

coding deities and temples seems to be the trend which will enable more contextualized accommodation of online and digital technology of local religions. QR Coding deities is a cutting age usage of digital technology that corrects and supplements the limits/deficiencies of earlier online religious services in Taiwan. It ensures continuity with the past by setting traditional practices in the ever open space of the web.

## Understanding the Role of Thai Aesthetics in Religion and the Potentiality of Thai Christian Aesthetics

*L. Keith Neigenfind, Jr.*

### ABSTRACT

*Thailand has a rich history of using aesthetics as a means of communication. This is seen not only in the communication of basic ideas, but aesthetics are also used to communicate the cultural values of the nation. Aesthetical images in Thailand have the tendency to dwell both in the realm of the mundane and the supernatural, in the daily and the esoteric. Historically, many faith traditions have used aesthetics as an effective form of communication, including Buddhism, Brahmanism, as well as other local expressions of deities across the country. Art plays a large role in the daily communication of religious values and concepts.*

*While Christianity has a rather long history in Thailand, the large-scale impact that Christianity, and specifically Protestantism, has had is rather minimal. There can be a myriad of reasons for this, but one potential possibility is Christianity's lack of an aesthetical engagement upon and within Thai culture. This potentially is not an issue of only the Protestant church in Thailand but also stems from some of the Western Christian roots throughout its faith tradition. One finds a chasm between aesthetical practices and faith from the Heidelberg Confession,*

---

**L. Keith Neigenfind Jr** is a PhD candidate at Assumption University in Bangkok, Thailand, where he is currently researching pacifism and nonviolence in Buddhism and Christianity. In addition to completing his studies, Keith has been working in the religious field in Thailand as an ordained minister with the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

*in which Christians became so worried about the ramifications of idol worship, that they threw out the proverbial 'baby with the bathwater' and basically condemned the use of icons and other forms of art in western Protestantism.*

*Therefore, this paper examines the relationship between Thai culture and Christianity, offers critiques of the Western biases in Christianity, and attempts to suggest new ways that the Thai Christian church may develop organic, indigenous Thai art that can be used as a more effective means of communication. If Christianity wants to effectively convey its concepts into Thai culture, it must value traditional aesthetics as a means of communication. Is it possible that Christianity could not only communicate a more effective message in Thailand, but also that Christianity could experience a more robust self-analysis of its core concepts through Thai aesthetics? Therefore, one needs to explore the ways that Christianity may be able to better understand itself through current Thai aesthetical practices. These concepts will be explored to develop a more robust and organic paradigm of communicating Christian concepts in the Thai context.*

**Keywords:** *Thai Buddhism, Thai Christianity, aesthetics, interreligious dialogue*

In every country and ethnic group, the arts are impactful in conveying culture, meaning and ideas. Philosophers and sociologists have a long history of critically analyzing the arts to determine its value, meaning and relevance to social and cultural development. This is certainly true in the Thai context, in that much can be understood through observing and analyzing Thai aesthetics. When one observes daily life and culture in Thailand, it becomes evident very quickly that aesthetics play an important role in Thai people's life. From the architecture of buildings, to carved images, to paintings, one never has to venture far to see the impact that the arts have upon Thai society. To gain proper understanding of Thai society, values, and religion, one must consider Thai aesthetics as a gateway to a greater understanding.

Therefore, as Christianity continues to make inroads into Thai culture, one must address the question of aesthetics as well. Specifically, what are the differences between Thai aesthetics and Christian aesthetics, and how then can Christianity better engage Thai culture? Can a bridge be built between Thai culture and Christianity through aesthetics? Or does Thai Christianity have any contributions for aesthetics in Thailand? These topics will be addressed in this paper.

Christian presence in Thailand, or the Ayutthaya Kingdom as it was known, began in the 1500s when the Portuguese first sent Catholic missionaries to the kingdom. The first work among the Thai population by Protestants was around 1816, through missionaries working with the Thai population in Burma, and then in 1828 Protestant missionaries first arrived on Thai soil, which opened an era for many future missionaries to come.<sup>1</sup> Despite the relatively long presence, Christian conversion growth has been rather slow. Today the Protestant Christian population by most estimates sits somewhere around 1 percent, which is represented by virtually all Protestant denominations. Some of the key represented groups are the Church of Christ in Thailand (which has Presbyterian roots), the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Baptists, Charismatic groups as well as many others.

Buddhism, particularly the Theravada tradition, on the other hand is typically thought to have entered Thailand during the reign of King Asoka, then was established as the official state religion during the era of the Kingdom of Sukhothai. Buddhism from its very beginning experienced rapid growth, and ever-growing influence. There is a myriad of different factors which one could point to in order to explain the difference in growth between Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand, but one of these factors could be the lack of the use of communication by aesthetics in Thai Christianity, and the embrace and promotion of aesthetical practices in Buddhism. When Buddhism entered Thailand during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Buddhism did not

<sup>1</sup> Alex G. Smith, *Siamese Gold: The Church in Thailand* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 2004), 11-15.

fully reject the previous animistic practices, but instead found a place for them in its cosmology. Specifically, Buddhism realized the power of the aesthetic in promoting religion, and built upon the use of pre-existing idols and images. Buddhism, as well as historical animistic and Brahman traditions have consistently incorporated aesthetics into daily practice and teachings. On the contrary, Christianity, specifically Protestant Christianity, did very little to engage or affirm the aesthetical practices in Thailand, therefore, missing out on an effective way of communication that touches the heart of the Thai people.

Aesthetics can be an extremely broad field. To clarify, this paper will not just be talking about art appreciation, or art criticism, but is choosing to use the term aesthetics. This is due to some of the connotations that are referred to by the word “aesthetic.” For example, Alexander Baumgarten specifically used the term aesthetics as a way to link art and the experience of art as a means of knowing.<sup>2</sup> This is therefore what we are looking at, trying to get a deeper glimpse into the meaning of Thai art, the role of beauty and what the experience can mean. Also, when referring to the term “Christian,” unless specified the paper is referring to Protestant Christianity. It must be noted that Protestant Christianity is broad and is made up of many subgroups, so it may seem overly broad to refer to the “Protestant church” as one unit. Yet this speaks to the overarching commonality in that almost all Protestant churches, from high church mainstream congregations, to low church evangelical groups, are not properly engaging and employing aesthetics. To sharpen the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on the visual arts. This seems to be especially important when thinking about the relationship between Christianity and Thai aesthetics. Historically the Christian church in Thailand has helped to produce some organic Thai forms of art, such as music, but it has neglected a strong engagement in visual aesthetics.

<sup>2</sup> Nina Odegard, “Crows,” in *Social, Material and Political Constructs of Artic Childhoods*, eds P. Rautio and E. Stenvall (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 122.

## The Role of Aesthetics in Thai Culture

As stated above, Thai visual art is simply everywhere, and is a large part of daily life. If one is to take a deeper look, one will also notice that the vast majority of Thai aesthetics are tied to some form of religious symbolism. Much of this is tied to Buddhism – (temples, amulets, images of the Buddha), but as Thailand consistently operates under a sort of syncretistic landscape, one will find aesthetic expressions of various other strains – (spirit houses, images of the Naga, Chinese ancestor worship, decorations of holy trees, images of the Yak, etc.) co-habituating alongside Buddhist art. The abundance of these items can point to a variety of different things. One initial observation is simply the perpetual realization of syncretism found in Thai society. Buddhism is fused with other religious expressions; therefore, other aesthetic offerings to different religions are not only tolerated but also are celebrated. Religious aesthetical expressions are the dominant art forms. Thailand owes some of its artistic lineage to the Dvaravati and Khmer periods from around the 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, as one author states, in fact, it is “Hinduism and Buddhism, and especially the latter, to which the art, architecture and literature of the Thai owe their birth.”<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, one can see the impact that these images have on the daily life of the Thai individual. These religious images will typically be bowed to, be offered gifts, and used as objects that impact a person’s daily life. The great value ascribed to these images does not only simply come from the traditionalists, people in the rural regions, or the elderly. Even among the new generations in urban spaces reverence and respect are bestowed upon these images. James Taylor comments, “In the disconcerting and disorienting postmodern urban spaces, the Buddha and his religion are being recast in discreet and sometimes not so discreet spaces in a new religious logic, to conform to the values

<sup>3</sup> Phaya Anuman Rajadon, *Popular Buddhism in Siam and Other Essays on Thai Studies* (Bangkok: Chareonwit Printing Ltd., 1986), 15.

of post modernity.”<sup>4</sup> Various spaces have modern religious art forms, which are adapting to the changing culture, and are still prevalent.

For Thais, traditional aesthetics are not only expressions of natural pride and beauty, but also contains a communicative component. For example, in Thai Buddhism during the reign of Rama III, it was agreed that there would be 40 different postures of the Buddha that would be officially recognized.<sup>5</sup> Each of these postures has specific meanings to convey. The aesthetical forms contain beauty and, but they also have functionality, in that they instruct and influence.

From a Southeast Asian cultural context, and also from a philosophical and religious perspective, one can clearly see that truth, meaning, and consciousness is something that can be communicated through aesthetics. Mircea Eliade, who spent significant time examining the role of arts in religion and religious aesthetics, realized that religious art can “open up a higher or deeper kind of consciousness,” and is something in which “the individual or group participates in sacred time and space and in this way discovers transcendent, timeless meaning.”<sup>6</sup> Aesthetical practices open up a different area of understanding and consciousness. In Thai religious settings, aesthetics is used to instruct and communicate ideas that are not simply communicated by oral or written instruction.

Finally, and perhaps most insightfully, many forms of Thai visual aesthetics are frequently viewed as images that have innate power and supernatural potential. Some are supposed habitats of spiritual beings, such as spirit houses, or holy trees. Some are believed to have the power to grant wishes or offer protection. One needs to only spend some time

<sup>4</sup> James Taylor, *Buddhism and Postmodern Imaginings in Thailand* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth E Wells, *Thai Buddhism, Its Rites and Activities* (Bangkok: The Police Printing Press, 1960), 40.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 190.

in a Thai cultural environment to see local people bowing to, saying a prayer to, offering sacrifices, or performing a ritual around these aesthetic images. Oftentimes, even images of the Buddha are believed to have power and are worshipped in Thailand. Although this practice is contrary to classical Buddhist teaching, in Thai society, this element of religiosity exists. In his work on Thai Buddhist images, one Thai Buddhist monk asserts, “The Buddha images were made to be worshipped and to remind us of his doctrine”<sup>7</sup>

This theory of the power of images is rather broadly recognized. According to William J. Klausner, “In general, Buddha images are conceived of as symbolic representations of the Buddha’s teaching, and, in paying respect to them, one recalls the teaching and finds peace of mind. However, there are a few special images, usually located in temples in provincial capitals, which are viewed as possessing magical potency to grant requests for the curing of sickness, a child, wealth etc.”<sup>8</sup> One can see the connection of Thai art and aspects of the divine fused together as one entity. This concept tends to be at odds with secular Western art, but not necessarily with Christian art. Christian artists of the past, before the time of the Protestant church, viewed their act of making art as something sacred, a form of worship and a way to be in touch with the Divine. It should be noted that although Christian art at times is lumped together with Western art, its origins, practices, and means are in some ways actually closer to the Thai concept than the Western concept.

### Christianity’s Engagement with Thai Aesthetics

Christianity has a long history of art and of aesthetics being a part of daily life. Especially during the early Christian period, art was a means of communicating truths about God and about the Christian scriptures.

<sup>7</sup> Ven. Kandarapanguwe Dhammasiri, *The Buddha Images and Pagodas in Thailand* (Bangkok, Thailand: Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya Buddhist University Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>8</sup> William J. Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture* (Bangkok, Thailand: Prachandra Printing Press, 1983), 169.

Regarding early Christian images, in the book *Understanding Early Christian Art*, Robin Margaret Jensen states, “These images, however were not derived from the myths or even shored up by philosophical argument, they were drawn from events that really happened in the concrete past. For this reason, the expectation was firmly anchored to reality and not a mere fanciful hope”<sup>9</sup> Early Christian art was a grounded representation of Christian beliefs expressing its history, and it was the means of teaching and educating the people. From the designs of paintings, to even the way they painted Jesus posing, Christian art was used as a means of communicating the teachings of God in daily life. Images comforted, instructed, inspired and helped push the community to deeper spirituality.

Somewhere along the road, these concepts shifted. The created images began to take place of the Creator, and like Thailand, the images were at times ascribed power and were worshipped by laypeople. When the Protestant Reformation occurred, most Protestant groups took an extreme stand and completely got rid of all visual art forms in the church. The Heidelberg Catechism, (which almost parallels the Islamic view of images that completely forbids art that represents forms of the divine or divine concepts), strongly forbade any images depicting God or having any likeness of Him, as well as banning any form of visual aesthetics in the church. The reasoning was that the preaching of the Bible was all that should be needed.<sup>10</sup>

The Reformed Protestant tradition, in attempting to prevent the false perception that icons themselves had power, threw out something important along the way. They threw out the proverbial “baby with the bathwater.” As many Orthodox scholars would say, icons are windows to the Divine and are not something that are divine in themselves.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 181.

<sup>10</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 27.

<sup>11</sup> McGrath, *The Christian*, 239.

Christian art was not intended to replace the Creator, just to be used as an aid to the Creator. In its drastic reaction, the Protestant church lost a vital expression of faith. While some theologians such as William Dyrness assert that the Protestant Reformation actually enhanced interest in the arts for modern people,<sup>12</sup> in modern times, theologians tend to ignore the impact of aesthetics within Christianity. Although theologians such as Tillich, Schleiermacher, and Berdyaev have made some contributions, they are not the norm, and concepts of aesthetics have been more or less overlooked.<sup>13</sup> For example, “Dorothy Sayers laments what she takes to be the fact that, although there are writers on aesthetics who happen to be Christians, there is ‘no Christian aesthetic – no Christian philosophy of the Arts.’”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, at the same time that there is inadequate actual theological work done on aesthetics, there is also a lack of religious practice and expression.

This is certainly true when it comes to Christian impact and influence in Thailand. For the Protestant church there has been no aesthetical engagement in Thailand. For example, if one were to go visit a Protestant church in this country, the first thing one might notice is a complete lack of architectural beauty. Churches may be nothing more than converted storefronts, or industrial or residential buildings that have simply been rented out. Even churches which have been purchased or built, and have significant membership and resources, will typically be buildings with architectural style devoid of any aesthetical sensibility, focusing primarily on functionality. When one enters the church, there is little atmosphere of it being sacred space. Instead it feels as though one is entering an office complex, completely devoid of religious aesthetics.

Comparing the Christian churches to the Thai *Wat* (Buddhist temple), there is a stark contrast. Thai temples are ornate, not haphazardly

<sup>12</sup> William A. Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe: Calvin's Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 19.



created, and they reflect the marriage of both form and function. The space, architecture and design are well conceived, whether it is a local *wat* from an obscure village or an urban *wat* of great importance. While there are certain traditional motifs that are present in all Thai *wats*, there has also been some progression and allowance for modern designers to put their aesthetical twists on classical concepts, as is seen in temples such as *Wat Rong Khun* in Chiang Rai, *Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew* in Sisaket, or *The Sanctuary of Truth* in Chonburi.

One issue concerning Christianity's engagement with cultural aesthetics relates to the Protestant church's global relationship with some of its eastern and southern counterparts. Due to longstanding tradition, and more access to many theological works, the West has had the tendency to dominate the theological landscape. This can be an issue in that the West has the tendency to be a society that is more focused on reading, and learning through literary means, but this is not as true in other countries that have more oratory or visual ways of learning. For a religion that perpetually speaks about concepts such as contextualization, Protestant Christianity has failed at times to contextualize aesthetically. Taiwanese theologian Choan-Seng Song faults Western theology for being "a theology of rationalism, and its lack of imagination."<sup>15</sup> In many other countries the church has engaged the culture aesthetically, in a much more effective manner through inculturation and contextualization. Even in Thailand, the Catholic church has made some aesthetic contributions to the country's religious art. Notable examples of attempts at aesthetic inculturation by the Catholic church includes the St. Raphael Cathedral in Surat Thani, various art pieces at Assumption University, and the chapel of the Redemptorist Congregation in Pattaya. However, in this area, the Protestant church remains un-engaged and seemingly uninterested.

For Christianity, creating these aesthetical expressions should present no theological difficulties. If Christians believe that God has

<sup>15</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 280.

created them in his own image, then Christians should use art forms as a work of engagement that comes from the Divine. Makoto Fujimura, a prominent artist and founder of the *International Arts Movement*, when asked in an interview about whether or not the visual arts have a role in the church, he responded:

The arts provide a comprehensive picture of both humanity and God. What I mean by this is, it's not a theological statement. I'm not saying that the arts replace the divine word of God or the expression of the church. But what I am saying is that the arts are fundamentally connected with the realities that God has created in the universe, as well as in communities of his people. Look at everything from the Genesis account of Adam being asked to name the animals to passages in Revelation that are full of images -- and maybe, in some ways, only artists can understand that. All those things are the language of the arts. It's more than arts being used. I think in some ways you can't use the arts any more than you can use a human being. So we want to have a language that fully celebrates both the artist and the gospel. And in my mind, they are two intertwined realities. The reason that we need the arts is not so we can have more artists in the church, but for the sake of the gospel. The arts are a cup that will carry the water of life to the thirsty. It's not the water itself; it's the vessel. What we are doing in the church today is we are just picking up water with our bare hands and trying to carry it to the thirsty. We can still do it, but the effect is minimized by not fully utilizing what God has given us. We have to do what we can to carry the full cup, rather than be satisfied with waters that slip through our fingers."<sup>16</sup>

### The Need for Employing Aesthetics in Evangelization in Thailand

If Protestant Christianity wants to fully engage Thai culture, it must not neglect the tool of visual aesthetics. In short, Christianity

<sup>16</sup> Makoto, Fujimura, "The Function of Art", <https://www.faithandleadership.com/makoto-fujimura-function-art>, accessed on 12/10/2018.

needs to return to some of its roots if it intends to engage Thai culture. In the early church, arts were vital to the proclamation of Christian truths and helped reach people in ways that words simply could not. In today's world, the arts should be vital to the Christian faith. Robin Margaret Jensen writes, "No matter how frustratingly enigmatic they may seem to those primarily trained in interpretation of words, visual images provide an extraordinary testimony to the aspects of the hopes, values, and deeply held convictions of the early Christian community."<sup>17</sup> This could especially be true today in Thailand. While the West tends to be a society which gains understanding through linguistic and logical communicative means, much of the East tends to learn through different means, orally, socially and visually through spatial understanding of concepts.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, Christian art could be beneficial in all societies, but specifically in Thai society.

In an article titled "Music in the Arts" Steven R. Gurthrie states, "If Christian spirituality is the domain of lived Christian experience, then clearly the arts are a valuable asset in the spiritual life."<sup>19</sup> When Christians live out their faith through cultural artistic expressions, they are worshipping the Creator by making use of their God-given gifts, and in the process they are able to experience the Divine as well as enabling others to have a similar experience. When artists use their creative power to make things, they are collaborating with the Creator who made humanity and gave women and men the ability to create beautiful things. The Christian church needs to make artistic creativity a priority in its relation to the world and specifically in its engagement with the Thai culture. Art can be used to teach, instruct, comfort, affirm, and communicate Christian themes in ways that do not make them to appear so foreign. To this end, a serious endeavor must be undertaken to

<sup>17</sup> Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 31.

<sup>18</sup> Sally Lam-Phoon, "A Comparative Study of the Learning Styles of Southeast Asian and American Caucasian College Students on Two Seventh Day Adventist Campuses" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Steven R. Guthrie, "Music and The Arts," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 187.

commission and create indigenous Christian Thai artworks that are not mere replicas of Western art. Because of the domination of the Christian church by Western theology and cultural and aesthetic expressions, people have at times been too quick in condemning new non-Western Christian expressions as heterodoxy. Nevertheless, the Christian scriptures give much room to cultural expression. When the Apostle Paul along with other New Testament writers interact with Gentiles and people from other ethnic groups, there is no expectation of them adapting to Jewish cultural norms; instead there is an overarching theme of freedom, and the realization that Christ is above culture.

Thai Buddhist art tends to relate values that are important in Thai society. For example, in the book, *Transformation of the Thai Concept of Aesthetics*, Mattani Mojidra Rutnin states, "Most traditional Western artists follow the system of creating a balance between horizontal and vertical lines, or grouping the characters in a triangular space, whereas in Asian art, like that of the Thai, the artist prefers flowing, continuous lines which create another type of balance and unity. These qualities of harmony, restraint, moderation, and temperance in Thai arts and literature have probably been ingrained through generations through Buddhist teaching of the Lokiya Dharma which helps us to lead a successful and peaceful life on earth."<sup>20</sup> These themes put forth in Thai art are not simply qualities and values that are beneficial for adherents to Buddhism, but can found throughout all of the major religions, and across societies. In other words, Thai art can help teach universal values. One can learn quite a bit from Thai aesthetics, not only about the forms and styles, but also one can learn some of the values of Thai society that are conveyed through Thai aesthetics. The acceptance and use of Thai aesthetical lens to interpret and depict Christian theology frees it from being dominated by Western culture. This would not only have a positive impact on Thai culture and people, but would also contribute to building a more enriched and robust theology throughout Christendom itself. Thai Buddhists find value in displaying images of the Buddha and

<sup>20</sup> Mattani Mojidra Rutnin, *Transformation of the Thai Concepts of Aesthetics* (Bangkok, Thailand: Thai Khadi Research institute Thammasat University, 1983), 17-18.

other spiritual artifacts in their homes to express their religiosity. There is great loss and disconnect when one becomes a Christian and finds that such activities could no longer continue. In order to support Thai Christians in living out their faith, artistic religious expressions must be available. However, this style of religiosity cannot be realized unless there is a new paradigm of envisioning the role of Christian art that is expressed distinctly through Thai cultural and aesthetic sensibilities.

The creation of contextualized religious art means that there cannot simply be an importing of classical Western Christian art and aesthetical practices. Instead, there must be an incorporation and allowance of organic Thai aesthetical contribution to the visual expressions of the Christian faith. Thailand has a rich cultural and artistic heritage that can serve as a resource for enriching the local Christian church. The ability to make use of this wellspring of aesthetical richness can help transform Christian churches in Thailand to be places of not just functionality, but places of tremendous aesthetical and spiritual value, which as pointed out by Eliade, can “lead to higher consciousness.” The Christian churches in Thailand can serve the same purposes as the great cathedrals of Europe, which fulfilled both form and function. For example, when one considers Gothic Cathedrals, Gordon Graham states:

It has been pointed out many times that everything about a Gothic cathedral, but especially the spire, draws our attention upward, just as the minds and souls of those who worship in it should also be drawn upward. The gigantic nave of the cathedral at Rheims must fill those who stand in it with a sense of how small and fragile they themselves are. The important point is that this is an attitude singularly appropriate for those entering the presence of God.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the role that the Gothic cathedrals played in the life of European Christians can be replicated when the concept is thoughtfully

<sup>21</sup> Gordon, Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: Introduction to Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 151

applied to the Thai context.

Aesthetical Christian adaptation could also include the use of other visual arts, including paintings and statues. These are not in contradiction with the church’s teachings, but to the contrary, should be a way of opening up the religious imagination and can be used as a tool of instruction and confirmation of the church’s presence. That way, Thai Christian art could perform a similar role as with respect to Buddhism. Finally, work must be done on trying to discern and contemplate on developing theological aesthetics in a Thai concept. This could not only contribute to developing a more robust local theology, but also open up a whole new framework of interreligious dialogue through an aesthetical lens.

Although there is a need for contextualized Christian aesthetics, one cannot simply water down or twist Christian concepts in order to penetrate Thai society. Christianity is not looking to seduce people into changing religions but is offering people an opportunity to hear and respond to the message of Jesus. In doing so it is necessary to build relational bridges and practice enculturation on an individual as well as church wide level. When it comes to the issue of ascribing power to Christian art, Christians must remain firm on the stance that no power comes from images themselves; power can only come from the One who created the greatest aesthetical work – the world itself. As earlier stated, the Orthodox position could serve as a good basis for Christian approach to aesthetics, in affirming that Christian art may act as a “window to the Divine,” but cannot be the Divine itself. That being said, there can be aspects of the Divine that are found in humanity and through the creative artistic expression of humanity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Thailand has a rich history of visual aesthetics. From early roots in animism, to Brahminism, to Buddhism, Thai culture has expressed itself and made its art relevant and beneficial to society. As other forms of religious thought have entered the kingdom



and have adapted their religious art to the Thai context, the Protestant church should be no different. One must realize that people can be aesthetically conditioned, depending on a myriad of factors, but one of the key factors will be culture. Thai people have a deep appreciation for the role of aesthetics not only in daily life, but also in their spirituality and religiosity. Therefore, Christianity must accommodate this thinking if it wishes to gain a stronger foothold among the Thai people. Frank Burch Brown states, “What theological neo-aesthetics prompts us to emphasize is that such diversity is not so much an option as a necessity, that there are theological grounds for incorporating considerable diversity within every major Christian group or denomination, and that an important dimension of the diversity of Christian ‘performance’ is aesthetic.”<sup>22</sup>

Today’s Thai society features a plethora of religious aesthetical forms. Perhaps it is time for Christianity to take a seat at the religious roundtable, and produce genuinely Thai, genuinely spiritual, and genuinely Christian art. For the Christian, art as a form of expression is a gift from the Divine. Potentially Thailand, through its organic local aesthetics, could be the place that demonstrates the balance between the cold rationalism that tends to plague the West and the creative aspect deep within the Christian tradition. Through aesthetics, the various religious traditions present in Thailand could enter into a new dialogue. When culture and religion make their encounter, new ideas and aesthetical forms tend to arise. Imagine the richness that would come about as a result of the meeting of a combination of religious and indigenous cultural concepts, expressions and forms. Therefore, a more robust Christian and Thai aesthetic would not only assist the Thai Christian church but could contribute to Thailand’s greater cultural development as well.

#### REFERENCES

- Brown, Frank Burch. *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Dhammasiri, Kandarapanguwe. *The Buddha Images and Pagodas in Thailand*. Bangkok, Thailand: Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya Buddhist University Press, 1997.
- Dyrness, William A. *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe: Calvin’s Reformation Poetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Fujimura, Makoto. “The Function of Art.” <https://www.faithandleadership.com/makoto-fujimura-function-art>. Accessed on 12/10/2018.
- Graham, Gordon. *Philosophy of the Arts: Introduction to Aesthetics*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Guthrie, Steven R. “Music and The Arts.” In *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, edited by G. Scorgie. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.
- Jensen, Robin Margaret. *Understanding Early Christian Art*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2000.
- Karkkainen, Veli-Matti. *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Klausner, William J. *Reflections on Thai Culture*. Bangkok, Thailand: Prachandra Printing Press, 1983.
- Lam-Phoon, Sally. “A Comparative Study of the Learning Styles of Southeast Asian and American Caucasian College Students on Two Seventh Day Adventist Campuses.” PhD diss., Andrews University, 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 184.

McGrath, Alister E. *The Christian Theology Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.

Odegard, Nina. "Crows." In *Social, Material and Political Constructs of Artic Childhoods*, edited by P. Rautio and E. Stenvall. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019.

Rajadhon, Phaya Anuman. *Popular Buddhism in Siam and Other Essays on Thai Studies*. Bangkok, Thailand: Chareonwit Printing Ltd, 1986.

Rutnin, Mattani Mojidra. *Transformation of the Thai Concepts of Aesthetics*. Bangkok, Thailand: Thai Khadi Research institute Thammasat University, 1983.

Smith, Alex G. *Siamese Gold: The Church in Thailand*. Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 2004.

Taylor, James. *Buddhism and Postmodern Imaginings in Thailand*. Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008.

Wells, Kenneth E. *Thai Buddhism, Its Rites and Activities*. Bangkok, Thailand: The Police Printing Press, 1960.

## Paradox of COVID-19: Communication Opened, Religion Closed, and Social Distanced and Its Implications

Sebastian Periannan

### ABSTRACT

*Corona is not a catchy or patchy word, but it is a virus from the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) family. The etymological meaning of the word comes from Latin. It has affected the entire world with due exception to just a few small countries. Looking at the pandemic pages of history, it is nothing new but is "novel Corona Covid-19". This paper tries to look at the scenario from the areas of modern media world taking into account religion as a prism and social context as a concept. A critical observation from a communication aspect of the coronavirus leads to images such as, fear, faultiness, fight, family, faith, and finance. The paradox of communication is being opened one side, and numerous fake news on the other side, with strict orders to religious centres of worship to be closed, but the heart, mind and helping hands of the faithful are opened; and being social animals, people living and moving in close proximity are requested to move with distance. The challenge of this virus calls for a natural way of life, reverence for humanity,*

---

**Rev. Sebastian Periannan, Ph.D.** is currently the secretary and correspondent of Annai Vailankanni Arts and Science College at Thanjavur. Formerly, he was the Rector of St. Peter's Pontifical Seminary, and as Professor and Head of the Department of Social Communication in St. Peter's Pontifical Institute Bangalore. He has worked as a director and producer of Tamil Broadcast in Catholic International Radio Veritas Asia, Manila, Philippines for seven years (1989-1996). He lectures on Social and Pastoral communication in India and abroad. His book *Social Research Methodology: An Introduction*, has been published by the University of Madras.