None of these activities are seen as ends in themselves, nor are they ways to "make merit" or gain favor

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* I should note that this is not based on any scientific survey of my own. I base it instead on the volume of response at a Hope of Bangkok service when the pastor asked how many had ever spoken in tongues. I consider their response credible, because less than half responded affirmatively when he went on to ask how many still pray in tongues on a regular basis. Although some may have been inclined to reply positively in any event, on this issue most do not seem +o have been making programmed responses. T should note furthermore that most converts are strongly encouraged to seek the baptism of the Spirit within a few weeks of conversion (sometimes on the very same day), and that most individuals whom I have observed praying for this experience do in fact speak in tongues on that very first attempt. So the incidence of Holy Spirit baptism among Hope of Bangkok members appears to be much higher than has been reported for some "other Pentecostal denominations (add references later),

with God. Instead, they are seen as aids to ongoing personal spiritual growth. Furthermore, through these practices the individual learns cognitively about reality as the Christian community understands it. Through attendance at services, reading, and prayer, the individual learns about God, learns (partly through demonstrated example) how a Christian should live, and (it is thought) experiences through some spiritual process the direct action of the Holy Spirit in the inner being with such consequences as changing character for the better, increasing faith and understanding, bringing victory over sin, and increasing confidence and power to win others to Christ.

At Hope of--Bangkok, as in many other Pentecostal and holiness churches, conversion is thought on the theological level to be an instantaneous event of spiritual regeneration that occurs at the moment of belief. Nevertheless, spiritual growth and perfection are matters that take a great deal of time, and may never be completed in this life. As senior pastor Kriengsak Chareonwongsak tells the new converts every Sunday at the Hope of Bangkok Church, "No one ever finishes university in a single day. . . In the same way, the Christian life is a learning process," he says. He tells the converts that CHristian growth and understanding is a process that moves forward through regular church attendance and Bible reading, as well as instruction from Christian books, and from spiritual advisors in the church tget precise quote from one of the tapes].

The substance of the cognitive belief taught at Hope of Bangkok includes belief in God as evangelicals define him; belief in a dichotomy between good and evil; belief in sin and salvation as evangelicals define the concepts; and teachings on the nature of faith, the marks of Christian growth, and the nature of morality as understood in the church's interpretation of the relevant scriptures.

Many of these points, such as the existence of a God who must be worshipped exclusively, the sinful nature of nan, and the precise nature of salvation, differ significantly from the beliefs of most other Thai. On other matters, however, there are some points of similarity. For example, both Christians and non-Christians in Thailand are likely to believe in the existence of supernatural forces and beings that affect the affairs of humans. Both groups believe in the possibility of miraculous healing. Most intriguing, both groups also believe in the existence of supernatural forces associated with such specific venerated images and shrines as auspicious trees, spirit houses, charms, amulets, temples, images of Hindu gods, and statues of the Buddha. This particular attitude of Thai Christians is in marked contrast to the kind of skepticism with which most 19th century colonialists and missionaries from the United States and Britain tended to treat local beliefs throughout Southeast Asia.[5]

[5] See, for example, Daniel McGilvary's autobiographical account of his attempts to help individuals accused of witchcraft in late 19th century northern Thailand (McGilvary 1912). Although

Part of the reason for the shift from official incredulity to commonly-encountered belief is the recovery in North American evangelicalism (which in many cases serves as a template for Thai evangelicalism) of a more vivid belief in personifications of evil (that is, demons), particularly from the early twentieth century onwards, in precisely the same holiness and Pentecostal churches that are most likely to send large numbers of missionaries overseas. But for most North Americans, even Pentecostal North Americans, demons are an amorphous concept, easy to preach about, but hard to visualize, and even harder to take seriously as having to do with common everyday objects and experiences. So we might conclude that this particular continuity with traditional Thai belief is due to the ability of the Thai, like other Asian Christian communities, to take relatively amorphous beliefs borrowed from Western Christianity, and to adapt them to the specific contours of the local cultural landscape.

McGilvary seems to have been considered effective in curing individuals cf the kind of spirit possession that leads to witchcraft, and although he himself seemed fully aware of the nuances of local beliefs, there is no clear evidence from his book that he himself took the witchcraft accusations seriously, or that he performed any activities that he considered exorcism. Intriguingly, a colleague who has done fieldwork in one of the first northern Thai villages to contain a Christian community reports a folk memory that the early missionaries associated with McGilvary did in fact cast out spirits, although it is not clear exactly how he did this (Graham Fordham, personal communication). I suspect this reflects a local interpretation that developed very early in the Christian community.

Supernatural Powers in Popular Thai Religion

Before we pursue this point further, let us consider the nature of popular belief in supernatural powers in Thailand. Some scholars of Southeast Asian Buddhism have tended to take a rationalist, non-supernaturalist view of the core of the Buddhist religion. Working from certain readings of the Pali texts, these scholars tended to suggest that Theravada Buddhism, unlike Christianity, avoided "superstition," was essentially "philosophical" in outlook, and had nothing to do with the supernatural. According to this view, Buddhists do not pray, they do not worship gods, they do not predict the future, and, being

[illegible] calls "normative" or "nibbanic" Buddhism (1982:3ff), the farang Buddhist monk Phra Khantipalo (1973), and classic introductory readers by Henry Clarke Warren (1963) and Edwin Burtt (1955). Since many local people could be found doing all these things that seemed inconsistent with the scholars' selective reading of the texts, much local religious practice was attributed to local misunderstandings or corruptions of "pristine Buddhism," to the persistence of "folk religion," the interaction of the "little tradition" with the concepts of the "great tradition," or to the historical development of local "syncretism."[6]

[6] Succint reviews of the literature on the nature of Thai religious complexity may be found in Kirsch (1977) and in Piker (1972:212-214). Part of the reason for the attraction of this

More recent ethnography, particularly the three major works on Thai religion by Stanley Tambiah (1970, 1976, 1984), has undermined this approach. Largely through the indirect example of his method rather than by straightforward statement, Tambiah has revealed the traditional scholarly representation of "doctrinal Buddhism" to be a scholarly re-presentation of an elite hegemonic discourse that by now has been persisting in Thailand for several generations. The vision of a so-called "pristine" or "philosophical" Buddhism appears to have been a creation of and by an educated local elite in intellectual interaction with certain nineteenth century Western scholars. It is a hegemonic vision that devalues the religious practices of most Thai by reclassifying them as "not Buddhist" or sometimes even as "not religion." I lack the space here to recount the ways this is overtly done in official textbooks from elementary school onwards, and its effect on many young Thai, raised in middle and lower class urban and rural families, who learn in school to disbelieve explicitly much that they still feel emotively and

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essentially atomistic approach to Thai Buddhism may be due to the ease with which it could be made to dovetail with the long-standing concept elaborated by Robert Redfield though (he says) not invented by him – of a dialogueing opposition between "great tradition" (elite subcultures) and "little tradition" (folk subcultures) in peasant societies (see Redfield 1956:41ff; also Obeyesekere 1963 and Swearer 1989). However, whereas Redfield preserved a sense of an ongoing dialectic whereby the two traditions (three traditions, in the Mayan case) influenced each other over time by means of a variety of processes, it is not clear that this sense of living dialectic has always been preserved in the scholarship on Southeast Asian religion.

implicitly to be true.

Suffice it to say that by now there is plenty of evidence in works by Tambiah (1970, 1976, 1984), Mulder (1985), Terwiel(1979), and others that most Thai who consider themselves Buddhist (and who are so considered by the very elites who devalue their practice as allegedly non-Buddhist) are far less rationalist, agnostic, or desupernaturalized in their approach to life than elite discourse would have us believe is or should be the case. For example most Thai are very familiar with the world of supernaturally charged charms and amulets, whether or not they are themselves users, "believers," or aficionados of the amulet trade. Most monks are also participants in popular religious practice of one sort or another. In a typical monastery, even in Bangkok, one can not only obtain amulets, but also find instruction in palm-reading, services in protective house-blessing rituals, exorcism, fortune-telling, and a variety of other dealings with supernatural powers. As for the claim that Buddhists do not pray, many Thai -- even those from highly educated, urban middle-class families -- will readily admit to having made a vow to an image in exchange for a favor from the supernatural power associated with that image, or will admit to having "prayed to the Buddha" in the same manner that a Christian would pray to God or to a saint, in hopes of affecting immediate personal circumstances.

All of this is deplored, even ridiculed in official

religious circles, yet it is important that we note these practices if we are to understand the belief and practice of the average Thai who might become a Christian. Not only Thai, but Sino-Thai as well, are raised in a world filled with landmarks reminding them of the constant irruption of supernatural power into mundane existence. Most perceive a certain continuity of this-world with other-world, and they are aware of the potential benefits and dangers entailed by that continuity.

The popular cosmological landscape of the Thai or Sino-Thai religionist is not as dichotomized as that of the Christian. Rather than dividing the cosmos into a stark polarity between the forces of good (ordered by God) and the forces of evil (led by Satan), the traditional Thai religionist sees a cosmos inhabited by a variety of personalities, characteristics, and forces whose natures, however characterized, must necessarily be understood in non-moralistic terms. The cosmos is not a struggle between black and white, good and evil. It is instead a universe populated with beings that are themselves constrained by the nature of existence. Alternatively, it might be seen as a collection of powers that are amoral. They are amoral in that they are available to anyone who approaches them correctly (on this point see Akin (1975:108-110) and Mulder (1985:21-33) on vows to an image, and Tambiah (1984) on the amoral nature of amulets). They are amoral also in the sense that their essential natures may be focused in terms of an aim, mission, or reason for being that

makes them dangerous or beneficial to humans depending on the relationship of the human to that mission.

To take a concrete example, the spirit popularly known as Phra Sayam Thewathirat might be thought of as the guardian spirit of Thailand and also (depending on one's point of view on the relation of state and religion) as a guardian of Buddhism's fortunes in the nation through history. The spirit therefore is thought to be beneficial, even paternalistic, towards the Thai nation, Thai Buddhism, and the Thai people. The attitude of the spirit towards any individual might therefore be expected to depend on the likely impact of that person's activities on the well-being of the Thai nation.

Similarly, a local spirit, such as the guardian spirit of a homestead, is often thought to be protective of its territory. Individuals may enter into a relationship with the spirit such that the spirit becomes essentially protective toward the individual, while becoming vindictive toward others who might trespass on the territory that the spirit protects. However, even the homesteader may violate that relationship unintentionally; or, finding the spirit restless for other reasons, the homesteader may take steps to placate the spirit with ritual gifts or performances.

Another type of supernatural being, the thewada, are thought by some informants to be especially protective of the well-being of the Buddhist religion and are capable of punishing

individuals who speak against the religion, or who express ideas that might undermine belief, even as they might aid the quests of others who seek enlightment or moral betterment. In traditional religious literature such as the Buddha's birth stories, or in the dynastic chronicles of Thai and Burmese kings, one frequently finds the god Indra playing an active, positive role in times of stress. Tn more recent years, one of my informants considered himself to have been punished by thewada when his restaurant exploded in flames just minutes after he had suggested, ever so timorously, that some monks might be less than pure, and that the Buddha might not have uttered himself every single word that is recorded in the Pali scriptures.

The supernatural forces thought by many Thai to be associated with amulets and particular images are more "difficult to characterize. Many Thai feel that the forces associated with amulets are capable of providing personal protection to those who believe in their effectiveness, while the forces associated with images are capable of granting requests in exchange for the offer of a ritual repayment that would please them. Most Thai are vague, even inconsistent, about how this happens in a cosmological sense, but most agree that, particularly in the case of amulets, an individual must "believe" or "have faith [in]" (both words are translations of ml khwamchua) the power of the amulet or image in order for it to be effective.

Comparison and Contrast with the Christian World View

In the interests of brevity, I have framed this presentation in terms that will be relatively familiar to an English-speaking audience. By using a relatively small set of English terms to refer to the wide range of spirits and supernatural forces that populate the Thai cosmos, I have been engaging in a very ethnocentric, Western rationalistic form of discourse (influenced furthermore by explicitly Christian terminology) for which I suppose I should apologize. Had it been possible to frame the presentation in Thai with parallel English translation and annotation, I would have referred to the Christian god throughout in consistently gender-neutral terms, thereby undermining a sizable feminist critique of the supposed relationship between Christian symbolism, sexist language, and sexual oppression. More important, it would have been clear from the difficulties of translation that the Thai and English cognitive maps of, or at least linguistic taxonomies for, the natural-supernatural continuum (or dichotomy, as the case may be) are very different. The Thai language has a multiplicity of words and classifiers for the entities that the English language lumps together with the term "spirit." The Thai cosmos contains a diversity of phi (spirits and ghosts) thewada (gods or divine angels, who sometimes act as guardian spirits) winyan (spirit essences of individuals) cao thi (a kind of guardian spirit associated with a particular place) cao pho (a kind of guardian

spirit not necessarily specific to a place) pret (a generic Buddhist scriptural term for a particular class of ghosts, which in popular usage now appears to be classified as a kind of phi), and so forth. Many local ritual specialists can detail one or more of these categories at much greater length.[7] Although more and more Thai have been learning to think about the supernatural in Western terms, while still using Thai words, it is nevertheless useful to remember that the underlying assumptions about the shape and nature of the supernatural world are not the same in Thai popular religion as they are in popular evangelical Christianity.

There are, of course, some similarities between the two worldviews. The Thai popular religionist and the evangelical Christian both entertain the possibility of some relationship between a spirit and a human being. Both see the spirit as an independent being that watches out for its own interests and that intervenes in human affairs to reward or to punish, and to aid or oppose human action on grounds that seem appropriate to the spirit itself, whether those grounds be territoriality, protection of one's chosen people, preservation of some moral standard, or outright whimsy.[8] That intervention may take the

[7] For more detailed descriptions of some of these categories, see Tambiah (1970:312-326), Heinze (1982:___), and Phra Anuman (1966).

[8] For evangelical Christians this characterization must be modified by the observation that angels are thought to be so completely submissive to the will of God as to be almost

form of a miracle, or it may come in the form of action that appears (to others) to be played out as a natural course of events. For these reasons a convert to Christianity (particularly to Pentecostalism) from what I am loosely terming "Thai popular religion" would retain a world view that affirms the regular but unpredictable irruption of the supernatural into daily existence.

But the differences between Th3i Christians and non-Christians are also significant. First, where the Thai popular religionist sees a multiplicity of spirits and forces driven by a multiplicity of aims and interests, most evangelicals see the supernatural in dichotomous terms as a battleground between the forces of good and those of evil, the site of a struggle between the army of God and the minions of Satan. Second, the evangelical and the Thai religionist differ in their perceptions of the relationship of supernatural beings to the moral order.

Evangelical Christianity posits God as the initiator and sustainer of both the moral order and the physical realm. He is a cosmic lawgiver, so to speak. Christians may disagree as to whether God voluntarily submits to the order he has promulgated, or whether God merely decrees that which is already necessarily part of his nature. (Of course, the average evangelical is not incapable of independent action. Their activity is so subordinate to the command of an omnipotent God as to make their existence almost irrelevant. Nevertheless, they do retain some function in the evangelical and Pentecostal cosmology as messengers and guardians, most frequently appearing (or thought to be working) in a rescuing, teaching, or protecting role.

likely to think about questions of this kind any more than is the average Thai religionist likely to wonder how a Buddha who is officially believed to have ceased existing 2500 years ago is able to answer his prayers today). Most evangelicals would agree, however, that there is no order external to God himself, and no larger cosmos pre-existing and incorporating his creation. Many Thai, on the other hand, would see spirits as beings moving within a world that they have not created and which they can never entirely control. Some, influenced by more literary forms of Buddhism, might understand all spirits to be ultimately constrained by the rule of dharma. Others might simply consider the universe to be populated by a variety of beings with distinctive personalities who, although powerful, have specific limitations and weaknesses just as humans do. The moral order does not flow from any particular spirit, and no spirit is entirely pure (although some, such as certain thewada, come so close to the ideal that the distinction may as well be a moot point as far as humans are concerned). It follows, therefore, that spirits cannot be neatly classified into "good" and "evil" camps. They simply exist, to be dealt with according to one's interests and abilities. A third difference is that a multiplicity of spirits and sources of supernatural powers indicates a multiplicity of sources of aid to people in need. In Thai popular religion, people seeking healing, personal protection, or business success might, depending on need and

personal preference, go to a temple, have blessing rites performed, wear amulets, make vows, see a fortuneteller, or avail themselves of some of the other sources of aid that are easily available. A person who asks a favor of the shrine at what used to be the Erawan Hotel need never go to that same shrine again, any more than an American buying a new house would feel constrained to ask a loan of the same person who had financed her car the previous year, but the Christian feels herself constrained to approach the same God time after time.

From the traditional Thai point of view, the evangelical Christian idea of a Jealous God who alone may be worshipped and who alone of all supernatural forces is good, is an assertion that is ludicrous, arrogant, and disrespectful (or that at least informs behavior that can be interpreted this way). From the christian point of view, the idea of a variety of spirits that can be supplicated successively according to circumstance is dangerous to the supplicator, for in the Christian view the spirits themselves, except for God's angels, are necessarily evil in nature.

The worldviews therefore intersect while being opposed. Each religionist can and often does recognize the existence of the spirits believed in by the other, while holding different opinions about those spirits. Few Thai will deny outright the possibility of a God as the Christian describes him, but few would see that as sufficient reason for becoming a Christian as

evangelicals define the term. Similarly, few Thai Christians in the churches I studied would deny the existence of traditionally believed spirits, but few would have anything to do with them.

Therefore, upon conversion the Thai is not asked to give up his former beliefs in supernatural forces. He is asked instead to break off any ties with them. He is taught furthermore to view them no longer as potential benefactors, but instead as permanent, dangerous opponents, over which he can gain victory and safety only through utter and helpless dependence on God himself.*

Beliefs in the Other World, and Actions in the Material World

The two sets of beliefs regarding the supernatural can lead to different strategies for religious action in this world. Consider, for example, the context of a Pentecostal divine healing crusade. In Thailand these crusades are capable of drawing crowds numbering in the hundreds and in the thousands,

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* It should be noted that many evangelicals would avoid having anything to do with Buddhist and Hindu images on the grounds that traditional ritual constitutes idolatry. This is in fact preached by Thai Christians as well. However, the point I am making here applies to a broader range of phenomena than the prohibition against having and honoring what Thai Christians call rup khaorop (a prohibition that many North American Christians observe in only piecemeal fashion, in any event). This section's discussion focuses not on the image itself, but on the spiritual force thought to be associated with that image. As a consequence, the reclassification of the visual image is do largely to the way the image (or other landmark or symbol of spiritual force) is treated in popular religion, and with the reasons why it is honored in that fashion.

especially when actual healings are reported by those who have attended. The more successful healing evangelists often report conversions at their crusades numbering in the hundreds. The evangelists are not lying. I have observed some of these responses myself. Most people who go forward to accept Christ give every indication of being sincere and of understanding what they are doing. Many of them report having been healed, and they are more than prepared to [illegible]

[illegible] a church. For some, the apparent conversion may be ascribed to the excitement of the moment or to a desire to be polite to the evangelist. On the other hand, the inability of evangelists to channel most of their converts into churches may also be due to differing assumptions about what is going on. When a crusade evangelist issues an invitation for people to become Christians, he works from an exclusivist framework that assumes that becoming Christian means unbecoming whatever one was before. This is a kind of commitment whose full implications (including the evangelist's expectations about what must and must not change in the convert's belief and practice) are necessarily unknown to Thai listeners who have not engaged in considerable previous study of Christian literature or observation of practicing Christians. Thus, when the evangelist and the convert speak of "becoming Christian" (khao pen khritsatian. or rap chua) their meanings intersect (indeed, are expressed in precisely identical

terms), but their meanings do not fully coincide.

Evidence of that lack of coincidence can be found not only in the meaning of becoming Christian, but also in the conflicting interpretations of the implications of divine healing. According to the evangelist, miraculous healing demonstrates the power of God. Most Thai readily agree with this, and they might agree furthermore that a recipient of divine healing owes a debt of gratitude to the Christian God.[10] But to suggest, as many evangelists do, that divine healing not only demonstrates the power of God but also verifies the exclusive truth-claims of Christianity is to assume more than the audience is ready to accept, for supernatural healing in itself poses no challenge to the traditional belief system.

So at the healing crusade a drama is played out in which the evangelist and the "convert" express verbally what sounds like a common understanding of what is going on, while bringing different assumptions to that verbal expression. In a sense they have common understandings, but different understandings of the understandings. The result is large crusades, many converts, but few individuals who become full members of the Christian community.

But what of the people that Christian leaders consider genuine converts, the individuals who sooner or later come to

[10] For analogous situations involving vows or debts of gratitude to Thai (non-Christian) spirits, see Akin (1975a, 1975b) and Mulder (1985).

share, however temporarily, the Christians' views on the supernatural, on morality, and on the self? These individuals often find themselves in conflict with their non-Christian peers over the interpretation of ritual action, a conflict that is intensified by the intersection of worldviews. If the Christian rejected all previous beliefs, including the belief in local spirits, then compromise in response to social pressures from the Thai religionists with whom he still has intimate contacts might be easy. But because he believes that those spirits not only exist but also are dangerous, he stands firm in refusing to practice traditional ritual.[11] This firm refusal heightens the conflict with family, schoolteachers, friends, and other authority figures, who can then transform ritual practice into a test of whether one is or is not to remain a Christian. Before conversion the convert may already have been perfunctory or lackadaisical in observing ritual practice, but after conversion ritual often becomes a major battleground between social intimates. And both sides' actions are motivated in part by their views of the effect of those rituals on their relations to the supernatural. Christians in most of the Thai churches I visited avoided giving alms to monks, refused to pay respects to images, avoided merit-making activities, and in general avoided active

[11] I suspect that for many converts an injunction against "idolatry" in itself would be sufficient to bring non-participation in popular ritual. But the exclusivist argument of kingdoms in conflict gives the injunction extra force for some.

participation in any ceremonies thought to invoke or pay respects to non-Christian supernatural powers in any way. Conversely, families desiring all their members to participate in traditional ceremonial -- ceremonials that are usually performed to gain some benefit in this life or the next may often increase pressure on Christian converts to engage in the traditional ceremonial activities.

Christian converts attending organized small group meetings often raise these issues in the form of requests for counseling. How does one avoid participation in religious ceremonial without seeming to reject the family, ask some of them. How does one cope when parents pressure one to become a monk or to offer daily alms to monks? What is the proper role of a Christian at a traditional Thai or Chinese funeral held in honor of a member of the family? Why do Christians refuse to honor images of eminent historical figures, like the Suddha?

These are serious questions for many converts, for the intersection of conflicting worldviews has made ritual non-participation one of the key distinguishing public marks of Christian commitment and belief. As a consequence, religious ceremonies become prime opportunities to test a convert's allegience. Those conflicts are never easy to negotiate, and most would prefer to avoid them whenever possible. But because of the differing interpretations from which the conflicts spring, the price of peace for the convert may be the revision of one's

beliefs, or the outright abandoning of the convert's new faith. Although not every convert faces this kind of social pressure, for some the decision to convert brings months and years of skirmishing with the ones they love most. For these the free personal decision to adhere to the Prince of Peace brings, in a ~~sense~~, a loss of personal peace.

Postscript

While going through one of the early sections of this paper, one reader noted that I had forgotten to note that Thai Buddhists converting to Christianity move, at least in theory, from a belief in multiple lives to a belief in a single life in which to work out one's salvation, and that this should have some important psychological, motivational, and ideological effects. I agree that if the religion of neatly consistent dogmas were the religion of the people, then this would be an important point, and it is worth investigating in other contexts. However, church personnel at Hope of Bangkok, whose zealous proselytization efforts probably give them a better handle on this than most anyone else, report that very few potential converts with whom they talk raise the question of karma and multiple rebirths. This would be consistent with the many educated Thai informants who told me that for them talk of chat na (the next life) was nothing more than a figure of speech. For many urban Thai, traditional doctrines such as these are the sort of thing that, if believed,

is assented to in a perfunctory manner, and it is hardly surprising that a range of Buddhist teachers and sects as diverse as Phra Phothirak and Buddhadasa, Thammakai and Huppha Sawan are all able to find followers ready to accept their particular interpretations. Doctrines such as karma and rebirth are part of a broad range of belief on which many Thai young people are feeling, as one respected monk put it, "half and half" -- they half disbelieve, and half aren't sure (Phra Thepwethi, personal interview, April 1988).

Nevertheless, this partial abandonment of the traditional world view, particularly among the educated classes, does not necessarily result in a Weberian demystifying [wordchoice?] of the world.'* What remains in the dedogmatized and partially deceremonialized world of many Bangkok residents -- a world in which there is not "less religion" but rather a more "internalized" religion, as a Bangkok professor put it – is a preoccupation with those aspects of religious belief and practice that are most relevant to the vicissitudes of daily existence. And although many young Thai may feel just as "half and half" about spirit beliefs and supernatural forces as they do about beliefs in multiple rebirths, the former are a class of belief whose general availability and manipulability make them more immediately relevant to daily mundane existence, so that

'* Recent research among Bangkok intellectuals by Louis Golomb supports this point very well. Similar evidence can of course be found among most classes.

thoroughgoing disbelief is harder to manage than in the care of past and future lives, if disbelief is even desired.

These considerations may explain in part why it is that the indigenizing of Christianity in Bangkok of the 1980s does not show the kind of spatio-temporal continuities found, for example, in Mayan Christian syncretism (see Bricker 1981, Gossen 1979, Watanabe 1990), or among Central Sulawesi Protestants (Aragon 1990), or why it is that we do not see any obvious tendencies to dress up traditional deities in Christian names (compare Gossen 1979, Wolf 1958). The focus of Thailand's indigenized Christianity has to do instead with those aspects of religion that continue to be relevant to persistent concerns in a rapidly changing world -- namely those aspects that have to do with personal fortune and misfortune, with health and mental well-being, and with the possibilities and dangers implied by the existence of supernatural forces.[13] Further elaboration of these issues, together with their interrelations with recent social-structural changes in Thailand, are best handled in another context, but I thought the point worth raising here.

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[13] For parallel concerns and their expression in middle-class America, (And a reference by Maguire [name?] book on Supernatural healing in New Jersey suburbs). see McGuire (1988).

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