Social and Historical Aspects of the Assimilation of Christianity in Southeast Asia from 1500-1900 with Reference to Thailand and the Philippines

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Though many have attempted to address the complexities of the encounter between Christianity and non-western societies, the literature has not dealt much with Southeast Asia. This article attempts to help fill that gap by examining some of the factors affecting the assimilation of Christianity in Southeast Asia by looking at two countries in detail: Thailand and the Philippines. These two countries offer strikingly different assimilation results. Thailand was not colonized when Christianity was introduced while in the Philippines colonization and Christianity were intimately linked. As a result, both Thailand and the Philippines are a study in contrasts.

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Introduction

A growing body of historical and anthropological literature documents the complexities of the encounter between Christianity and non-western societies. This literature has dealt less with Southeast Asia than Africa or the New World, hampered by a paucity of resources, books, qualified teachers and interested students (Cate 2004:172). Nonetheless, the efforts of Christians to missionize Southeast Asia and Christianity's assimilation there, have been significant as witnessed by the growth in the Christian population over the centuries. Southeast Asia includes eleven main countries, listed here in decreasing order of

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present Christian population: the Philippines (92.5 percent); East
Timor (90 percent); Singapore (14.5 percent); Brunei (10 percent);
Malaysia (9.1 percent); Vietnam (8 percent); Myanmar (4 percent);
Indonesia (3 percent); Laos (1.3 percent); Thailand (1 percent); and
Cambodia (less than 1 percent) (CIA 2008). The main non-Christian
religions represented today in the region are Buddhism and Islam.
The countries of Southeast Asia, unlike South Asia (Barton 2005:72-
74), were not reached by the early Christians. Indonesia and
Malaysia alone seem to have been influenced by Nestorian
Christians in the period c.1000-1500 (England 1996:94, 97-98, 106).
The majority of countries in Southeast Asia first came to know
Christianity in its maritime phase (cf. Walls 1998) from missionaries
traveling with colonists either Catholic (ca. 1500-1700: Cambodia,
East Timor, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam) or Protestant (ca.
1800-1900: Laos, Myanmar and Singapore).

This article aims to examine factors affecting assimilation of
Christianity in Southeast Asia but has space to focus on only two
countries in detail. The first country examined, Thailand (strictly
"Siam" before 1939) is an uncolonized country with a social identity
and indigenous religious beliefs unresponsive to Christianity. The
second country examined, the Philippines, is a colonized country
with a social identity and indigenous religious beliefs responsive to
Christianity. On first sight these two countries might be thought of as
representative of Southeast Asia—coming from opposite ends of the
list of Christian demographics—but to the contrary, the very fact that
these countries are interesting from the point of view of Christianity
is because they lack the influences ubiquitous to the region of
widespread Islamic conversion (ca. 10th to 12th centuries) or loss of
historical records through Communist insurgence (ca. 1950's).

The Process of Assimilating Christianity

Before looking at the data, it is necessary to understand the
process of assimilation and some of the descriptive terms involved.
The Southeast Asian societies under examination started out with a
set of non-Christian beliefs and practices which formed an important
part of their social identity. When they encountered western
missionaries, they were "missionized" or received instruction on the

Gospel by various methods confessional or coercive. The result of such a process was a more or less complete assimilation of Christian beliefs and practices. If the transfer was complete, on a personal level it is known as "conversion." On the level of people groups, ideally it would result in the establishment of locally-led churches.

Assimilation has never been a simple case of "converting the heathens." In almost all contexts of missionary activity, conversion has been less than complete with S. Kaplan's (1986) C1-C6 typology illustrating the full spectrum of possibilities. There may be resistance to certain aspects of the Gospel because of historical factors, differences of social identity and incompatibilities with indigenous beliefs. The Christian message may be "incarnated" in locally appropriate forms within the definitions of orthodoxy that can be accommodated by the missionaries (see, for example, Hiebert 1994:91-92; Tan 2003:27). If the adapted forms fail to meet the criteria of orthodoxy, they are referred to as "syncretism" (Sanneh 2003:44)—with the possible lack of toleration which might lead to persecution as "heretical"—although in practice, the line of toleration between conversion and syncretism may be fuzzy (Sanneh 2003:46-47) depending on the perceived need for Christianity to "hold its shape" (Robbins 2001).

In practice, concerns about syncretism tend to be less about cultural mixing than about ambiguous religious loyalties (Zehner 2005:593). Interestingly, the missionization process is not one-way (Cohen 1994:30; Sanneh 2003:55). The message and practices of Christianity may be changed by local beliefs and practices in a reverse process called "indigenization." Recognizing the difficulty of assimilating the Gospel for non-Western cultures, missionaries have attempted to tailor their message and possibly other aspects of mission strategy (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989; Lim 2003:72) to local needs and identities by "contextualization" or "inculturation." If such contextualization becomes systematized, it may give rise to new theologies appropriate to that locality.

In light of this background to the assimilation process, the remainder of this article will examine the historical factors, social identity and nature of indigenous beliefs for the two chosen countries—Thailand and the Philippines—explaining

how these may have affected the assimilation of Christianity. Thailand will be examined first.

Thailand

Historical Aspects

In spite of repeated attempts by force and coercion, Thailand was never colonized and remained unreceptive to Christianity (Neill 1986:293; Wyatt 1984:116-117), in spite of relative freedom of religion (Keyes 1993:269-270). Historically, Thailand welcomed trade, but had no need of Christian military aid (Chandler 1983:83). The first period of Christian missionary work (1511-1830) was entirely Catholic, with friars repeatedly attempting to convert the monarch. After arousing suspicion of subversion in 1688, Catholic missionary efforts stagnated. The second period of Christian missionary work, from 1830 onwards, was dominated by Protestant denominations (Smith 2004a:143) which ministered especially to those on the edges of society. From 1858 onwards, Protestants refocused missionary attention away from Bangkok to folk Buddhists of the northern Thai hill-tribes (Koyama 1999:56). Lack of receptivity to Christianity *could* be correlated with an inability to colonize a country, but it is not the whole story as Myanmar or India *were* colonized but were also unresponsive to Christianity. In what follows, we find that social factors have also affected the degree of assimilation.

Aspects of Thai Social Identity

For the purposes of this article, the assumption is made that contemporary research on social identity can be extrapolated to Southeast Asians in the colonial period. Of ten Thai character traits identified by S. Komin (1991), five—shame-based motivation, community-oriented value system, reciprocity, non-assertiveness and compromise—seemed particularly relevant in trying to explain the Thai response to the Christian message. Social identity is elaborated here at some length to show the relevance to missionary attitude.

Firstly, Thais have motivation which is "shame-based" or aware of "face" (Flanders 2005). In Asia people expect to be treated with equal dignity, even though they may not have equal power (Kerkvliet 1990:176-177). They have a love of freedom (Mejudhon 2004a:307), believing everyone deserves respect (Mejudhon 2004b:280) and possibly resorting to violence if dignities are infringed (Mejudhon 2003a:98-99). In Asia, a person's religious identity is inseparable from their other personal and social concerns (Lim 2003:74; Tan 2000:296-299). For Westerners everything is an end in itself, but for Thais everything is a means to an end, often to save "face" (Mejudhon 2004b:279).

Secondly, Thais have a community-orientated value system. They value group harmony, especially close family ties, smooth interpersonal relations and preservation of the social *status quo* (Mejudhon 2004a:308 and 2004b:279, 281), tending to judge messages by their messengers (Mejudhon 2003a:96). Dissent against the *status quo* needs to be expressed indirectly (Mejudhon 2003a:98-99). In case of disrupted relationships, expression of reconciliation is important (Mejudhon 2004b:286). This observation is particularly important concerning the alienation Christians may feel from their community after conversion (Smith 2004b:204) or if openly disciplined by their church community (Mejudhon 2004b:279).

Thirdly, Thais value the reciprocation of favours between givers and receivers (Mejudhon 2003a:98-99; 2004b:281). Even after conversion to Christianity they may still feel gratitude for the benefits they have previously received from parents, teachers and Buddhism (Mejudhon 2004a:307)**.**

Fourthly, Thais tend to be a smiling, friendly people (Neill 1986:245). They are taught from an early age to be obedient, polite and subdued (Mejudhon 2004b:279) and to cherish a non-assertive, polite, humble personality, expressed through appearance and manners (Mejudhon 2003a:98-99). This Thai "way of meekness" (2004a:298) understands true power as being expressed through vulnerability (Mejudhon 2004a:307), and as shown in the previous section, this approach has served well to protect Thailand against colonialism. Difference is not necessarily a cause of conflict in Thailand (Koyama 1999:xi). However, in case missionary efforts were admixed with a treasonable agenda, Thais may have responded

aggressively; this being the only reason for martyrdom in Thailand. Thailand has an easygoing view of history as compared to the West's theology-backed impatience (Koyama 1999:37), posited as complacency towards life (Koyama 1999:72) characteristic of a climate where natural disasters are rare (Koyama 1999:22).

Finally, Thais tend to have a compromising personality (Mejudhon 2004b:281). This tendency may lead to a degree of laxity in matters of principle (Mejudhon 2003a:98-99).

Aspects of Indigenous Beliefs

At the time colonists arrived, the Thai religion consisted of three basic subsystems: Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism (Kirsch 1981:146-147). In Thailand the practice of animism antedated both Brahmanism and Buddhism. According to legend, Buddhism arrived in Thailand from Sri Lanka in the 3rd century B.C. with the monks Sona and Uttara, but there is no evidence to support or deny this. Thailand was quickly converted to Buddhism with state support that continues to this day (Ishii 1968; Reynolds 1977; Wyatt 1984:229). Brahmanical elements also antedated Buddhism, arriving via Cambodia. Animistic practices were also found, particularly in the hill-tribe regions of the north of Thailand. Irregardless of these Brahman and animist precursors, the country has been dominated by Theravada Buddhism since long before 1500.

The Theravada Buddhism of Thailand incorporated a highly integrated philosophical system (Smith 2004b:201) in perhaps the purest form found anywhere in the world (Koyama 1999:93). Buddhism and Christianity were based on totally different assumptions and soteriologies (Burnett 1996:277; Smith 2004a:147). Buddhists did not have common points of contact from biblical revelation like Muslims or Jews, or redemptive analogies (Smith 2004b:201). Christian missionaries identified as many as thirty-three theological contrasts between traditional Buddhism and Christianity (Church of Christ in Thailand 1962). Of these, differences in understanding of the nature of reality, the basis of spiritual life, eschatology, view of suffering, the authority of the scriptures and ancestor worship are not immediately relevant to this article. The theological stumbling blocks for missionaries that have contributed

to the unintelligibility of the Christian message include: Buddhist non-theistic view of the world (Smith 2003:53 and 2004a:164); denial of Christ's deity (Smith 2003:42 and 2004a:147-158); the doctrine of no eternal soul (Cohen 1991:121; Smith 2004a:147-158); the law of karma as opposed to the concept of original sin (Smith 2004a:147-158); salvation by self-effort rather than redemption or grace (Cohen 1991:121; Smith 2003:47, 2004a:147-158, and 2004b:201); and principles of religious outreach (Smith 2004a:147-158). In Buddhism there are no laws equivalent to the first five commandments which focus on man's personal relationship with God (Smith 2003:46).

The animistic or "folk Buddhist" peoples of the northern hill tribes proved more receptive to Christianity because they seemed more prayerful and aware of demonic forces and ancestral spirits (Smith 2004a:164), although there is also evidence suggesting that the conversion of folk Buddhists to Christianity has also been largely opportunist (Mischung 1980:143).

Outcome of Mission Work

What has been the result of mission work in Thailand? Figure 1, below, shows the growth of Christianity in Thailand over the past five centuries.[1]

Figure 1: Growth of Mission Work in Thailand from 1500 to Present

Date	1511	1662	1785	1802	1868	1912	2006
Thai Christians	0	2,000	1,372	2,500	3,000	36,000	438,600

Although there has been some expression of optimism about missionary efforts in Thailand (Smith 2004b:206), the consensus has

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[1] Figure 1 numbers include both Catholic and Protestant Thai Christians and are compiled from three sources: Pro Mundi Vita Centrum Informationis (1973:22); Neill (1986:352); and Johnstone and Mandryk (2001).

been pessimistic, with descriptions of missionary efforts varying from "difficult" (Neill 1986:245) and "disturbingly slow" (Johnson 2002:2) to "spectacularly unsuccessful" (Cohen 1991:118) and "miserable failure" (Lantern 1986:13). Five main weaknesses in missionary strategy have been identified in the literature: the unintelligibility of the message, patronizing missionary attitudes, lack of relationship bonding, inconsiderate manner and western forms.

The message of Christian missionaries was unintelligible both in terms of vocabulary and the concepts expressed. In the earliest years, missionaries following the policy of the Council of Trent, used Portuguese-based vocabulary to explain key Christian terms instead of "baptizing" vernacular equivalents. Nineteenth-century missionaries learned to translate key Christian words into Thai (see, for example, Rajadhon 1968), but still could not communicate key terms like "guilt" or "redemption" due to a lack of a conceptual common ground. Furthermore, instead of starting with Bible tracts close to the Thai worldview, missionaries were quick to evangelize; for example, starting with the Four Spiritual Laws tract (Bright 1965) which was conceptually alien to Thais (Mejudhon 2004b:283).

The earliest missionaries to Thailand mistook Buddhism for animism (Cohen 1991:125) and although this misunderstanding was later dispelled, self-righteous and arrogant attitudes of Christians persisted towards non-Christians (Koyama 1999:153; Lim 2003:77; Mejudhon 2004a:307; Sanneh 2003:16), especially towards Buddhists (Cate 2004:170). Missionaries failed to listen to native people on their own terms, seeing them rather as objects of religious conquest (Koyama 1999:65; Lurry 2004:234). Even the attitude of Replacement Theology—that other world religions are merely preparation for the coming of Christianity—is considered patronizing by non-Christian Thais (Koyama 1999:xii).

Missionaries overlooked the importance of relational bonding for the region (Mejudhon 2003a:97) leading them to pass on the Christian message in a direct, cognitively-oriented, instantaneous way, without sufficient relational bonding (for example, the description of nineteenth century sermons in Feltus 1936:46). This ran counter to the social graces that underlie the Thai values of "face," grateful relationships and flexibility identified above

(Mejudhon 2004b:279). Not only was there no bonding between the missionary and the listener (Mejudhon 2004a:307), but in the unlikely event a listener should want to convert, the relational bonding with the rest of their family, extended family and village (who had not converted) would be compromised (Lim 2003:76; Mejudhon 2004b:283) frequently leaving them to be considered a traitor (Smith 2004b:204).

For Asians, Christianity came over as a noisy faith (Koyama 1999:161), and correspondingly it was often not the message but the messenger of Christianity that provided the greatest problems for the average non-Christian Thai (Mejudhon 2003a:96). Christians, and hence Christianity, was thus perceived as unkind, selfish and fanatic (Mejudhon 2004a:307), aggressive (Mejudhon 2004b:283), forceful and threatening (Mejudhon 2004a:307). Thais spoke with particular distaste (2004b:282) about the western witnessing approaches (see, for example, Bright 1965; Kennedy 1996). Christian demeanor became particularly inexcusable when it went beyond attitudes and words to include desecration of Buddha statues (Mejudhon 2004b:281), posting of gospel messages on trees all over Thailand and manipulating Thai children in the name of Jesus (Mejudhon 2004b:286).

When H. Belloc referred to "Europe" as the faith (1920:10) he identified the historical tendency for uncontextualized witness and transplantation of church structures and missionary strategies (Lim 2003:84). This was especially true for Thailand where unnecessary barriers were raised (Bunchua 1986:3; Lim 2003:76; Smith 2004b:204) because Christianity was introduced by Westerners insistent on western architecture (Smith 2004b:205 and Wisely 1984:163), western music, individual conversion and the alienation of its members from their original social relationships (Blanford 1985:84).

Subsequent to the mistakes of the period 1500-1900, Christian missionaries in Thailand have adjusted their approach to missionization, which is reflected in the growth of Christianity in Thailand during the 20th century. It is now time to turn our attention to the second country in our analysis: the Philippines.

The Philippines

Historical Aspects

Unlike Indonesia, Thailand or Vietnam, the Philippines has little recorded history predating the arrival of colonists (Rafael 2001:16; Steinberg 2000:53). This article restricts itself to the history of the lowland territories of Luzon and the Visayas for which some historical records from this period are available. The violent and destructive aspects of colonial rule have not generally been documented (Cannell 1999:9), history being overwhelmingly written by the colonizers rather than the colonized (Rafael 2001:6). Nonetheless, some balance to our social and historical picture of the time is reconstructed from the writings of local authors such as Tomas Pinpin (1610) and Jose Rizal (1887), as well as those of Jesuit historians like Father Francisco Blancas (1610, 1614), Gaspar Aquino de Belen (1703), and Father Pedro Chirino (1890).

Until the 1500's the pre-Hispanic Philippine communities, with the exception of the Muslim sultanates in Sulu and Mindanao, were fairly small without a great deal of centralized authority. Lowland society was never amalgamated into a single state before the arrival of the Spanish, but consisted of many small, piratical chiefdoms making war and trading with one another in conditions of relative political fluidity (Cannell 1999:10; Scott 1982:99-111, 122-126). Pre-colonial justice was dispensed either by ordeal or divination (Rafael 2001:140). Islam had been present in the southern Philippines since between the 10th and 12th centuries and had slowly spread north, with a settlement in Manila.

Aspects of Filipino Social Identity and Indigenous Beliefs

Filipino social identity remains as elusive now as it was in the colonial era (Cannell 1999:245), never fitting the anthropologist's preoccupation with forms (Appadurai 1996; Fabian 1983; Geertz 1988; Trouillot 1991) and "impervious" to outside influences (Cannell 1999:246). Filipinos themselves are often conscious only of the bastardized nature of their cultural forms admitting glibly "we're very westernized . . . the Spanish brought religion, the Americans

brought democracy" (Cannell 1999:4). Unlike the *indio*s of the New World, Filipinos had neither temples to be destroyed nor pagan monuments to desecrate (Rafael 2001:106). Nonetheless, far from being a blank slate, Filipino identity lay more in the realm of "meaning" and as such offered little resistance to Christian missionization while in many ways seemed to relish submission to it (Rafael 2001:136). There were five features of meaning that seemed to mark Philippine social identity: fear of the unknown (Rafael 2001:127, 191); belief in reciprocity, negotiation or token repayments (Rafael 2001:131) where debts of gratitude (*utang na loob*) were too overwhelming to pay; animistic afterlife beliefs (Scott 1983:141); pity for the dead (Rafael 2001:xix); and no developed concept of heaven, hell or sin (Cannell 1999:138; Rafael 2001:146, 170, 191). These five features, as we shall see, had an underlying compatibility with the redemptive message of the Gospel.

Missionary Efforts

Christian missionary work in the Philippines from 1521-1898 was dominated by Spanish Catholic denominations. A second period of Christian missionary work (beyond the scope of this article) from 1898 onwards, was dominated by Protestant denominations when the United States ended Spanish rule (Neill 1986:293).

Catholic missionization started with Magellan's ill-fated expedition and was continued by Legaspi. The absence of centralized power meant that with a mere fraction of the military force used in the New World, Spaniards were able to "requisition" the lowland Philippines and put it under colonial hegemony. A requisition notice (*requerimiento*) was read to the natives requesting them to receive the faith and submit to the Crown. Any native refusing to comply would then justifiably be subjected to military assault (Rafael 2001:158). The *indios* were not "enemies of the faith" like the Moors had been (Rafael:2001:154), so Philip II's conscience could only justify colonization in terms of evangelization (Rafael:2001:158-159). Such justification created a fiction of the need for Filipinos to be converted and idealizing submission to sovereignty out of gratitude for redemption (Schumacher 1979). The evangelization

effort was initially funded by galleon trading between China and the New World (Steinberg 2000:21-22, 35).

Later the galleon trade became less profitable, and the missionary efforts were supported instead by "tributes" of gratitude paid by native converts to the Crown. As early as 1589, Philip II had set the annual rate of tribute as 10 *Reales* payable in cash or kind (Rafael 2001:159) and forty days *per annum* unpaid labor on government projects (Rafael 2001:160). Exaction of "tributes" was facilitated by *reduccion de indios*, the forced relocation of small, scattered settlements into one larger town centered around a church (Rafael 2001:88). This arrangement facilitated "friar rule" (Cannell 1999:242) with a mere 400 friars ministering to the 600,000 natives converted by 1700. By the end of Philip II's reign, the bureaucratic network emanating from Castile via Mexico to Manila, down to village level, was administered by the largest bureaucratic apparatus in the Western world (Payne 1973:167, 256).

The significance of vernacular transmission (Rafael 2001:7) was overlooked by earlier historians such as Phelan (1959) and de la Costa (1961). Without schools to train natives in Spanish, the friars were required to say Christian mass and otherwise communicate in the vernacular languages of the Philippines (Cannell 1999:5; Rafael 2001:19). In accordance with Council of Trent policy, key Christian terms were left untranslated (Rafael 2001:29). For Spaniards, the translation process was a way of reducing native culture to objects accessible to divine and imperial intervention. Later this went beyond language to include the natives' settlements, beliefs and traditions (Rafael 2001:90, 107). On deeper examination this "translation" process can be seen to have stimulated "reverse translation" by the Filipinos and mission contextualization to have sparked a process of indigenization. For Filipinos, translation was the process less of internalizing colonial-Christian conventions than of evading Spain's totalizing grip by repeatedly marking the differences between their language and interests and those of the Spaniards (Rafael 2001:131).

Result of Mission Work

It was not until the early 18th century that we have sustained evidence of Philippine conversion that coincided with, rather than simply circumvented, Spanish intention (Rafael 2001:211). However, within three centuries, 85 percent of the population had become Christian (Russell 1999) and the Philippines a "showcase of Christian faith" (Steinberg 2000:80). However, the Spanish were successful in converting neither the Filipinos of the Luzon highlands—where a diverse array of ethno-linguistic groups used their remote, difficult mountainous terrain to avoid colonization—nor Muslims (Russell 1999).

Missionary efforts were made easier by the Christianization of pre-existing Philippine customs. The most significant was the reinvention of the concept of death—previously seen as an undifferentiated afterlife—to link it with the Christian economy of salvation, through the new concepts of sin, heaven and hell (Cannell 1999:138; Rafael 2001:170). On the level of practice, the lighting of candles on graves to guide the dead back to revisit the living (*tibao*) (Cannell 1999:153, 157) was Christianized as "All Saints Day" (Rafael 2001:188). Elaborate funeral rites (*sipa*) with associated ritual weeping (*manambitan*) (Cannell 1999:181) and pity for the dead (*herak*) (Cannell 1999:165) became Christianized as the funeral wake for the dead Christ laid out in death centered on the *Amang Hinulid* shrine in Calabanga (Cannell 1999:13).

At the same time, in the characteristic Filipino style of taking on something new while circumventing the authority of the source (Rafael 2001:192), there has been a *reverse* translation of Christian traditions in the form of indigenization, since the earliest years of colonization (Chirino 1890). Catholic liturgy has found its way into local animistic and healing rituals (Echauz 1978:109-111). The passion plays originally derived from 16th century Spanish religious texts (Cannell 1999:168; Javellana 1984; Rafael 2001:194) have never been performed in a formal church context (Cannell 1999:168), but rather are used for "bargaining" with Jesus, Mary or the saints for healing or empowering benefits (Cannell 1999:170). Such bargaining (*promesa*) is to request help from saints with the promise of something in return (Cannell 1999:191). The same

motive is otherwise fulfilled by extreme acts of devotion such as carrying crosses from one's home town to the *Amang Hinulid* shrine, flagellation, blood-shedding (Barker 1994; Zialcita 1986) or having oneself nailed to the cross (Cannell 1999:191; Zialcita 1986:59). Repentance and contrition are a relatively minor part of these devotions since they are *only* performed if the solicited healing or empowerment is fulfilled (Cannell 1999:176). This bargaining is recognizably indigenous as it takes place with other forms, even in non-Catholic parts of the Philippines (Cannell 1999:195; Polo 1988). Priests have been unsuccessful in their efforts to "Christianize" these practices into unconditional worship and gratitude to God (Cannell 1999:194). Lastly, the popularity of confession with Filipinos since colonial times (Rafael 2001:85) has had little to do with total submission to the word of God (Rafael 2001:132). The sacrament is supposed to elicit the sense of one's perpetual indebtedness to a Creator God (Rafael 2001:96), however the Filipinos of colonial times have used confession as an occasion for boasting and protesting their innocence (Rafael 2001:135), maneuvering around Spanish demands for submission to an all-inclusive hierarchy (Rafael 2001:168).

Differences in the Assimilation of Christianity
Between Thailand and the Philippines

The difference between the assimilation of Christianity in the Philippines and in Thailand can be explained in terms of three factors. The first factor is historical. While Thailand had no need of European military support, the Philippines encouraged it and put up little resistance when it was eventually turned against them. Missionary work in the Philippines proved easier than it would have been for countries of Southeast Asia living in large, organized, complex kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia, the Malay Peninsula or Indonesia. Furthermore, the inability to resettle the highland Filipinos may also have been a main reason why highland Filipinos were not converted.

The feature of social identity of the Filipinos—including a belief in the unrepayable indebtedness concept (*utang na loob*)—was

compatible with the redemptive message offered by the Christian missionaries. This was not so convincing in Thailand where features of shame-based motivation, community-orientated value system, reciprocity, non-assertiveness and compromise made Thai social identity unreceptive to the Christian message. Furthermore, in the Philippines, the "otherness" of the colonial social identity stimulated fear that could only be placated by token repayments and negation. Social norms in Thailand, dictated a different response to colonial "otherness" which was politely to "quarantine" it, socially speaking.

As for the features of indigenous religion, the Philippines welcomed Christianity because it brought a paradigm shift in their understanding of death and the afterlife. The same "paradigm shift" did not take place in Thailand, because even at the time of missionary arrival in Thailand, the Thais already had a developed cosmological understanding of these issues from Buddhism. In fact, Christianity has made little headway in any Asian country where it has competed with Buddhism or other religions with a well-developed worldview. A hermeneutic useful in predicting the degree of Christian assimilation in Southeast Asian countries has been S. N. Eisenstadt's (1982) dichotomy between pre-axial religions (such as animism) and axial religions (such as Buddhism or Islam) (Cohen 1994:31). E. Cohen posits that the closer indigenous beliefs are to axial religion (in other words, possessing an explicit and congruent theological system) the more resistant they will be to the arguments of missionaries or conquerors (1991:117). The converse is true for pre-axial religions that lack a well-developed theological system. In Thailand, Catholics failed because they engaged in a "battle of the axes" with the axial tradition of Buddhism. Protestants in Thailand experienced a higher success rate than Catholics because they engaged the pre-axial folk-Buddhists and animists in a "contest of power" instead. Eisenstadt's hermeneutic can also be generalized to the Philippines to explain why the animist lowlanders were easily converted to Christianity but the Moslems were not. Indeed, most Buddhist populations in Asia have less than 1 percent Christians, except for South Korea where about 30 percent are Christian (Smith 2004a:146). This South Korean exception can be explained by the pervasive pre-axial folk-Buddhist belief which rests on the

foundation of an essentially monotheist concept of creator god in Korean Shamanist tradition (Johnson 1988).

The degree of Christian assimilation in Southeast Asia is therefore affected by the combination of factors of social identity and indigenous religion as well as historical factors.

Conclusion

Theology has started to speak many languages (Koyama 1999:viii). Although every country in Southeast Asia has a slightly different history and character, and it is risky to generalize (Koyama 1999:9-14), there has been an ongoing attempt to formulate a Southeast Asian theology (Anderson 1976; Furtado 1978). Some of the more specific literature, which might help to shape such a theology, recommend the following efforts by Christians: overcome triumphalism (Griffiths 1991:3; Mejudhon 2004b:281, 283; Seamands 2000:96-97); contextualize the Christian message (Netland 1994; Smith 2004a:145); foster respect for non-Christian neighbors (Mejudhon 1997 and 2003b); emphasize social graces (Mejudhon 2004a:306; Tan 2000:303-304; Toynbee 1957:111); and decolonize Christianity (Cohen 1994:42; Ranger 2003:116; Shenk 1981; Caldwell 1999). All of these proposals are within the bounds of biblical and church history controls on syncretism and would overcome the problems of the nature outlined in the Thai "Outcome of Mission Work" section above.

Whatever definition of Christianity missionaries are working with, it seems, however, that contextualization in Southeast Asia will need to be *more* radical, with a possible case for the relaxation of the usual Christian theology of exclusivity, so that Christian faith can be more fully expressed through indigenous symbols and modes (Tan 2003:24; Caldwell 2006). There have already been successful examples of such radical contextualization in the church history of Asia. K. L. Reichelt perfected a contextualized approach to Christianity by establishing Tao Fong Shan in Hong-Kong (Smith 2004a:144) and brought 150 Buddhist monks and nuns into the Christian faith (Lim 2003:82). Matteo Ricci of China and Robert De Nobili of South India, risked syncretism but won many Asian

converts (Koyama 1999: xii-xiii), as did the Nestorian Christians whose syncretism unfortunately caused them to be persecuted to extinction (Burnett 2003:7; Smith 2004b:202). To advocate a revival of Christianities deemed syncretistic would be frowned upon by mainstream Christians who consider denominational avenues closed in the course of Christian history to have fallen forever foul of Christian identity (see, for example, Küng 1995:7-9). Yet others see Christian church traditions as needing to reflect the diversity of the peoples of the world (Sanneh 2003:130). Still others speak of differences of religious views in terms of mutual enrichment (Koyama 1999:xiii). There are even Christians who would accept other religions as bringing Christianity to fulfillment (Lai and Bruck 2001:90; Smith 2004a:145), who see all human belief as provisional (Volf 1994:103) and who would go as far as to accept that the views of non-Christian religions are possibly true (Lim 2003:81; Caldwell 2006). A full range of Christian theology exists from conservative to liberal. However, Christians in Southeast Asia wishing to maximize converts in countries dominated by non-Christian axial religions, will need to formulate a Southeast Asian theology which widens the working definition of Christian identity.

Christianity has been assimilated to widely differing degrees in the countries of Southeast Asia. This article has examined two countries from opposite ends of the Southeast Asian spectrum of Christian demographics: the Philippines, where conversion to Christianity has been almost complete, and Thailand, where prolonged mission efforts have failed to make significant impact. It has been demonstrated that Christianity was more easily assimilated where Christian mission strategy was closely contextualized to indigenous social identity, where indigenous beliefs corresponded with Eisenstadt's category of pre-axial religions, and where Christians were able to fulfill the historically "felt needs" of the host country.

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