

The Conversion Strategies of Protestant Missionaries in Chiang Mai City¹

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Abstract

This paper argues that the Protestant missionaries who understand the varying logics of conversion and adopt contemporary Western style as their mission strategy thrive in the modern landscape of Chiang Mai city. Based on an iconic case study of a successful Protestant missionary in the modern milieu of Chiang Mai city, this research paper problematizes scholarly explanation pertaining to the unsuccessful conversion strategies of Protestant missionaries. By utilizing in-depth qualitative interviews and participation observation as its research methodology, this research examines the elements of modernity adopted by one of the fastest growing churches in Chiang Mai city. The findings elucidate the importance of incorporating contemporary Western style in singing, preaching and teaching as a trend to attract the Thais into the church community. Given the scarcity of literature in Christian anthropology in Thailand, this paper seeks to

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contribute to the understanding of the dynamic relationship between conversion and modernity, and to remove the static belief of “Being a Thai is being a Buddhist”.

Keywords Protestant Missionaries, Mission Strategy, Conversion, Modernity, Chiang Mai City

1. Introduction

Even though there are only 0.63% of Protestant Christians in the entire population of Thailand (Joshua Project, 2018), this paper argues that the Protestant missionaries who understand the varying logics of conversion and adopt contemporary Western style as their mission strategy thrive in the modern landscape of Chiang Mai city. Against a backdrop of religious freedom due to the 1878 Promulgation of Religious Tolerance by King Chulalongkorn, this paper seeks to evaluate scholarly explanation pertaining to the slow growth of Evangelical Protestantism in Thailand.

Despite the pessimistic outlook in the existing scholarly literature that depicts the hopelessness of Thai Buddhists to be converted to Christianity, this research paper takes a proactive approach in investigating the conversion strategies of Protestant missionaries in the context of Thai modernity. It aims to contribute to the understanding of the dynamic relationship between conversion and modernity. As the research objective is to reveal the role of modernity in the success of conversion strategy, my primary research question is “What are the conversion strategies of Protestant missionaries in Chiang Mai city to convert Thai Buddhists in the twenty first century?” To understand the phenomenon of conversion in modern Thai society in the academic field and to refute the comment or explanation given by scholars about, “Why the Thais are not Christians” or “To be a Thai is to be a Buddhist”, I integrate the concepts of conversion and modernity into this research paper.

My main respondent is NG, a Protestant missionary from India. He did his Theological Studies in India and Christian Ministry Studies in Bangkok. In 2004, he started a charismatic church named AGC in Chiang Mai city due to his passion to evangelize the urban Thais. As the Senior Pastor of AGC, he involved himself in pastoral work and biblical teaching. For ministerial accountability, he registered AGC under the umbrella of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT). Hence, his church became part of the national evangelical alliance of Thailand and a member of the World Evangelical Alliance legally recognized by the Thai

government. Within a period of fourteen years, his church grew in quality and quantity. He had 7 full-time staff and was known as one of the fastest growing churches in Chiang Mai city. He and his full-time staff started a daughter church in Chiang Rai in 2016 and they planned to have many daughter churches in Thailand, particularly, in and around Bangkok city.

As an overview, this research paper begins with the historical overview of American Presbyterian missionaries in Thai modernity. Subsequently, a literature review of studies related to this paper, which includes the concepts of conversion and modernity is presented. Thereafter, this research paper lays out the research methodology for data collection to avoid bias and inaccuracy. Next, this paper recapitulates the key problematics of scholarly explanation and deals with them based on the research findings. Finally, this paper concludes with a summary of the three major findings.

2. The Historical Overview of the Protestant Missionaries in Thai Modernity

During the nineteenth century, the Protestant missionaries commissioned by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and the American Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church (BOFM) arrived in Siam in response to the request of London Missionary Society (LSM) for more missionaries (Sathian, 1996, pp. 51-53). The Protestant missionaries impacted the medical field, educational system and printing press in Bangkok and thirty years later, to the Lanna people through Lao Mission. Concomitantly, they caused great changes particularly in the socio-political milieu of the Lanna Kingdom (Pongudom, 2009, p. 19).

The Protestant missionaries were recognized as the agents of early modernization or westernization in Thailand (Swanson, 2018, p. 2). They introduced maps, globes, western medicine, chemical equipment, printing press and new ways of life to the Siamese during the reign of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn (Pongudom, 2009, p. 7). Dr. Thomas Heyward Hays and Dr. George Bradley McFarland taught traditional Thai physician pertaining Western medical knowledge and skill

(Phongphiphat, 2009, p. 10). Rev. Jesse Caswell became King Mongkut's English tutor. Caswell's teaching team taught Thai princes and nobility English, history, politics, military science, medicine, engineering, shipbuilding and others. The wives of those missionaries were invited to the King's palace to give English lessons to the court ladies (Phongphiphat, 2009, pp. 13-15). Thus, the Protestant missionaries' mission activities ushered in new social cultural experiences and values for the Siamese. It resulted in the emergence of a new era, which I term as the former wave of Thai modernity.

In Northern Thailand, the former wave of Thai modernity began after American Presbyterian missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. Daniel McGilvary, reached Chiang Mai in April 1867. Known as *kula kaow* (northern Thai for "white person"), they used Western medicine to rescue the lives of those who suffered from smallpox, malaria and goiter. Concurrently, McGilvary (Daniel) utilized Western Science to attack the traditional cosmology (Phongphiphat, 2009, p. 10). In other words, Western technology, such as science amateur astronomy, was used to counter-attack the local legends or spirit beliefs that bound the Lao people (McGilvary, 1912, p. 203) (Zehner, 1996, p. 297).

McGilvary and his mission partners passionately did evangelization among the Lao people through education, engineering, publishing and social welfare as their mission strategies (Swanson, 2018, p. 1-2; Ramasoota, 2016, p. 75). The formal school education in Northern Thailand was pioneered by lady missionaries. In the beginning, Mrs Gilvary (Sophia) gave informal education to the Thai children and younger ladies. In 1879, Miss Edna S. Cole and Miss Mary Campbell joined Lao Mission and linked up with Mrs Gilvary to establish formal education (McKaen, 1999, p. 121). Contrary to the traditional way of doing missions, the three lady missionaries established Western-style education and built the first boarding school in Chiang Mai for the girls and younger women. Because women's education simply did not exist in 1860s, their effort had elevated the status of Northern Thai women (Swanson, 2018, p. 4). Subsequently, Rev. and Mrs. David. G. Collins organized the first boys' school in 1887. Those two boarding schools developed well and

changed their respective names to Dara Academy and Prince Royal's College (McKaen, 1999, pp. 121-122; Phongphiphat, 2009, pp. 17-18).

The medical work of the Laos Mission was an active and growing part of the Protestant mission since 1882. A team of American missionary physicians came to Chiang Mai to assist C.W. Vrooman, the first physician to Northern Thailand. Together, they established several medical clinics and a hospital. They also introduced medical techniques, such as surgery and x-ray devices and the concept of sanitation to the Northerners. One of the them was Dr. James McKaen who joined the Lao Mission medical team in 1887. He gathered a medical team to set up a laboratory to develop the vaccine to prevent smallpox in 1904. The laboratory successfully produced enough vaccine for the Siam Government and other mission stations in the North (McKaen, 1999, p. 197). Subsequently, McKaen became the second Director of the American Hospital established by Vrooman and contributed much to the establishment of McCormick Hospital in 1920 (Phongphiphat, 2009, p. 11; Ramasoota, 2016, p. 77). During malarial epidemics in 1911 and 1912, Rev. Howard Campbell, a missionary physician in Lao Mission medical team joined effort with two churches in the North to mobilize the non-medical members to enter into the affected districts to battle against the ongoing severe epidemic. As a result, many were cured from malignant malaria (McKaen, 1999, p. 121).

In addition, the American missionary physicians helped those lepers shunned by the society. In 1905, McKaen saw the need to quarantine leprosy victims who begged in the streets and under the bridge. Permission was granted to him by the Chiang Mai Governor, Intrara-Varorose Suriyavong, to modify a 640, 000 square-meter (160 acres) land at the southern half of Koh Klang (Middle Island) to shelter and treat the leprosy patients. With the moral support from the Minister of the Interior of Siam, the first private leprosy sanatorium named McKaen Leprosy Institute or McKaen Leprosarium was established in 1908. It was built in the middle of the Ping River, in a location where it previously used for raising elephants (Ramasoota, 2016, pp. 77-78). Thereafter, the Lao Mission medical team made the initiative to work together with Red Cross Society chaired by Queen Savang Vadhana, Chiang Mai merchants and residents to build the most modern and the

best Leprosy Hospital in Asia Pacific (Phongphiphat, 2009, p. 11; Ramasoota, 2016, pp. 77-78, 107-108).

Covertly, the McGilvays and his team members in Lao Mission caused great changes in the socio-political milieu of the Lanna Kingdom during the former wave of Thai modernity (Pongudom, 2009, p. 19; Phongphiphat, 2009, pp. 13-19). For example, McGilvary's request for the Christians in Lao states to observe Sabbath Day had indirectly clashed with the rules of the traditional corvee labor system of Lao society. As corvee labor system was the integral part of the patron-client structure, it was associated with the absolute authority of the *chao muang* (means lord of the kingdom). In 1869, McGilvary and Lord Kawilorot had an unresolved conflict because of the execution of two Christian converts, Nan Chai and Noi Sunya, who refused to perform the corvee labor on Sundays (Swearer, 2004, pp. 6-7). To reduce the tension between the two parties, Bangkok persuaded the Chiang Mai government to sign the "S.R. 92 Agreement." This agreement allowed Bangkok to administrate the affairs of Chiang Mai. Thereafter, Chiang Mai gradually became one of the provinces of Thailand instead of a vassal state protected by Kingdom of Siam (Pongudom, 2009, p. 19).

Nevertheless, conflicts between McGilvary and the Princes of Chiang Mai did not reduce after the S.R. 92 Agreement. McGilvary's disapproval of the Lao traditional marriage triggered another intense conflict. The giving of a "spirit fee" of six rupees to the titular head of the groom's family was a compulsory matter so that the titular head could engage spirits and guardians to protect the newly married couple and their family (Swearer, 2004, p. 13). To McGilvary, this form of giving was a form of Buddhist superstition. Hence, during the first Christian marriage in Lao states, the Christian couples and their family members refused to pay the "spirit fee". As a result, the first wedding had to be postponed until the confrontation could be resolved (McKaen, 1999, p. 122). When the entire matter was reported to Bangkok, King Chulalongkorn decided to promulgate the "Edit of Religious Toleration" in the Lao states in 1878 to ease the increasing amount of conflicts between the two parties.

The promulgation of the “Edit of Religious Toleration” by King Chulalongkorn through the Siam Royal commissioner was a crucial turning point for the evangelization of Lao Mission as it made clear the civil rights and religious privileges of Christians in the Lao states (Swearer, 2009, p. 16). The promulgation also helped McGilvary to gain authority to abolish traditional “spirit fee” in Christian marriage and to enable Christians to observe the Sabbath Day. The Lao people could since then leave their old religion or tradition without being persecuted by the rulers of Chiang Mai. Everyone had the freedom to choose their religion and to start a new way of living (Phongphipat, 2009, p. 9). Thus, the socio-political changes caused by the American Presbyterian missionaries allowed the Northerners to experience a new era in life. I term that era as the former wave of Thai modernity (Swearer, 2004, p. 13; McKaen, 1999, p. 120). Concomitantly, the socio-political changes in Chiang Mai after the S.R. 92 Agreement and the promulgation of Edit of Religious Tolerance for the Lao states had created great opportunity for the American Presbyterian missionaries to evangelize to the Northerners (Sathian, 1996, p. 66). Favor and privilege were given to them to continue with their social activities from the monarch who desired to modernize and develop the country through Western civilization. Hence, McGilvary and his team began to set up more mission stations in areas such as Lampun, Chiang Rai, Phrae, and Nan after 1878 (Swearer, 2004, p. 13).

In a nutshell, the American Presbyterian missionaries during the former wave of Thai modernity contributed much to the Northerners’ welfare because they had the freedom to carry out their mission activities. Their mission activities under the protection and the authority endorsed by Bangkok were also their evangelization strategies to convert the Northerners to Christianity (Suwatcharapinun, 2015, p. 81, pp. 85-88; Smalley, 1997, p. 240). However, there were only four thousand and four hundred Protestants in the North when McGilvary passed on in 1911. In 1940, the total membership of Protestant members in the entire Thailand was still only ten thousand six hundred. Statistics showed that the annual growth rate of Protestant membership was one percent, which was slower than the growth rate of the country’s population (Zehner, 1996, pp. 302-303).

With a background of “Protestant-Catholic antagonism” influenced by the Protestant Europeans who colonized America in the sixteenth century, the old-time American Presbyterian missionaries were anti-Catholicism and had dualistic prejudices towards Thai Buddhism (Swanson, 2015, p. 32). Unknowingly, American Presbyterian missionaries carried the same mindset to Siam. As a result, their views about Thai Buddhism was distorted due to their quick judgment on Thai Buddhism. They did it without considering the religious context of Thai Buddhism (Handy, 1971, p. 51). By looking at the Thai Buddhist temples, yellow robes, palm leaf religious texts and incomprehensible rituals of Thai Buddhism, those missionaries thought that Thai Buddhism was the manifestation of the Church of Rome, the old nemesis of Protestant church.

In other words, the American Presbyterian missionaries in Siam made the church of Roman Catholic as the model to interpret Thai Buddhism (Swanson, 2015, pp. 5-6). They formed negative attitudes towards Thai Buddhism as what they had done to Roman Catholicism (Swanson, 2015, p. 5). Moreover, their three-pronged “theological, intellectual and ethical analysis” (Swanson, 2015, p. 28) allowed them to conclude that Thai Buddhism had been promoting idolatry, foolishness and immorality which was rooted in their concept of Catholic-like heathenism “built out of painful experiences and countless hours of careful study of the Bible” (Swanson, 2015, p. 13). For instance, McGilvary and his team members in Lao Mission had anti-sentiment towards Thai Buddhism. They equated “Thai Buddhist’s tamboon” with “Roman Catholic’s penance” and thus, merit-making activities in Thai Buddhism were an abomination. They requested the converts to eschew Buddhist teachings, which practiced alms-giving as a way of merit-making to obtain a better next life or to reach Nirvana. To the Protestant missionaries, Thai Buddhist’s tamboon was rooted in self-interest and would cause pride, conceit and selfishness (Swanson, 2015, pp. 28-29).

The Protestant missionaries were ignorant about the complex characteristics of Thai Buddhism created by Rama Kamhaeng during the thirteenth century and this ignorance caused them to perceive Thai Buddhists as selfish, indifferent, indolent and vice-ridden. They did not have the knowledge that Thai

Buddhism existed because Rama Kamheang intended to reverent Phra Khaphung (characterized as phī-thewadā or a spirit deity) and concurrently, he wanted the pre-Buddhists of Sukhothai to be devoted to Theravada Buddhism. Hence, Thai Buddhism is a syncretic belief of Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanism or a so-called “religious complexes”, an euphemistic term coined by Edwin Zehner (Kirsch, 1977, p. 241).

Additionally, McGilvary and Jonathan Wilson applied Dr. Charles Hodge’s understanding regarding the concept of conversion which required the Lao Christians to live a new way of life different from their Buddhist relatives and friends. As a theologian in Princeton Theological Seminary and a supporter of the Old School Scottish Presbyterian theology, Hodge believed that authentic conversion produced “saints” due to his dualistic theology (Swearer, 2004, p. 4). Therefore, for the sake of being recognized as “saints” before God, Christians need to consecrate themselves and be different from the general social conventions. This includes the arbitrary rules and the norms governing the behaviors in everyday life such as shaking hands, greeting someone or travelling on the right side of the road (Hodge, 1987, p. 183). The dualistic attitude of conversion had greatly influenced the evangelization work in the Lao states and the emergent Protestant church in the North during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

By the end of World War 1, Lao Mission required converts to reject their previous religious worldview and “all of its social and cultural ramifications” (Swanson, 2015, p. 42) by signing a policy. The converts needed to pledge their allegiance to Christian belief by renouncing their old practices and replacing them with the Christian duties before they could be recognized as saints (Hodge, 1987, p. 187). Those who partnered with McGilvary to establish Lao Mission believed that authentic conversion could only be attained by discontinuing the former way of living and distinguishing themselves from the Buddhists. The staff in Lao Mission persuaded the converts to shun their indigenous cultural roots by creating a community similar to the American Presbyterianism (Swearer, 2004, p. 3). To them, “saints” ought not be under the influence of Thai Buddhism to avoid spiritual poverty or eternal damnation after death (Swanson, 2015, p. 3).

Concurrently, Lao Mission had systematic methods to create Christian communities because the old-time Presbyterian missionaries perceived the people in the North as a-moral heathen. By strategizing and organizing the communities in a very hierarchical and controlling way based on a set of dualistics, Lao Mission unintentionally subjected its converts to an “ecclesiastical colonialism” (Swanson, 2017, pp. 3-4). As a result, the dualistic prejudices of the old-time American Presbyterian missionaries had hindered them from being effective in their conversion strategy as most Thais refused to break away from the society and culture (Swanson, 2015, p. 43).

3. Literature Review

In this literature review, I problematize three scholarly explanations with regards to the unsuccessful work of Protestant missionaries in Thailand. Firstly, English language is a foreign language and thus, it is a hindrance to conversion. Secondly, there is no competent Protestant missionaries to do pioneering work. Thirdly, Protestant missionaries viewed conversion as an absolute event rather than a dynamic process. Therefore, it is crucial for me to include the theoretical concepts of conversion and modernity to bring forth the main argument of this paper in a succinct manner.

3.1 *Scholarly Explanation of Conversion in Thailand*

Kosuke Koyama (1978), a Japanese Protestant theologian at the Thailand Theological Seminary in Chiang Mai discovered that the early Protestant missionaries did not make their message comprehensible to the Thais. The following is the statement made by Koyama’s about the famous missionary, McGilvary’s writing (1912). “I am forced to see how thoroughly strange and unrealistic - how western - is the Christian vocabulary to the ears of my Thai neighbours!” (Koyama, 1978, p. 110). Koyama’s comment implied that English speaking Protestant missionaries did not have sufficient vocabularies or relevant words to help the Thais to feel connected with the gospel message and therefore, Christianity is perceived as a foreign religion in the Thai world (Keyes, 1993, p. 277). Nevertheless, would a

problem in the past as stated by Koyama remain an obstacle or would it become a tool for the twenty first century Protestant missionaries to connect with the people in the Thai society?

Hughes (1982), a student in Protestant church in Thailand argued that Protestant missionaries could only convert the marginalized groups, the ill-health people and those who faced extreme crisis in life because Protestant missionaries in Thailand lacked charisma and competence (Hughes, 1982, p. 14). Hughes noted that Khruba Srivijaya, a well-known Northern Thai monk during the 1920s and 1930s had greater influence in the Thai society compared with Protestant missionaries due to his charisma and teaching ability (Keyes, 1993, p. 266). Hence, many Thai Buddhists had the belief that the Christian God had to subordinate to kamma law because the local spirits were more powerful (Hughes, 1982, p. 14). Based on Hughes' explanation, is it true that in the twenty first century, none of the Protestant missionaries are gifted in Biblical teachings to convince the Thai Buddhists to convert to Christianity and caused them to sense that the Christian God is more powerful in comparison and thus, resulted in successful Christian conversion?

Overall, the theological concept of conversion embraced by the nineteenth and early twentieth century American Presbyterian missionaries were similar to the secular scholars of their days. All of them viewed conversion from the lens of sociology and concluded that the core of all conceptions of conversion were pertaining to a "radical personal change" (Snow & Machalek, 1984, p. 170). For example, sociologist Lewis R. Rambo defined conversion as "a total transformation of the person" that strikes "to the root of the human predicament" (Rambo, 1993, p. xii). Richard V. Travisano and Max Heirich reckoned conversion as "a radical reorganization of identity, meaning and life" (Travisano, 1970, p. 594) and "a process of changing a sense of root reality" (Heirich, 1997, p. 694). In the same vein, A.D. Nock deduced conversion as "a deliberate turning and a reorientation of soul" (Nock, 1933, pp. 6-7) and Peter G. Stromberg proposed conversion as "self-transformation and commitment" (Stromberg, 1993, p. ix). Another relevant concept of conversion is "a change in one's universe of discourse" (Snow & Machalek, 1984, pp. 170-171). This view pertaining conversion is also agreed by Mead (Mead, 1962,

pp. 88-90). To other sociologists, it is “a paradigm shift” (Kuhn, 1962), “rooted in a transformation” (Travisano, 1970, pp. 600-601) or “informing aspect” of one’s life or biography (Burke, 1965, p. 77).

These assumptions of conversion were derived from the theological perspective found in the Biblical narrative written in Acts chapter nine where great and radical transformation happened to Apostle Paul’s life when he encountered Jesus on his journey to persecuting Christians in Damascus (Snow & Machalek, 1984, p. 170). This type of conversion is known as an act of divine mercy that occurs within the Christian tradition. It acknowledges the true consciousness of human beings, which can be made complete and instantly because God shows up (Zehner, 2004, p. 1). However, how do Protestant missionaries view Christian conversion in Thailand in the twenty-first century? Do they have the fixation of conversion and see it as an absolute event, a drastic personal transformation and a radical reorganization of identity?

3.2 Modernity, Multiple Modernity and Conversion

Overall, modernity gives positive value to the term “modern” and its prolific usage has induced a positive meaning to “change” (Van der Veer, 1996, p. 18). Modernity departed from the negative connotation about “change” as it was resisted during premodern Europe. Extraordinary examples, which caused the social theory of modernity from not being able to be challenged include the abolishment of widow burning (sati) in India’s religion by the colonizers and the conversion to Christianity of the untouchable castes in India by the political mobilizers. Those two examples show great significance that “modernity” is about “changing for the better” (Van der Veer, 1996, pp. 3-4).

Modernity and conversion have something similar where both see “change” as something positive (Van der Veer, 1996, p. 18). Judith Pullmann concluded that the Protestant converts during the sixteenth century did not bring much religious transformation compared with the seventeenth century because Western modernity was accepted by Christianity from the seventeenth century onwards. Peter van der Veer stated that modernity defines conversion as “new

choice” but it was rarely the result of an entirely “free choice” before the seventeenth century as there were limitations to what one could think of religious belief (Asad, 1996, p. 263; Van der Veer, 1996, pp. 18-19).

Talad Asad (1993) agreed with Clifford Geertz (1973) regarding the difference in how medieval age and modern era understood religion (Van der Veer, 1996, p. 5). Before the existence of Western modernity, it was the era of religious universalism. People in medieval period believed that it was God who helped human beings to see the truth and be converted. Hence, conversion during the pre-modern period needed no explanation (Asad, 1996, p. 263). However, the European theologians in the modern era believed that imperial expansion and the spread of Christianity were closely linked. Thus, they argued that theology must continue to address the “repressive” nature of human power, particularly regarding the purpose and condition of colonization. To the modern European theologians, the expansion of Christian world through colonization was perceived as secular, embarrassing, scandalous and intransitive because it was based on secular teleology “which reaches its widest range of potential good and evil under the form of imperialism” (Asad, 1996, p. 266). Therefore, the tension caused by Western modernity pertaining “conversion” is even stronger because religious truth has the inclination to make itself unassailable, unable to be attacked, questioned or defeated (Van der Veer, 1996, pp. 18-19). However, Max Warren argued against the modern European theologians’ view and stated that imperialism left behind the legacy of permanent good things such as legislation, political improvement, the development of European-style cities, cohesion of states and breakdown of isolation (Asad, 1996, p. 266).

According to Peter Wagner, a German social scientist, there are different views about modernity due to the emergence of social theory of modernity (Wagner, 2015, pp. 270-271), political theory of modernity (Wagner, 2015, pp. 271-273) and social political ontology of modernity (Wagner, 2015, pp. 273-275). In social theory of modernity, the “unstoppable processes of individualization and instrumental rationalization of social trends based on notions of autonomy and mastery” (Wagner, 2015, p. 274) have been redefined “as one interpretation of

modernity among others” (Wagner, 2015, p. 267). As for the political theory of modernity, modernity was about the emergence of a new type of understanding about civilization, which emphasized the possibilities of domestic peace due to religious wars in Europe (Wagner, 2015, p. 271). Thus, the political theory of modernity was linked to the formation and expansion of world religions (Van der Veer, 1996, p. 2, 6-9). In other words, Wagner argued that the term “modernity” has taken on other forms of interpretation instead of remaining as “the imposition of linear trends towards globalization and individualization” (Wagner, 2015, p. 267). To Wagner, the existence of social political ontology of modernity is undeniable because the history of modernity should be about “the struggle over the adequate interpretation of modernity at one’s own moment in space and time in the light of one’s experiences” (Wagner, 2015, p. 276).

Besides Wagner who argued that modernity centered around the relevance of history of a particular society, social scientists such as Shmuel Eisenstadt became significant due to his concept of “multiple modernity.” Prevalent in the 1950s, Eisenstadt stated that there are many ways to modernity. Both Wagner and Eisenstadt argued against the classical theories of modernization and the convergence of industrial societies. They did not believe that “the cultural program of modernity, which developed in modern Europe and “the basic institutional constellations” that emerged would prevail throughout the world. Hence, they had a different view from the classical sociological analysis of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. In other words, they disagreed with the concept of identical developments in the spheres of society, economy, polity and culture because modernity and Westernization are different (Eisenstadt, 2006, p. 199).

Charles F. Keyes and Shigeharu Tanabe stated that there is no uniformity in modernity as it “does not have a single face” (Tanabe & Keyes, 2002, p. 20). Hence, both of them viewed that multiple modernity must not be suppressed because the word “modernity” needs to be understood and interpreted according to the peoples, eras and places in this globe. For example, Thai modernity has been categorized into four distinct processes. Those four processes are: “the use of rationalized and secularized knowledge in place of understandings derived from

religion and magic; orientation of economic action with reference to demands generated in a globalized market instead of to subsistence needs; acceptance of the political authority of those representing a nation-state rather than of those whose status is determined by a hierarchy of personal relationships; and construction of one's identity as a person with reference to diverse messages and images transmitted through mass media, in contrast to the highly redundant meanings ascribed to the ancestors transmitted primarily through ritual" (Tanabe & Keyes, 2002, p. 7). In a nutshell, even though those four processes were originated from the West, Charles F. Keyes and Shigeharu Tanabe explained that they unfolded themselves differently due to the social and historical contexts in Thailand (Keyes and Tanabe, 2002, p. 8-20).

Modernity in Thailand can be divided into two waves, which I term them as the former wave and the latter wave. The former wave of Thai modernity emerged due to the changes in the socio-political milieu of the Kingdom of Siam resulted from the mission activities of Protestant missionaries. It began since the adoption the Western conception of modernity by the Siam dominant elites during the nineteenth century. The former wave of Thai modernity is also known as Westernization began after 1826 Burney Treaty. The trade established between Britain and Siam paved the way for the arrival of the Western Protestant missionaries with the purpose of converting the Siamese to Christianity (Sathian, 1996, p. 51) (Swanson, 2018, pp. 1-2). In 1930s, the latter wave of modernity in Thailand was formed. It emerged during the time when Kingdom of Thailand changed its name from Siam to Thailand and from the rule of absolute monarchy to the rule of institutional monarchy (Tanabe & Keyes, 2002, p. 16).

4. Research Methodology

This research paper omits evangelization work of foreign Christian missionaries from the other three major segments of Christianity namely Roman Catholicism, Conciliar Ecumenical Christianity and Eastern Orthodoxy due to the limitation of space, time and length of my research. I have chosen "Evangelical

Protestantism” among the four segments of Christianity because it follows strictly Christ’s Great Commission as written in Matthew 28:18-20 (Nichols, 1998, p. 567). I have utilized semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews and participation observation as its research methodology during its fieldwork. After four months of data collection and analysis, three major findings are being presented in this paper. Data of this case study was collected from NG, his church full-time staff, members and visitors in his church.

Additionally, to understand the dynamic relation between conversion and modernity in a holistic way, I have done desk research. Generally, desk research generates data that has a “wider resonance” because the data collected during fieldwork might be “idiosyncratic or particular to the limited empirical parameter of study” (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006, p. 157). Documents from the Chiang Mai University Library and Payap University Archives assisted a foreigner like me, who is also an evangelical Protestant Christian for about thirty-five years to achieve my research objective. To collect explicit data, I went to my research site located near Chiang Mai Night Bazaar for Sunday Worship Service, Wednesday Bible Study Class, Discipleship Training Class and Christmas Evangelistic Celebration for participation observation in October, November and December 2018. This research project is not an ethnographic research as data was collected periodically (Mason, 2002, p. 84). In the following section, I present my research fieldwork report.

5. Overview of Reporting Research Findings

The table below shows the chronological growth and expansion of NG’s ministry.

Table 1: The Chronological Growth and Expansion of NG's Ministry.

Year	Venue for Sunday Worship Service	Attendance: Adults	Attendance: Children
2004	Five months in a small room in Big C Hangdong, Chiang Mai	30	5
2004-2009	YMCA Chiang Mai	150	30
2009-2012	Shangri-La Hotel, Chiang Mai	300	100
2012-2018	Lanna Palace Hotel, Chiang Mai	400	60
2017-2018 started a new campus in Chiang Rai	368/1 Moo.1 San Tan Lueang 4, Rim Kok Mueng Chiang Rai, Chiang Rai 57100	70	30

Source: NG's Church Office (2018)

5.1 English Language

NG, my main respondent, kept on emphasizing that mission work has changed because the mindset of urban Thais has evolved. According to NG, "The younger generation enjoys singing English songs. My church congregation has songs in both Thai and English versions. When we sing in English, all the Thais also tag along. Many years ago, missionaries had to learn Thai language to be effective but not anymore. I do not think that they are disconnected at all when I preach and teach in English. In fact, they are very engaged. Thai members in my church told me that they listened to the English sentences of my sermons too instead of just waiting for the Thai interpreter. To them, listening solely to the Thai sermons is boring. They prefer bi-lingual worship service."

NG realized that Thai parents are interested in letting their children learn English. Hence, he started an "English Club" in Chiang Rai early 2018 and used it as a platform to evangelize to the people in Chiang Rai. NG said, "50% of the children in "English Club" are from non-believer families. Now, they want to go

to church on Sundays to join the Sunday Bible School as well. This proves that you don't have to speak fluent Thai to evangelize to the Thai people."

5.2 Media Technology

NG became well-known in Thailand after his Media Department started to post his sermons on YouTube. He said, "I am aware that a large number of people in Thai society consume online media. It is an in-thing in Thailand now. Therefore, establishing campuses is the best way to expand my mission work throughout Thailand. This mission strategy is formed because I can't be going everywhere to preach and teach. I will be burnt out by then. It is an impossible task for me to go and plant church physically everywhere too."

"Campus" is a term coined by NG. A campus has the same DNA as the first church he pioneered in Chiang Mai city. It is similar to a daughter church. Technically, all campuses are directly under the supervision of his team members who are stationed in Chiang Mai city. NG said, "The only possible route to expand my ministry is to start on-line campuses. I plan to live stream my preaching and teaching sessions in major cities. As for the work of pastoral care, my assistant pastors will oversee and counsel the people in those cities. Those who stay in other cities do not need to come to this main campus for Sunday Worship Service and Bible Study Class. They can gather at specified location to watch live streaming. It is a new way of doing mission work. More importantly, it is less daunting for everyone in my team."

I attended the 2018 Christmas Evangelistic Celebration organised by NG's team in Chiang Mai. There were about three hundred people joining the special occasion. A few minutes before feasting, I saw NG went to the pulpit to greet the people in Chiang Rai campus. One of NG's church member turned to me and said, "People in Chiang Rai campus are watching this Christmas events right now. That is why NG is sending Christmas greetings to them. Our faces appear on their church TV screen. Next year, NG will expand his mission work to places nearby Bangkok such as Nakornsawan and Nakornprattom. This main campus in Chiang Mai plans to establish online streaming media for Discipleship Training School in

Bangkok using satellite link. It would be similar to what we are doing for our campus in Chiang Rai.” This piece of information I received from NG’s church member on Christmas Day confirmed what was told to me by Sea, the Head to Media Department in NG’s church.

According to Sea, media technology, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram or livestreaming, is good for those church members who work in Bangkok and unable to return to Chiang Mai regularly. Sea said, “I would give them AGCThailand TV live stream link. It enables them to join NG’s Sunday Worship Service while they are still in Bangkok. They could also invite their friends and colleagues to listen to NG’s sermons too. Through this method, I can help with the growth and the expansion of NG’s ministry.”

5.3 New Techniques of Presenting the Gospel

NG emphasized the importance of implementing new techniques in presenting the gospel. He said, “Because I want to attract those who live in urban Thai society, I usually wear jeans and button-down shirt or even a T-shirt. It is not appropriate for me to dress-up like a Catholic Father. I preach and teach in a more modern way. For instance, I express the meaning of the gospel message using modern terms. I verbalize *khun tuk tong nai sai taa prachau* instead of *kwam chop tham*. The term *khun tuk tong nai sai taa prachau* makes it easier for the people in the modern Thai society to link with the concept of God’s righteousness. It tells them that mankind is not guilty anymore in God’s eyes. We become righteous in the sight of God because Jesus Christ has removed our wrongs. The righteousness of God is a free gift and a passport to heaven. “*Kwam chop tham*” is a too religious sounding term. It is difficult for the Thais to grasp or to connect it with the gospel message.”

5.4 Conversion as a Process vs an Absolute Event

During semi-structured qualitative interview, I posed my primary question to NG to find out: “What are the conversion strategies of Protestant missionaries in Chiang Mai city to convert Thai Buddhists in the twenty first century?” NG replied, “In Thailand, street evangelism, the act of evangelizing Christian faith in public places, is not effective. Thai Buddhist converts become disciples of Jesus through long-term friendship. For instance, I visited a very rich Thai Buddhist couple with some committed church members regularly for a period of five years. Recently, this wealthy couple started to join our Sunday Worship Service. Last week, they walked toward me and asked me to pray with them. They told me that they wanted to learn how to be better Christians. That wealthy couple saw the peace and joy in us. They wanted those elements that money cannot buy. Thus, we who are true followers of Jesus Christ, let us befriend the Thai Buddhists. It is just a matter of time their hearts will be opened to Christianity because they trust us.”

Milly who was a church newcomer said, “I was water baptised more than a decade ago. In 2016, I messed up my life and had suicidal tendencies. My mum who has been faithfully attending NG’s Sunday Worship Service noticed that I did not go to my previous church on Sundays anymore. Hence, she sent me NG’s sermon YouTube link. After I finished listening to NG’s sermon about God righteousness and goodness, I decided to attend NG’s church together with my mum. I knew that God wanted me to get closer to him and NG’s sermons confirmed it. I would say that my conversion is not a one-time event. It is a dynamic process. I sense that I am “born again” recently.”

6. Discussion

To recapitulate, the literature review section raised the following problems: 1) English language is an obstacle to conversion to Christianity; 2) Protestant missionaries are incompetent for pioneering work; and 3) Protestant missionaries are fixed in their understanding of the concept of conversion.

Drawing from the research findings, firstly, Koyama's comment about the perception of Thai society with regards to English language has been invalidated. The Thais do not regard English language as something foreign or outlandish. English language, which was considered an obstruction to the work of Protestant missionaries has become a platform to connect and to build friendship in the Thai society. In my viewpoint, some Thais who learn English as a hobby or for self-development might like to attend NG's church gatherings for English practice. The Thais in the twenty-first century are open-minded and outward-looking. They have the tendency to integrate the best the West can offer (Smalley, 1997, p. 249).

By referring to the world hierarchy of languages rather than the intrinsic value of a language, the Thais are aware of the importance of English as it is "the primary of secondary external language for all countries, learned by native speakers of lower language" (Smalley, 1997, pp. 237-238). Moreover, Thai world's ideology about "freedom of consumption and liberation from national identity" would have created a desire in them to learn English language (Tejapira, 2002, p. 205). Therefore, NG's mission strategy, which incorporates the contemporary Western style in singing, preaching and teaching, becomes the pull factor to conversion because the Thais enjoy joining his church.

Secondly, Hughes' explanation about the lack of charisma and competence, which is the non-existence of "a divinely conferred power and talent" (Keyes, 1993, p. 271) of Protestant missionaries after McGilvary and his team passed on is refuted. Based on the number of views for NG's sermons in YouTube channels as listed below, he is recognised as a charismatic preacher and a gifted biblical teacher in Thailand. Below is the amount of viewers for NG's sermons in AGCThailand TV (Abundantgracechurch, 2015) based on the theme: "Leading People into a Life of Victory and Divine Purpose".

Thirdly, from my research findings, conversion is no longer seen as an absolute event. There is a paradigm shift from the universal discourse of conversion stated by the Orthodox Evangelical Protestantism and the sociological lens regarding Thai conversion (Snow & Machalek, 1984, p. 169). Conversion in Thai context usually consists of a "transitional phase," which Zehner described

it as “A Typology of Thai Conversions to Evangelical Christianity.” Thai conversion focuses on where it is coming from and heading to. It is not about when is the exact moment, the precision of time and date or how the conversion happened, but rather, it is about gradual change and without any clear dividing points (Zehner, 2004, p. 3; Zehner, 2005, p. 590). Therefore, to enable the Thais to be on the journey to discover the truth in Christianity, “six main categories and a seventh combination of category” of conversions are needed. The Thais perceive “continuum, improvement, growth and maturity” as the accurate way to convert. Thus, by observing the social and cultural context of the Thai society, Thai conversions are about gradual conversions, experimental conversions, casual or drifting conversions, emotional conversions, social conversions, *krengjai* (showing politeness, respect and consideration) conversions, quasi-adoption effects and observation of Christians (Zehner, 2004, pp. 3-8).

Table 2: Viewers for NG’s Sermons Based on YouTube Channel

Topic	Posted Date	Number of Viewers
What is Salvation?	25 July 2014	6.4K
From Mess to Masterpiece	28 July 2014	4.0K
Let Christ Rescue You	13 February 2015	12.0K
Free Indeed	31 July 2015	3.5K
The Power of the Pure Gospel	2 June 2016	4.4K
The Focus of a Christian Life	13 May 2016	5.9K
The Power of God’s Voice	29 January 2017	7.9K
The Place of Blessing	23 November 2017	3.7K
The Lifestyle Under Grace	5 January 2018	2.5K
Let Jesus be the Centre	15 March 2018	2.7K

Source: Abundantgracechurch (2015)

In a nutshell, conversion, which demanded an immediate rejection of Buddhism would not attract the Thais to biblical truth. It takes time for the Thais to leave their culture and society that clashes with doctrine and the teachings of the evangelical Protestantism. In fact, that final bold and drastic step into

Christianity is one of the greatest challenges in life (McGilvary, 1912, p. 188). Hence, the concept of Thai conversion challenges the binary approach of Levi-Strauss. Dichotomizing the term conversion with yes and no, in and out, darkness and light or good and evil is inappropriate because there should not be strong emphasis on contradiction or opposition (Zehner, 2004, pp. 3-8). This changing perception of conversion of the Protestant in the latter wave of Thai modernity is a pull factor to conversion. It is so because of the removal of dualistic mindset of the Protestant missionaries.

Additionally, I discovered several pull and push factors to conversion in the Thai society, which outlined the multicausality and the varying logics of conversion in Thailand from my desk research. The pull factor to conversion in the former wave of Thai modernity was directly associated with the desire of Siam kings to obtain Western civilization offered by the Protestant missionaries. The favour given to the Protestant missionaries by the monarchs such as King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn and their successors opened the doors for evangelization with conversion as an intended end. Concomitantly, the mechanical learning without the understanding of the inner meaning and purpose of Buddhist texts and practices in the traditional Thai Buddhism became the push factor to conversion (Sathian, 1996, p. 55).

In the latter wave of Thai modernity, the push factor to conversion from the bird's-eye view is due to the departure from Thai nationalism. Thai nationalism, which consists of three major components identified by King Vajiravuth (1910-1925) namely the Nation, the Religion and the Monarchy is a phenomenon, which is inherently political (Selway, 2019, pp. 2-3). The ongoing socio-political changes in Thailand since the 1930s has resulted in "dissatisfied with self-aggrandizement in political, commercial and private life" (Zehner, 1996, p. 307). Those changes stirred up cultural crisis, social dislocation and religious pluralism. During the 1932 Revolution, the year in which Siam changed its name to Thailand, the Thai neo-traditional politicians requested King Prajadhipok to accept a new political transformation (Tanabe & Keyes, 2002, p. 16). In the aftermath, the Kingdom of

Thailand was officially ruled within the framework of a constitutional monarchy instead of an absolute monarchy (Evans, 2002, p. 157).

However, Thailand suffered two decades of socio-political uncertainty as there was no active king living in Thailand due to the coup d'état. The Thai political crisis ceased after the return of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in the 1950s. He was recognised as a man who possessed superior merits like King Chulalongkorn (mi bun barami). Thus, he successfully reversed the 1932 Revolution and sent the military rulers into exile in an official manner on 14 October 1973 (Tanabe & Keyes, 2002, pp. 16-18). This political reversal became a Thai social memory called the *sipsi tula*. Hence, Thailand re-emerged implicitly as a country reigned under absolute monarchy (Tanabe & Keyes, 2002, p. 17). Three years thereafter, a group of Thais became members of Communist-led insurrection and that political preference created another Thai social memory called the *hok tula*. Moving forward, in the 1990s, new social movement through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) protested against the establishment of absolute monarchy in Thailand (Morris, 2002, p. 69, 85).

Oscar Salemink argued that Christian conversion in Thailand is linked to Thai Buddhism, the traditional source of authority (Salemink, 2009, p. 50).

Thai Buddhism is facing challenges because of “its politicized role in relation with military coups and democracy protests since 1970s” The request for meaning pertaining to the traditional source of power and authority since 1970s is the pull factor to conversion as it causes the Thais to see the need to accept the “power of God” preached in Protestant churches (Salemink, 2009, p. 50). Moreover, Thai Buddhism has the tendency to modernize and pluralize its religion. The “transformation,” “symbiosis,” “ambiguity,” “paradox” or “complementarity” in the sociocultural order of Thai Buddhism aftermath World War II (Obeyesekere, 1979, p. 626, 638), which operates under “the governing umbrella of Thai Buddhism conceptions” has indirectly reduced the traditional source of authority (Zehner, 2005, p. 603). Hence, the processes of modernizing and pluralizing Thai Buddhism or Kirsch coined them as “ungrading” (Kirsch, 1977, p. 263) are solid reasons to adopt the production of a new subjecthood of conversion to another world religion

(Salemink, 2009, p. 50). Doors are opened for the Charismatics and Pentecostal Protestant missionaries to introduce new kinds of “ubiquitous presence of spirits” because the twin processes of “universalization” and “parochialization” are yet to function more effectively to enable the Folk Brahmanism to stabilize the entire religious and social system in Thailand (Kirsch, 1977, 264). By having new ways of dealing with demon-spirit and reclassifying the spirit world that is convincing to the hearers, the Thai Buddhism’s traditional rituals are rejected based on the teachings of the Pentecostals and Charismatic missionaries because the spirits are recognized as demons or the Devil’s manifestation (Salemink, 2009, p. 51).

Another hindsight to Christian conversion is the economic changes in Thailand. In the 1980s, Thailand became one of the world’s most dynamic economies in a sudden manner. In that era of “Thailand’s boom,” the people in Bangkok faced drastic identity challenges and cognitive adjustment because of the acceleration of social and economic growth (Baker & Phongpaichit, 1996, p. 207). “The incorporation into a global market economy” and “integration of peoples into modern nation-states,” which began in the 1970s caused the younger generations and the upper income families to experience “rapid economic growth, rising education levels, changing occupational structure and migrant patterns, the increasing importance of off-farm income, and intergenerational reconstitution of ethnic identities” (Zehner, 1996, p. 306; Tanabe & Keyes, 2002, p. 7, 13). As a result, “alienation of the Thais from Thainess” is not an abnormal phenomenon as the search for new meaning of life is unavoidable due to life’s expectations and the process of self-construction in “careers, lifestyles choices, personal identities, and social networks” (Tejapira, 2002, p. 208; Zehner, 1996, p. 306). Conversion to Christianity was particularly obvious among the students, service workers and professionals in an urban, mobile and multi-ethnic social setting of the Thai world where the traditional ways had been in the “taken-for-granted” status (Heffner, 1993, p. 29). For example, the Thais need to fulfil the demands of personal and family immediate material needs. The rise of cost and standard of living and thus, the Thais’ worldview of *samsāra* began to transform (Collins, 1992, p. 217).

To ignore the teachings of karma where “virtues of giving to the monkhood and renunciation within the framework of rebirths” is understandable.

Gradually, the traditional values of giving in the Thai Buddhist religion and the renouncing of materialism by giving up goods and senate pleasures to join personally the brotherhood of monks or to spend time in wats (Buddhist temples) are not fully adhered and treasured (Ferguson & Johannsen, 1976, p. 660, 664). The desire for freedom of consumption and liberation from national identity, which is the vital elements of the whole process of un-Thainess (Tejapira, 2002, p. 205). The whole process of un-Thainess has watered down the teachings in the traditional Thai religion system formed by Rama Kamheang (Kirsch, 1977, p. 241). Thai Buddhists who embrace the ideology of “liberation of national identity and freedom of consumption” might probably find excitement rather than confusion about bilingual Christian redemption message (Tejapira, 2002, p. 205).

Therefore, the role of Thai Buddhism as either a civil religion or a civic tradition (Reynold, 1977, pp. 281-282) has lessen its influence after 1970s. Even though there are 1,106 individual wall paintings found in fifty percent of the total monasteries, worship halls (wiharn), at times in ordination halls (bot) or in premises for meetings or resting (sala) within Chiang Mai City itself, these murals are looked upon merely as pieces of art rather than as the symbolic statement of Thai religion in the twenty first century (Ferguson & Johannsen, 1976, p. 648). Their adjustive capacity like a “gyroscope” is no longer functioning to combat the change against threats caused by the modernity (Ferguson & Johannsen, 1976, p. 646).

7. Conclusion

This research paper reveals that American Presbyterian missionaries in the former wave of Thai modernity who had inherited the Protestant anti-Catholicism teachings did not excel in the category of evangelization work to convert the Thais to Christianity. Their insufficient knowledge pertaining to Thai Buddhism and their dualistic prejudices mindset had unintentionally subjected its converts to an “ecclesiastical colonialism”. However, in the latter wave of Thai modernity,

the better understanding about Thai Buddhism and the removal of dualistic prejudices has given rise to a changing perception regarding conversion among the Protestant missionaries in Thailand. Essentially, the changing perception is a pull factor to Christian conversion from the lens of modernity. From the research findings, I conclude that the Protestant missionaries who understand the varying logics of conversion and adopt contemporary Western style as their mission strategy thrive in the modern landscape of Chiang Mai city. The research findings have shown that English language, which had been a hindrance to conversion has become a tool to draw the Thais into the Christian community. The establishment of satellite churches through media technology and the modern techniques of presenting the gospel has validated the ability of Protestant missionaries to create new and effective conversion strategies. Conversion in Foucault's notion of "technology of the self" when placed under the complexity and diversity of Thai modernity produces a new subjecthood of conversion, which challenges the binary approach of Levi-Strauss, the removal of dichotomy and dualistic mind.

Last but not least, the emergence of the system of nation-states and the economic globalization has brought about the departure from Thai nationalism namely the Nation, the Religion and the Monarchy. Hence, the ongoing socio-political changes in Thailand and the four major processes of Thai modernity have allowed us to think more in-depth and observe more clearly about the topic of conversion and effective mission strategies in Thai context.

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