Orthodox Hybridities: Anti-Syncretism and Localization in the Evangelical Christianity of Thailand

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Abstract
At the turn of the twenty-first century, evangelicals employ a brand of anti-syncretism that incorporates a substantial amount of hybridity. This creativity inside a framework of seeming inflexibility is one of the things that helps evangelical Christianity localize while “holding its shape.” It also enables conversions to be grounded in idiosyncratic experience while enabling those conversions to present as orthodox. Employing interviews with ethnic Thai and Sino-Thai who have converted from Buddhism to Christianity, the article explores two mechanisms of hybridity that can be observed among Thai evangelicals. Hybridities of extension fit locally specific material into frames that are transculturally shared, while hybridities of transition exploit cognitive and terminological overlaps that facilitate a person’s movement across otherwise discrete religious boundaries. Together, these orthodox hybridities give evangelical Christianity a feel of the local while preserving converts’ sense of being loyal to a transculturally shared set of teachings. [Christianity, conversion, Thailand, evangelicals, hybridity]
To be human is to be a syncretist... Even a prophet... needs the speech and the situation of his audience in order to be comprehensible... (Kamstra 1970:23, translated and quoted in Pye 1971:84)

This article uses material from Thai evangelical Christian churches, especially conversion stories told by recent converts, to consider how the evangelical movement’s conflicted relationship with hybridity enables it to localize while retaining a sense of commonality across cultures. The movement’s ability to localize while “holding its shape,” to use Robbins’s phrase (2001), has most commonly been observed for the Pentecostal wing of the evangelical movement (see Casanova 2001, Coleman 2000, DeBernardi 1999, Martin 1990, Poewe 1994, Robbins 2001, 2003a, 2004). However, the observation can also be made of evangelicals in general (see Barker 1990, Knauf 2002, Martin 1990). Christianity’s claim of universality and its need to express itself variously in specific times and places (James and Johnson 1988:3; Niebuhr 1951) inherently raises the issue of how much variation to accept and where to draw the line on behalf of orthodoxy. In recent decades the issue has been an especially vexed one among evangelicals, a branch of Christianity for which the importance of Christianity’s truth claims is especially strong yet which is in ongoing dialogue with a myriad of cultures and religions around the world. While engaging in this array of dialogues, evangelicals across cultures have kept a generally shared sense of common orthodoxy despite lacking a central organizing agency to enforce homogeneity, and they have maintained this sense of commonality despite the increasing devolvement of church leadership and evangelism to non-Westerners.

This article explores one aspect of how evangelicals manage this paradoxical task of adapting their tradition to the local while remaining part of translocal evangelical movements. Drawing examples from Thai evangelical converts and churches (only ethnic Thai and Sino-Thai were interviewed for this article), its thesis is that one of the things that enables the evangelical tradition to localize while holding its shape is the way the evangelicals combine anti-syncretism with a selectively tolerated hybridity, with much of the latter being unacknowledged as such.

Like Bastian (2001:169) I use the term hybridity in the broad sense of cultural mixtures, being interested primarily in those pieces of symbolic and rhetorical behaviors that show the influence of multiple systems or, to put it another way, that would be equally sensible in more than one of the presumably opposed cultural and religious settings in which the actors have partici-
pated. In practice, the products of hybridity show themselves sometimes in an ambiguity of origins (i.e., an equally plausible argument can be made for more than one opposed origin) and at other times in a more visible bricolage of elements (i.e., with some pieces being appropriated from one milieu while others clearly come from elsewhere). While some of these hybridities may be condemned as syncretism, others are openly accepted, and in still other cases their hybrid nature may not be recognized at all.

The paper's purpose is not limited to establishing that these processes of self-disguised hybridity happen. It is concerned, furthermore, with detailing some of the patterns that structure this work of discrimination, the specific grids and expectations that render some hybridities condemnable and others invisible. It argues that while evangelical Christianity presents as being vigilant on all matters, evangelical anti-syncretism is in practice narrowly focused, being concerned primarily to forbid resort to alternative sources of spiritual power and to techniques that had been associated with those alternative sources. It argues, furthermore, that certain kinds of structures actively invite—or at least facilitate—bottom-up hybridities that are viewed as relatively benign and that may even be incorporated into the evangelicals' techniques of anti-syncretistic rigor.

The fact that hybridities may be produced by the conversion process is not in itself remarkable. A degree of rhetorical and symbolic intermixture is inevitable in any movement that, like evangelicalism, seeks actively to expand through conversion, as there are inevitable overlaps and tensions between the tradition as received and life as previously lived. What is remarkable is that hybridities should play such an important role in a tradition that is so vigilant against unapproved cultural and religious mixtures. Though many of the mixtures to be recounted in this article are to some degree accidental, they are also instrumentally useful, for it is at the points of overlap that the orthodoxies become most slippery, making the movement between multiple systems of thought and action most plausible. Yet even as they facilitate cognitive slippage from one system to the next, the evangelicals' anti-syncretistic stance keeps much of this hybridizing activity below the level of conscious awareness. This anti-syncretistic amnesia is to some degree necessary for hybridities to play the role that they do in evangelical conversion, for converts to evangelical Christianity are normally expected to conform to evangelical behaviors and teachings, and most of the converts I interviewed consciously intended to do so. When converts told their stories of entry into Christianity, they were normally not aware of altering what they had received, and they considered
their stories to fit the accepted ranges of orthodoxy. Yet the contents, symbols, styles, and relationships in their stories contained slippages by which the before-conversion and after-conversion perspectives interwove.

I do not mean to suggest that Thai Buddhist conversions to evangelical Christianity can be reduced to continuities from pre-Christian religion, neither as local resistances to globalizing evangelicalism nor as inadvertent assertions of a fundamental continuation of the old beneath the veneer of the new. Here I agree with Robbins (2003a) and Engelke (2004) that the converts’ claim of discontinuities—especially discontinuities of allegiance—must be taken seriously. However, I also agree with Scott (2005) that there must be a resolution between the continuity and discontinuity approaches, one that recognizes the ways that evangelical Christians—both leaders and converts—deal with, as he puts it, the “multiple interlocking macro and micro Christian logics in ways that aspire to systematicity” (2005:102). The particular interplay of hybrid and anti-syncretistic elements that I found in the evangelical Christianity of Thailand constitutes a piece of that resolution.

As the article explores the frameworks of evangelical anti-syncretistic judgment, it is important to realize that those frameworks are not owned by any one group or cultural context. Though contemporary evangelical Christianity may have had its origins in England and North America (see, for example, Balmer 1999, Martin 1990, Walsh 1994), with the churches in the latter location continuing to be a dominant institutional influence in many parts of the world (see, for example, Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose 1996; Coleman 2000; but also see Austin-Broos 1997; Bastian 2001). In Thailand, as in many other parts of the world today, the evangelistic agents and most influential local figures are normally not missionaries but rather are ethnic Thai and Sino-Thai pastors, church elders, and church members. In the multi-noded webs of authority that structure evangelical teaching and practice, judgments of convert orthodoxy are often made somewhat collectively within congregations, while the congregational leaders look in turn (formally and informally) to other leaders and congregations for clues to modal ranges of acceptability, with some of these models and sources being non-local organizations, individuals, and texts (the latter including cassettes, videos, and websites). These local and non-local agents are engaged in similar negotiations with each other and with their own local milieus. Evangelical Christianity is therefore to some degree a culture or society that stands apart as a transcultural collectivity, being not fully owned by any particular cultural setting or subgroup, while being somewhat adapted to each of the settings in which it finds itself. This is what it
means to say, as noted at the outset, that evangelical Christianity is holding its shape (being transcultural, often self-consciously so) while also localizing (adapting both intentionally and in spite of itself). No one individual or group has ownership of this process or its outcomes. 3

The present article is therefore interested in the hybridities that arise within the evangelistic interaction itself, looking explicitly to cases—conversion stories told by Thai and Sino-Thai students attending Bible schools and seminaries—in which the intent is conformity, and in which locally creative hybridities are assumed to be expressions of cross-culturally valid orthodoxy and therefore consistent with the anti-syncretistic stance that most Thai evangelical converts seek to uphold. One of the reasons that converts can be creative while legitimately assuming themselves to be orthodox is because the effect of the evangelicals’ anti-syncretistic gaze is to focus awareness on certain areas of concern while perceiving other kinds of cultural mixing as always their own. In other words, at the same time that it contests some hybridities, evangelical anti-syncretism also produces a psychological denial of the hybridity occurring in other areas of thought and behavior.

In addition to the effects of this anti-syncretistic focus there exist processes—both on the level of evangelical Christianity’s general practice and on the level of Thai evangelicals’ particular experience of the Thai Buddhist context—that fairly encourages processes of localizing hybridity. The present article draws attention to two of these processes. The first, which might be called hybridities of extension, involves the elaboration of translocal metathemes into localized microdiscourses that work with specifically local material while presenting as unaltered translocal truth. The second might be called transitional hybridities. These involve an overlap of expectations and of schemes for interpretation and action. The extension of metathemes—which will be illustrated by discussion of two that appear in conversion stories and in the rhetoric of Thai evangelical churches—tends to be relatively stable and shared within particular settings, and it is relatively unlikely to be challenged from within the evangelical tradition, despite varying in its details from setting to setting. The transitional hybridities—which will be illustrated with examples from individual conversion accounts—tend to be more idiosyncratic, more variable within the locality, and therefore more prone to contestation and reinterpretation both in the social realm and in the life course of the individual. For this reason the conversion stories, despite being the experiential grounding of the converts’ present experience, also sometimes exhibit signs of self-correction efforts. Both the extensions and the overlaps help localize
Christianity, and in both cases they do so fairly surreptitiously, in the first case because the localizations are not recognized as hybrids at all, and in the second cause because the resulting formulations are assumed to be more orthodox than they really are, or possibly because the outcome—conversion to orthodox evangelical Christianity—blinds both convert and observers to the unorthodox elements of the experience and thought processes in which those orthodoxy-intended conversions are often grounded.

All of this happens within a framework in which some hybridities are condemned as syncretism, others are actively promoted as contextualization, and still others “just happen” along lines similar to the ones being outlined here. It is important to realize that the context from which this paper draws its material is a fairly orthodox one, and it is this feature that makes it possible for its Thai converts to stand in for evangelical Christianity in general. I am aware that there are many Thai converts and quasi-converts to Christianity who have somewhat different motivations and goals, such as a desire to sample power or to experiment with the Christian style of religious practice. For some people this experimentation is a transitional phase, while for others it is not (fuller discussion of this and other types of Thai evangelical conversion appears in Zehner 2003:83-94). I am also aware that there are examples of local Christian communities in Thailand whose existence appears to be grounded in considerations other than the kind of theological issues that get expressed in the typical evangelistic appeals (for some ethnographic examples, see Fordham 1991). However, the evangelicals with which I was working were among the most orthodox of the orthodox—my observational work was done in urban-based churches that were playing leading roles in the national evangelical community, while my formal convert interviews were with Thai and Sino-Thai individuals who were studying in Bible schools in preparation for ministry positions in these and similar churches. To borrow terminology from Lamin Sanneh (2003), they exemplify a “global[ized] Christianity” rather than a “world Christianity,” emphasizing conformity to received forms rather than the potentials for local uniqueness. This is a tendency they reportedly share with Asian Christianities in general. Thus it is that they can affirm the tensions against both local- and non-local culture that are inherent in their approach to hybridity.
Syncretism and Orthodoxy in the Evangelical Context

The present discussion overlaps yet diverges from several literatures that have employed the term “syncretism.” In the Christian tradition, the term has long been used to denote unacceptable mixing or borrowing of non-Christian elements into Christianity. While such an evaluative approach may be useful to clerics, it is less satisfactory for scholars seeking an objective stance. Consequently, over the past century social scientists and historians of religion have sought to develop a neutral, analytically useful definition of the term that could define an area of study without judging its contents (for example, Bowker 1997:936; Colpe 1987; Droogers 1989; Shaw and Stewart 1994; van der Veer 1994). However, beyond the general notion that syncretism has to do with religious mixing, there continues to be no agreement on its essential features. In essence, there have developed two major streams of usage, one of them seeking to avoid evaluative judgments while the other seeks explicitly to make them. To confuse matters, both streams have been using the same word for their opposed projects.

In the first stream, which uses “syncretism” in ways that roughly parallel the meaning of the more recent term “hybridity,” there is a diversity of definitions, just as there is with the definition of hybridity. Some scholars take the position that a precise definition is not needed. For example, Colpe (1987) and Shaw and Stewart (1994) discuss syncretism at length without offering a definition beyond the general notion of religious mixing. Colpe apparently takes the position that precise definitions may depend on the context and therefore may depend on the preferences of the writer. Shaw and Stewart use the word interchangeably (or nearly so) with terms such as “religious synthesis,” “bricolage,” and “creolization.” Concerned that the term evokes a presumed purity of the traditions being mixed, Bastian (2001) avoids the term altogether in favor of “hybridity” and “bricolage” (with the exception of the present discussion, the present paper will follow his lead when referring to mixing in the descriptive, non-judgmental mode).

Some representatives of this stream have tried to define syncretism more narrowly, and this has led to disputes among them over its essential nature. Pye (1971:93) suggests that the mixing results in “a coherent religious pattern.” His position is paralleled by van der Veer (1994) and by the Oxford Dictionary of World Religions (Bowker 1997:936), who talk of “amalgamation,” “unions,” and “blending.” By contrast, Meynell’s entry in The Encyclopedia of Religion and Society describes syncretism as a situation that combines “heterogenous beliefs, usually uncritically” (1998:506). Similarly, Baird (1971:147)
and Pye (1971:93) suggest there exists a logical tension among the amalgamated elements, with the latter speaking of this tension as an “ambiguous coexistence” of religious referent.

By contrast, some who employ a more inclusive definition have suggested that syncretism is a natural process that is exemplified even in the traditions that are concerned with defending their own purity. Shaw and Stewart point out (1994, citing Hobsbawm and Ranger 1987) that the traditions defended by anti-syncretistic rhetoric may themselves be of recent vintage and therefore of somewhat syncretistic origin. Several have suggested that syncretism, broadly defined, can be found in the origin and development of nearly any religion (see the sources in Droogers 1989:9,12). Kamstra, in the epigram to the present article, has suggested that syncretism is a universal phenomenon entailed by the very structures of communicative process (1970:23, cited in Pye 1971:84).

Meanwhile, many writers working from an explicitly Christian perspective, including most evangelicals, employ the term syncretism to refer only to those processes of mixing that pose dangers to the Christian tradition, as they understand it. In effect, these authors, who include most evangelicals, work with a less inclusive definition of syncretism that highlights mixings’ potential, seeing them as threatening to change Christianity at its core. Most evangelicals would ascribe to what The Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions calls the traditional negative definition of syncretism: “the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements” (Moreau 2000:924). They would also resonate with Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiënoû’s description of syncretism as “combining elements of Christianity with folk beliefs and practices in such a way that the gospel loses its integrity and message” (1999:177).

Despite this protective attitude toward preserving the “essential truths” and the “integrity” of the core, evangelicals are by no means opposed to all aspects of hybridity. By the end of the twentieth century most evangelicals had accepted the idea that some adaptation was good, while remaining wary of how far adaptation could go. To distinguish “syncretism” from more acceptable adaptations, many have recently adopted the term “contextualization” for the latter. When the term “contextualization” was first advanced in the early 1970s by the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches, evangelicals feared it was opening the door to syncretism (Conn 1984:176ff). By the early 1980s, however, some evangelicals were embracing the tension of a fuzzier stance. Harvie Conn, for example, was asking, “How can the missionary aim for cultural contextualization and avoid theological
syncretism?” (1984:12). He suggested that a wholesale refusal to adapt could itself bring about syncretism, as the refusal to adjust would ensure that Christianity is conveyed in “foreign forms” that “cannot adapt to changing meanings and often become unchristian in the process” (1984:189; also see Kraft 1980:294-296).

The above distinctions are more than rhetorical window-dressing. Whatever may have been evangelicals’ approach to local cultures in the past, there has been a strong stream of concern in recent years that, to the extent possible, cross-cultural missions should be careful to distinguish religious conversion from cultural conversion, promoting the former while avoiding the latter. This concern has been expressed in such works as Charles Kraft’s influential Christianity in Culture (1980), and continues to be expressed in concerns among some evangelical leaders—concerns strongly expressed at a missiology conference I recently attended—that cross-cultural missions in the early twentieth century (especially the rising tide of short-term missions) should seek ways to minimize the “cultural footprints” they leave behind in the churches they help. Therefore, evangelical anti-syncretism—which remains strong—is not simply a blanket resistance to local cultural inputs. Rather, it entails resistance to some inputs while embracing others.

Indeed, by now it appears that evangelical concerns about syncretism are less about cultural mixing than they are about ambiguous religious loyalties and competing sources of spiritual power. These concerns tend to deal primarily with the nature of God, the means of salvation, the source(s) of power that can be accessed for everyday problems, and the techniques that can be used for access. These days, most evangelicals have little problem with tolerating differences in ritual form, as long as the underlying meanings seem the same. They don’t care where the church meets, they can tolerate a lot of differences in service styles, and they might not even insist on meeting on Sunday, if another day works better. It does not matter if the Eucharist (more commonly called “communion” or “the Lord’s Supper) is celebrated with bread, matzo, wheat crackers, rice crackers, or pieces of yam (though most evangelicals avoid using alcoholic wine). It does not matter if baptism is conducted in a river, a lake, a bathtub, a pool, or a concrete block tank constructed in the pastor’s back yard (though most adhere to the notion that the baptized person should be dipped fully in the water, while the person performing the ceremony should use the Trinitarian formula of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

On the other hand, affirmation of certain core doctrines becomes important regardless of their local comprehensibility. These include such notions as
the eternity of God, the divine creation of the world (usually expressed in opposition to the theory of evolution, though this opposition is not always explicit, and is not unanimous), the Chalcedonian affirmation of the Trinity and of the notion that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, the notion that Jesus died for our sins, the notion that heaven is attainable through faith in Jesus, and the notion that there is an active Satan who is opposed to the work of God. Whatever their differences on other points, evangelicals are fairly united in their insistence on affirmation of these. They help constitute the co-existent “hard” parts of their tradition that must be accepted as a whole, even though the relations among the elements are often but poorly articulated. In addition to those doctrinal affirmations, evangelicals have trouble with practices—such as the possession of charms and amulets, the veneration of ancestors and local spirits, leaving offerings at others’ shrines, and celebrating the holidays of others—that suggest divided religious loyalties and a questioning of the sufficiency of God’s power for daily needs. But this does not mean a blanket resistance to hybridity even in these areas, for, as will be shown below, it is precisely through the localizing hybridities that some of these principles are even made sensible to the churches’ participants.

The Rise of Thai Evangelicalism

The above points are illustrated in the Thai evangelical material that is the focus of the balance of this paper. The evangelical community in Thailand has a relatively brief history. The Protestant presence there dates from only 1828, when the German missionary Carl Gutzlaff and the Englishman Jacob Tomlin arrived in Bangkok. Though they stayed only briefly, they managed to arrange a translation of the entire Bible into Thai. Other Protestant missionaries soon followed, and more permanent works were begun in the 1830s. In the nineteenth century, most of these missionaries came from the United States, though a few also came from Great Britain and elsewhere. The most enduring work of that period was by the Presbyterians, who by 1914 had nearly 8,000 members, mostly in Bangkok (both Thai and Chinese) and the north (mostly ethnic Thai). There was also a Chinese church in Bangkok that had been started by Baptists in the 1830s and had essentially become self-governing by the end of the century.

Some additional Protestant missions began work in the first half of the twentieth century, but the real efflorescence of Protestant work began after World War II, when 15 new missions entered the country in just 15 years, with the
stream of new missions continuing apace for the next several years. Most of the Thai and Sino-Thai churches that identify with evangelicalism date from this period or later. Initially the newer missions were primarily American and British. However, from about 1980 onward there was also a significant Asian component in personnel and funding relationships, especially from Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Many of these groups come from churches that in turn had Anglophone relations. This same period, especially from 1970 onward, also saw a proliferation of local Bible schools and seminaries. By 1990, nearly a dozen of these schools had been established, most of them in and near Bangkok, and most within the previous two decades. The late twentieth century also saw the rise of a significant core of Thai and Sino-Thai church leaders, some working within mission-founded churches, while others developed their own independent work. Even when working within mission-established structures, many of these leaders became de facto heads of the organizations, due to their charisma, personal networks, speaking abilities, and organizational skills. Whatever the continuing influence of missions, by the late 1980s they had receded to the background of conversion stories, which focused almost entirely on interaction with Thai peers and Thai pastors.8

Despite the increasing localization of leadership, evangelical churches in Thailand remained thoroughly orthodox. Most Thai evangelical leaders shared with the broader evangelical community the idea that localization has limits. And many would have objected to the notion that the localization of personnel and authority should be accompanied by any localization of teaching emphases, beyond the surface adaptations needed to make those teachings locally attractive and comprehensible. Thus, at the turn of the twenty-first century, many Thai evangelical leaders had notions of syncretism and orthodoxy that corresponded closely to those of the foreigners, despite having a different experiential relationship to the local communities and to local cognitive and behavioral terrains. The notions of syncretism and contextualization defined the general terrain of consciously rejected and accepted hybridities, respectively. But a lot of significant material arose in the space in between these notions. Some examples of that material provide the focus of the following sections.

Two Kinds of Hybridity
The following sections will explore two kinds of hybridity that arise in Thai conversions to evangelical Christianity, with special attention to their ambiguous nature.ix The material draws on interviews with Thai and Sino-Thai
Buddhists who had become Christians and were now studying for Christian ministry. It also draws on general observations of rhetoric and practice in the Thai evangelical community, especially the churches in Bangkok. The first type is hybridities of extension and elaboration. These are developments entailed by the act of speaking in a local idiom, being local in their connotations yet translocal in their overall theological import. In these cases a theological or symbolic core shared generally among evangelicals gets elaborated with locally specific connotations. Being ambiguous in their local and translocal resonances, they enable conversation on both levels simultaneously. If evangelicals recognize them as hybridities at all, they are usually considered benign. The following discussions explore this in the elaboration of the themes of love and divine power. The notion of God’s love gets elaborated in terms of local connotations, based on cognitive grids shaped by personal and collective experience, in terms of which it is perceived. The notion of supernatural power gets elaborated in terms of a local panoply of spirits that is unique to Thailand yet provides concrete elaboration of an evangelical cosmology that would otherwise remain vague.

The second section explores what I call transitional hybridities. These hybridities can be more problematic, according to the evangelical perspective, for they exhibit direct overlap between Buddhist and Christian frames of meaning by employing, at least in the transitions of conversion, symbols and meanings that could be sensible in terms of both traditions. Yet as parts of transitional processes they facilitate conversion by providing points of congruence that bridge the two traditions, making conversations simultaneously sensible in both meaning systems. Where these transitionally hybrid systems operate, a motive rooted in one system can become the basis for action in or adherence to the other. At any particular time it may be impossible to tell which cultural or religious meaning system is the primary one influencing a person’s understanding. Yet the metaphorical ambiguity makes transition possible by wrapping old into new.

**Hybridities of Extension in Conversion Story Themes**

The first type of hybridity can be illustrated by the themes that were most prominent in the conversion stories, namely the themes of divine love and divine power. Both themes are thoroughly understandable to North Americans, and neither is entirely alien to North American conversions. Indeed, these themes may lie at the transcultural core of Christian self-iden-
tity, for, as Elaine Pagels reminds us (2003:7-10, 19), Christians were expressing radically sacrificial notions of love, and of Christian community as family, since before there was a creed or an agreed-upon Christian canon. And few would question the notion that Christianity has tended to express a robust notion of supernatural power, a notion that fundamentalists and evangelicals have continued to champion through the twentieth century. Though Christian communities have at times strayed far from these themes and ideas, they have repeatedly reasserted themselves and are today featured once again in the vigorously growing evangelical and pentecostal communities of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Nevertheless, even if these metaphors are universal, their local manifestations are not. In these cases, the general notions function as macrothemes that state a general notion adhered to across cultural boundaries. They are fleshed out locally as detailed microthemes of life, experience, and local referents.

In a way, the microthemes are the signifieds of the macrothematic signifiers. It is the metaphorical work of these signifiers in looping together diverse microthemes under common labels that enables Christianity to ground itself locally without losing its translocal recognizability. Because this joint functioning of macrotheme and microtheme weds the two tightly together (to most speakers they appear to be the same), and because it is the microlevel that resonates most strongly (it is, after all, the level at which theme intersects with experience), the microtheme's details are often assumed to be universal. This may be one of the reasons why cross-cultural missionaries have such difficulty distilling the transcultural Christian message from the cultural forms in which they themselves were enculturated as Christians, because those microthematic forms shape believers' subsequent readings of scripture, whose results in turn clothe the microthematic details with an aura of universality. Nevertheless, despite the feel of universality, each of the microthemes is in some way or other unique to local times and places.

The Theme of Love
The specific ways that the notion of divine love attracted converts varied greatly. For some, the teaching grabbed attention in its abstract form. References of this type included statements such as "God is love," "Jesus loves you," and "God loves you to the fullest." Converts listed several reasons for the emotional power of these seemingly simple phrases. Some cited the unique availability of God's love. A young woman spoke, for example, of Jesus being
her “true friend,” a person who “understands us and goes with us everywhere.” Another linked the power of the notion of love to the notion of Jesus being alive—“Christ is living, and he knows you, and he sees you here, and also loves you greatly.” Some also claimed that God’s love was greater and purer than any human love. He “loves you greatly,” said one person. He “loves you to the utmost,” said another. For many Thai converts, though Christ’s death on the cross may be affirmed cognitively in terms of the conventional theological sense of providing in Christ a perfect substitute for the sinner, it is grasped emotionally as an act of love. One young man said his understanding of “the love that God gives” was clarified when he understood the teaching about Christ’s death on the cross. Another similarly said that Jesus’ death on the cross helped him see “the love of God.” A young woman said Christ’s sacrifice on the cross made her want to develop a similar ability to love others. And yet another said there is no other religion where the founding figure has shown love to this extent.

Joel Robbins (2003b: 192-193) has observed that one of the reasons why it has been so difficult to get an anthropology of Christianity off the ground is because the Christians’ cultural similarity to (white North American) anthropologists leads the latter to assume the Christians’ lifeways unworthy of study. For many readers of the present article that may be especially true of the love theme outlined here. Nevertheless, the notion of such a strong and pure love issuing from a divine person who can be encountered anywhere at any time is an important aspect of the Thai evangelicals’ cognitive world. People who had felt alone or abandoned claimed that God’s love assuaged their loneliness. Those who had experienced disappointing relationships said that God’s love is more reliable than the love of the people of this world. And informants who already had good relationships with family and friends said that God’s love was even better than those relationships.

In addition to these notional expressions of God’s love, some converts claimed direct experiences in which, as one person put it, they “encountered the love of God.” One person claimed to have had a mystical experience that freed her of feelings of abandonment. Another had a quasi-vision in which she heard God calling her name and was immediately overwhelmed by the feeling that she was a sinner on whom love was being undeservedly bestowed. Another’s feelings of bitterness toward her family suddenly dissipated as a Christian laid hands and prayed for her to have strength through her struggles in school. Others said they felt God’s presence and warmth while attending worship services.
Still others were attracted by the notion that Christians should love others, by the example of Christ’s love as shown on the cross, by the relationships observed among Christians, or by the kind ways they were treated when visiting Christian communities. The love demonstrated in community could be especially powerful in visitors’ perceptions, not only because of the psychologically comforting effects of encountering a community perceived to be working well, but also because Thai Christians teach that the love demonstrated in Christian communities is a manifestation of the spirit of God and is therefore an extension of the divine love. On first visits to churches, the impact of the interpersonal interaction could be powerful. As one person observed on his first visit to a Christian church:

I was very impressed with the Christians [there]. I mean, they came from many different places and backgrounds. But how could they have [this] love for each other? I felt a strong sense of love in that place.

Another observed of the small group meeting in his recently converted sister’s home:

They would greet each other informally, and they sang together in a familiar, friendly, informal manner…. They were different from most people. I mean, even the way they spoke was good. They did not use harsh words and phrases [or speak unkindly].

Yet another had gone to live with his Christian brother’s family, of whose members he observed:

They were very close, with no vices. It made my spirit feel like it was coming in touch with something new in the lives of the Christians there. And I started to observe and change….

These expressions, which could easily be multiplied, drew on two primary notions. The first was the notion that God creates loving communities through the action of his Holy Spirit. The second was a metaphor of the Christian church as an idealized family, a united community created out of disparate elements. To speak of “my spirit…coming in touch with something new” is to speak of the mystical quality of this love. To comment on the Christians’ varied backgrounds is to suggest the power of God to create community out of diversity.12
Now, the theme of love is as much a part of North American evangelicalism
as it is of the Thai version. It is such a central feature of global Christianity that
some Thailand hands I have talked to felt that converts must have revised their
conversion stories to fit their post-conversion indoctrination in schools and
churches. While to a degree this may be so, such adjustments make the theme
no less important as an indicator of local significances. As Arjun Appadurai has
shown in his analysis of cricket in India (1996:89-113), indigenization need not
entail replacement or adulteration of elements of the item being borrowed,
especially if the item is a “hard” cultural form such as cricket (Appadurai
1996:90) or evangelical Christianity (see Robbins 2001), that is, a form that tends
to resist piecemeal adaptation. Even if the form is transcultural (and every
Christian conversion involves some acquisition of translocal material), it still
must be re-articulated locally. In other words, the macrotheme must still devel-
op local micro-manifestations. This is true even of a seemingly straightforward
term such as “love.” In Thailand, this is especially so, for at the linguistic level
there is more than one term available for expressing the notion. One of those
terms is the common-language word “love” (rak or khwamrak), while the other
is the more religiously-associated “lovingkindness” (metta or khwammetta).
Thai Christians have chosen to express their discourses about love by means of the
common-language rak. It does not matter if this choice was made by mission-
aries or by local leaders, for the term’s resonances are by now myriad, and those
networks of meaning not only affect how the term is encountered by converts
but also express the manner of its localization in the community at large.

At first glance, the choice of the common-language term might seem a
strike against Christianity. Perhaps it is for some potential converts, as the
term could be tainted by its commonality. After all, according to many Thai
Buddhists, at least as their discourse is heard by some missionaries, love (rak)
is a kind of attachment. It can bind us unhealthily to the object or person
loved, and for that reason it may need to be let go of. The pure kind of other-
directedness involved that other word, lovingkindness (metta), an other-
directed concern for the welfare for all living things, and one of the virtues
that good Buddhists are supposed to cultivate. But this characterization of the
terms as opposites overstates the issue. One of Thailand’s most respected
Buddhist scholars, Phra Prayut Payutto, points out that even many Thai
Buddhists treat the terms as synonyms, and he points out that it is only the
grasping, self-centered kind of love that needs to be avoided, since the self-
less, other-directed form of love truly corresponds to metta, even if it is
referred to as rak (Prayut Payutto 1986:507).
Nevertheless, since the word metta is already available for denoting a pure, other-directed love, then why do Thai Christians talk of rak rather than metta? I think one of the reasons for this preference is because khwamrak is emotionally personalizing and suggestive of bonds of relationship, while metta is relatively distanced. For that reason it draws easily on metaphors of family, commitment, and interpersonal caring. Thai popular discourse is rich with these metaphors. Alongside the songs of lustful love and broken hearts hears on the radio one also encounters television commercials showing family members caring for each other and adults caring for cute, innocent children, all of which is denoted by the term khwamrak. The term rak also evokes the care of friend for friend, the grace and material aid provided a person who needs it, and protection provided in response to another's vulnerability.

Love gains special power when combined with notions such as that of the church as idealized family. In the Thai setting the family metaphor evokes notions of self-sacrifice and of care for the weaker by the stronger. It also evokes notions of friendship and mutual dependability. Not only were these notions expressive of ideal family relationships, but when I examined converts' interview transcripts for synonyms of khwamrak (I did so by looking for parallel constructions in which interviewees expanded on the term), I found a focus on warmth and security. Other common associations included giving practical assistance (pen huang), having good intentions toward another person (jingjai), and trustworthiness (mai lauk luang). Some people also mentioned the notion of Jesus being a “true friend” who has a special level of understanding and dependability. This latter set of associations takes the penumbra of love well beyond family.

Now, these associations are not tremendously different from those encountered in North America. For that reason the acculturation involved is a subtle one. But that does not mean there has been no localization at all. For contextualization and localization (especially the unintentionally hybrid ones) do not always involve accretion of exotic traits noticeably different from those of the source locale. It consists merely of the generation of webs of meaning that connect to local contexts (see discussion in Conn 1984:177-179). Those webs can be complexly localized even when surface forms appear similar from place to place.

Furthermore, despite the similarities between Thai and North American connotations of love, the associations are not entirely congruent. Given the translocality of the theme, and given the number of converts who spoke of learning the nature of Christian love by reading Biblical texts, it is reasonable
to ask how much comes from local meaning systems and how much comes from Christian instruction. It is impossible to know the answer to this, for in its local manifestation the theme draws on translocal material and local connotations in ways that overlap seamlessly.

The Theme of Divine Power
Another theme with special prominence is the theme of divine power. Whereas the theme of love parallels material that might be encountered in North America, the theme of divine power is more distinctively different. North Americans rarely say that they converted because they heard that God has power over spirits, as some of my Thai interviewees did, nor are their conversion stories as likely to cite answered prayer, news of healings, or relatives' sudden recovery from mental illness. These are potential themes, because North American evangelicals certainly have concepts of the supernatural. But I do not hear them as much in the United States as I heard them in Thailand, because in America the supernatural does not play this role in the average non-Christian's daily life and expectations.

As in the case of divine love, the area of divine power is one where Christian teachings get elaborated as they are transplanted. Here the process is more apparent than in the case of love. For example, the spirits that are the focus of some discourses of supernatural power are likely to be locally named, causing each locale to have a somewhat different demonology. Furthermore, though North American evangelicals believe in an active supernatural realm, their view of the spirit world tends to lack details, because by the early twentieth century evangelicals lacked a living mythological template. What beliefs they did have, other than belief in God, had already been relegated to the category of superstition. This has opened evangelicals, when expanding across cultures, to the possibility of ascribing to whatever local spirit beliefs already existed locally. This phenomenon has been much noted in recent studies of Pentecostals across cultures (Meyer 1994, 1996; Robbins 2001; Zehner 1996).

Robbins (2001) points out that the fundamental move in conversion is a reversal from appeasing (or currying favor with) spirits to driving them off. To a large extent, this is true. However, the mere recognition of local spirits raises the question of where to place them in Christian cosmologies. The problem parallels one that arose in earlier centuries when Theravada Buddhism expanded into the societies of mainland Southeast Asia and worked out its accommodation with the local spirit beliefs and practices of Southeast Asia. As
Craig Reynolds shows (1976), the solution at that time was to assimilate the spirits to functionally similar places in the Buddhist cosmology, so that certain phi (Thai territorial spirits and spirits of the dead), for example, became classified as a kind of pret (Pali: peta), inhabitants of the underworld that are mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures (see Reynolds 1976:207; also Harvey 1990:33). A. Thomas Kirsch argues that the resulting “religious complexity” (his euphemism for “syncretism”) involves three separate ritual complexes of diverse origins that function today under a governing umbrella of fully Buddhist conceptions (Kirsch 1967, 1977). Though others have found the complexes to be not so neatly separable or have provided alternative ways of looking at their structure (see Spiro 1978, 1982; Tambiah 1970; Textor 1973a, 1973b), the point is that most Thai Buddhists consider these to simply be part of their world.15

At the moment, Thai evangelicals are following the pattern outlined by Robbins (2001, 2003a), recognizing the existence of local spirits while opposing them, and most are doing so by following the pattern outlined by Reynolds (1976), domesticating the Christian cosmology by assigning indigenous spirits to appropriate places in that cosmology. The rather shapeless evangelical notions of the supernatural are thereby given form by being extended directly into the relatively detailed local lore of spirits and their capabilities and characteristics (for more details, see Zehner 1996).

This openness to local elaboration as being “really our stuff” creates the possibility of a great deal of cultural mixing being accepted as consistent with evangelical orthodoxy. One of my favorite examples of syncretistic yet accepted theological creativity was the Thai pastor who taught from the Bible that there is a hierarchy of spirits. Each nation had its own ruling territorial spirit, like the prince of Persia in the Book of Daniel. Below those national spirits were provincial spirits, then spirits commanding each district, then each sub-district, and so on down to the local spirits that might inhabit a spirit house or who might strike a woman mute or give her a stiff back as she drew water from the local well. If anything fit the dictionary definition of syncretism, this was it. It was a three-way merging, for it combined (1) the Biblical notion of territorial spirits with (2) Thailand’s centralized structure of provincial and sub-provincial governance, and (3) a complete acceptance of the reality of whatever spirits were said to exist in a particular locale. Yet his teaching was considered acceptable by fellow pastors and by associated missionaries, not just because he referenced the Bible, but also because evangelical Christian thought had this space available for elaboration, besides which, the overall use he made of the merged set of ideas was
in support of evangelism and otherwise orthodox teaching. The important thing was that Christianity provided the master nodes, the overall outline of a cosmology in terms of which local spirits were to be interpreted (a similar argument appears in Zehner 1996). But because that cosmology was nonspecific it was ready to be filled with local material, and the manner of that filling-in is open to individual creativity, such as to make the work of this Thai pastor somewhat parallel to similar cognitive work among the Urapmin of New Guinea (Robbins 2003a, 2004b), the Ewe of Ghana (Meyer 1994, 1996), the not-quite-so-evangelical members of the Johane Masowe weChishanu Church in Zimbabwe (Engelke 2004), and so on, each with somewhat different local textures and referents yet with overall similar notions of the purpose of the work.16

This creativity was hardly confined to Thailand or even to the Third World. In the 1980s and 1990s some leading evangelicals based primarily in North America attempted, in quasi-scientific investigative fashion, to develop a transculturally valid detailed evangelical demonology by investigating the nodes that connected the various local spirit cosmologies (or demonologies) to the transcultural one (see Kraft 1992, 1993, 1995; Kraft and White 1994; Wagner 1989, 1991, 1992, 1993; Wagner and Pennoyer 1990). Their move was controversial (see DeBernardi 1999; Priest, Campbell, and Mullen. 1995). The critique from evangelical opponents, some of whom called it “missiological syncretism,” proceeded largely on methodological and theological grounds. However, an additional issue may be missological and processual in its import—an overly specific demonology, though motivated by respect for non-Western cosmologies, could actually hamper the localization process, for the very flexibility of this particular metatheme is what enables evangelical Christianity to localize through the very expression of its anti-syncretism.

**Transitional Hybridities and Story Repair**

The above section has been discussing examples in which transnationally resonant metathemes were articulated into microthemes through articulation with local cultural and experiential contexts. However, this twin articulation of evangelical Christianity (and converts’ stories) with the local and the transnational was not always harmonious, for the metathemes were not understood to be completely free for local interpretation, nor was it always easy to link evangelical doctrine with personal experience. Neither were the hybridities arising from this process necessarily permanent or long-lasting. In the study of conversion an area of special interest is those transitional phas-
es in the conversion process where there are overlaps in meaning due to common or nearly common vocabulary or concepts. These words and concepts are hooked into separate realms of understanding yet are sufficiently similar that they provide segues into conversion. It could be said that these are cases of “frame overlap,” drawing on Erving Goffman’s (1974) notion of the “frame” as a cognitive-behavioral set entailing particular understandings of and prescriptions for behavior.

Larry Ingram (1989) has applied the notion of frame to one-on-one personal evangelism in public settings, suggesting that the reason these efforts tend to be so unsuccessful, even loathed, is because the evangelists’ efforts violate commonly-held frames for public interaction. His thesis is not in itself remarkable (similar observations apply to telemarketers, door-to-door salespeople, and e-mail spammers, all of whom make their living—sometimes quite lucratively—by bothering people who would usually prefer to be left alone), but the “frame intrusion” notion he employs is useful, for his discussion (1989:18ff) of the concept suggests a potential struggle over the meaning of particular actions and events.

Goffman’s and Ingram’s approaches focus on interpersonal interaction in which frames compete sub-cognitively in the space and meanings between two or more people. But a version of the concept might also be applied to a situation that arises internally within a single individual in the course of conversion. This situation involves an internal cognitive overlap, a kind of confusion or unbidden creativity within the mind, in which at certain points competing frames become congruent. At these points of congruence, symbols become so multivalent—due to having roughly the same meanings and resonances in both frames—that they can facilitate cognitive movement from one frame to the other. The effect on cognition is a bit like a dream in which a few portions of the scene remain salient and stable while the rest of the scene changes unnoticed. The frame overlaps are the stable parts of the changing scene, and because they are sensible in both frames, they facilitate movement between the two. Their function is primarily metaphorical, in the sense that they parallel the function of verbal metaphor to the extent of “mapping one domain into another” as part of the process of developing understanding (Quinn 1991:58-59), except that in the case of transitional hybridities the effect is not to generate understanding but to facilitate a shift in understandings.

Particularly interesting are transitional hybridities that are segues to conversion but do not create enduring meaning structures. Some examples of this
were produced by the overlap between popular Buddhist and Christian notions of heaven and hell and of the consequences of this-worldly action. For philosophically oriented Buddhists, the two systems should be very different, for the goal of practice is nirvana, however that concept may be defined. However, for more traditionally oriented Buddhists, and the majority of Thai people still think this way, the primary concern is the fruit of one’s actions, or *karma*, and its effect both on this life and in later lives, effects that potentially include determining one’s future place in the multiple heavens and hells of traditional Buddhist cosmology.

Now, to hear the Buddhist cosmos described this way, with multiple heavens and hells, is to perceive it as very different from the Christian one, despite their functional similarities as systems of reward and punishment. However, few Thai know this cosmological scheme in detail, and many educated people have rejected portions of it altogether. Further facilitating the overlap of Buddhist and Christian cosmologies is that the Thai language does not mark words for number (there is no opposition between “singular” and “plural” forms) unless the speaker wishes to draw attention to the specific number (for example, “four children”) or the fact of plurality (“many children”).

Consequently, it makes sense, as one person did, to speak of becoming a Christian because she had been disturbed by paintings of tortures in hell that she had seen on Buddhist temple walls when she was a child. It also makes sense, as another person did, to say that heaven had seemed far off but Christianity made it seem attainable. Linguistically, the transition is seamless. But at what point do these converts switch from a traditional Thai cosmology to a fully Christian one? Who knows? And evangelicals probably do not really care, because the functional similarities and the effects of the overlap make Christianity psychologically sensible. The phenomenon of notions of heaven and hell acting as transition facilitators is fairly widespread in the interview data, and in these cases the material stands uncorrected, as it offers no challenge to Christian perceptions or even Christian language.

Other transitional hybridities are more idiosyncratic and invite story repair. For example, one person told of a dream in which a bright person rescued her from being pulled under the surface of a lake. When she went to sleep she had had a high fever, and when she awoke the fever had broken. Upon hearing of her dream, her parents told her that (in her words) a *phrajao* must have come to her in the dream. That’s probably not what they said, because *phrajao* is the Christian word for the Christian God (though it is also the short form of the word(s) for “king” and is also sometimes applied to the Buddha). What they
probably actually said was *jao*, a local term for the powerful spirits channeled by mediums or acting as territorial guardians. But, whatever the parents may actually have said, the young woman soon identified this powerful spirit as the Jesus Christ whose picture she saw in the church attended by her Christian friend, and she came to remember it/him as *prajao*, assigning it/him the special status reserved for Jesus/God.

Something similar happened in the case of another young woman, who said she had developed mysterious stomach ailments after she let her church attendance become erratic. Her non-Christian mother suggested that God was punishing her for her unfaithfulness, and suggested her condition would improve if she started attending church regularly. Now, while this specific reason for returning makes sense in the Christian framework, it is somewhat unusual. It sounds even more striking when we become aware that the mother was a medium and that stomach ailments are one of the means by which powerful spirits claim people to act as their voices. Here again there was a functional overlap, in that the two perspectives pointed to the same outcome and for somewhat similar reasons. But the associated worlds of meaning were very different.

In a third instance, a young woman who had enjoyed a long friendship with a persistently witnessing Christian classmate was secretly becoming interested. The friend had suggested that if she wanted to know if God was real, then she should pray and God would give her assurance. Specifically, the friend had said that “I would know that Jesus is alive.” So she prayed, adding a twist of her own: “I thought inside, ‘If God is real, [then] I want to see God.” As she was falling asleep that night, she heard a voice calling her name, and she felt overwhelmed with emotion: “The instant I heard that voice, I felt that I was a sinner, unworthy for that voice to be calling...for that voice to be giving me love and warmth...I had never heard a voice like that before. I had never received a feeling like that before.” She was instantly convinced that Jesus was real and alive. “The moment I thought this, it made me feel that I had received release. It was like there was joy and happiness welling up unexpectedly.”

On one level, this person had done exactly what her friend had suggested, asking for and receiving proof of God’s reality. However, the manner in which she requested and received this proof is of ambiguous provenance. Stories of visions of Jesus and of divine voices can be encountered in most evangelical communities, and, after all, such a vision figured in the Apostle Paul’s conversion. But such experiences are rare (regardless of cultural background) and are not likely to be advocated in a conversion appeal. If the friend was following
Thai evangelical convention, as seems likely, then instead of suggesting to ask for a vision, she had really been saying that those who open their hearts to God will gradually and naturally develop the conviction that Christianity is true.

The young woman’s quest for a vision (which was only half answered, as she “heard” and “felt” but never “saw”) is likely to have come from her prior involvement in the Wat Phra Dhammakaya Buddhist meditation movement. This movement encouraged the cultivation of guided visions as part of its meditation technique and taught that these visions were actual glimpses of the Buddha nature within. It also taught that more advanced meditators could obtain visions of the heavens and their past lives (see Zehner 1990). It was but a short step from the woman’s involvement in this movement to expecting a vision of Jesus. She was not the first Dhammakaya member I had encountered who had such an expectation. But her use of this experience cut two ways, grounding her conversion in the habitus acquired in a non-Christian movement, while grounding it also in a direct experience of the divine that she understood in Christian terms.

These three examples all included instances of story repair. The first two did so in order to normalize the convert’s experience by means of Christian terms and tropes. Thus, the local jao became the Christian phrajao. The medium’s advice to her daughter became a “God getting hold of me” story. In the third convert’s story, the correction came back in the other direction; influenced by both Buddhist and Christian models, she had over-corrected her memory of the event, fitting it too neatly to those models. Consequently, as she talked to me she struggled to find ways to preserve that meaning while also being true to the details of her experience, revealing that struggle in a halting, constantly re-correcting delivery, saying first that she had requested to “see” Jesus, but eventually correcting to the notion that she had requested “anything at all” that would show her that Jesus is alive.

In his argument against overemphasizing the cultural continuities in Christian conversion, Joel Robbins has pointed out that many Christian communities who retain a cognitive contact with their pre-conversion frameworks (for example, through the practice of rituals aimed at subduing local spirits) do so in part through “rituals of disjunction” (2003a:224). Though he has in mind rituals in the traditional sense of external behaviors (usually behaviors structured and shared by the community), in a way the story modifications just mentioned perform a similar function. Whether or not it is correct that, as Coleman says, for evangelicals “part of the process of gaining identity…is the development and constant honing of a personal account of conversion”
(2000:119), the telling of these stories entails a double disjunction in which their overt content speaks of the convert’s break with the past while certain of their infelicities reveal (through inexpert masking) attempts to cover over inconvenient continuities that were significant in making the change.

Arjun Appadurai has recently suggested conceiving of cultural matters as being primarily about differences, being primarily “a contrastive...property of certain things” (1996:12), such that people can use those differences to “express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities” (1996:13). To some extent, story repair expresses the convert’s alliance with anti-syncretistic rhetorics shared among evangelical Christians. I suggest converts do this not just because the perspectives are imposed on them (though to a degree they certainly are), but also because anti-syncretistic perspectives have a useful function for them personally. Anti-syncretism, like Appadurai’s definition of culture, is about defining differences, and evangelical conversion is in theory about personal transformation. Consequently, a convert’s revision of her story to reflect anti-syncretistic rhetorical norms may be a means of demonstrating her personal transformation to herself. Such rhetorical transformations can be especially important for people (such as family-oriented young women or ascetically oriented Buddhist meditators) whose pre-conversion lives were not marked by personal vices and whose conversions therefore did not entail significant behavioral transformations. They may also be important for converts who sense that their conversions are grounded too obviously in multiple religious worlds.

Yet the ambiguities of transitional hybridities are not entirely erased in story repair. Though discontinuities are important to many converts, because of their role in signaling the transformations that play such an important role in evangelical rhetoric, so, too, are the continuities, because of their role in facilitating conversion by means of the points of symbolic inter-intelligibility.

To summarize what has been said in this section, the conversion stories sometimes use preconversion material as a springboard to conversion itself by means of symbols whose meanings stay roughly the same as the scene changes. Thus the young woman who told of asking to “see” Jesus in a vision employed a trope meaningful in both Buddhist and Christian contexts. The same was true of the young man who converted to Christianity as a surer way of reaching heaven, which had been the goal of his Buddhist practice. And it took the young woman who was rescued in her dream only a small linguistic slip to turn a jao (spirit) into Phrajao (the Christians’ God), especially since either way the functional meaning given to the dream was that a powerful supernatural being had come to rescue her from an underworld being.
Conclusion
Thus, though it presents itself as the defender of timeless truths, evangelical Christianity actually dwells in the dynamics of hybridity. Change is the norm, even in the evangelical churches of North America, where in the past thirty years suits have been exchanged for open collars, crusades have been replaced by seminars, and where, not long after singer Larry Norman famously asked why the Devil had all the good music (rock and roll), other singers would be using that very medium to go, in the words of another song, “back to the heart of worship.” Ironically, it is the theologically conservative churches—today’s evangelicals—that have been quickest to embrace and even pioneer some of these culturally adaptive changes. One of the reasons such an overtly anti-syncretistic tradition can so comfortably live in change—and can live with the unguided adaptations that constantly structure and re-structure its localizations—is because its anti-syncretistic gaze has a fairly narrow focus.

While on one level evangelicals identify syncretism as “too much change,” on another level they define it more narrowly as changes that “threaten the core.” In practice, this “core” consists of ideas about the nature of God and Jesus, along with the assumed authority of scriptures, and it assumes a monocratic loyalty to Christ at the expense of other sources of spiritual power and authority. The anti-syncretistic gaze is vigilant for deviations from these norms, whether they be particular exorcistic practices, offerings to spirits, meditative techniques assumed to have psycho-spiritual effectiveness in themselves (or because of the power to which they give access), or the use of charms and amulets. The idea is that you can’t be Christian while also engaging in these deviations. These signs of divided loyalty are policed at the level of public practices, hand-in-hand with the policing of behavioral norms related to sex and procreation. However, because this “core” of Christian belief is fairly narrowly defined, a good deal of local variation can be built into the local experience and practice of evangelicalism without its developing a sense of having lost its shape.

Thus, there is room for creativity in evangelical anti-syncretism. Yet the process is not entirely random, as there are certain structures that guide the bottom-up creativity that is enfolded within the evangelical style of anti-syncretism. The present paper has explored two of these structures, the hybridities of extension and the hybridities of transition. The hybridities of extension clothe transcultural themes with local details, while the hybridities of transition minimize perceived cognitive disjunctions during the ongoing reorientations of conversion. The local and individual variations built into these process-
es are just as essential to evangelical Christianity as is its self-proclaimed resistance to change, because collectively they enable a sense of seamless connection between localized experience and a translocal tradition, while disguising that creativity in a way that allows the converts to present as orthodox both to themselves and to others. At least in the experience of Thai evangelical converts, the orthodox hybridities outlined here are means to that end, happening from the bottom up, yet being articulated as additional instances.

ENDNOTES

1In James and Johnson’s words, “There is a tension inherent in Christianity between the universal descent of the Holy Spirit and the cultural expression of Christian values, whether or not enshrined in the institutional forms of a given Church” (1988:3).

2The term “anti-syncretism” is borrowed from the introduction to Stewart and Shaw’s Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism, as is the notion that anti-syncretism surreptitiously incorporates hybridities into itself while hiding them from awareness by claiming that “they have really always been ‘ours’” (1994:8). The latter notion is also consistent with André Droogers’s earlier observation (1989:8) that most syncretism (used here in the sense that I use the term “hybridity”) goes unnoticed and unchallenged.

3The cultural-theological inertia caused by the evangelicals’ diversity has been noted by evangelical scholar Craig Blomberg (see Blomberg and Robinson 1997). To speak of this diversity is not to say that evangelical Christianity does not change—indeed, I am arguing the exact opposite, as that inertia of cross-communally shared theological authority may include certain shared directional processes of change. I mean simply that the ability of any one individual or of any small, closely networked elite to take the evangelical churches in any particular theological direction through its own volition is going to be limited, as may be suggested by the up-and-down careers of even such influential evangelical figures as Jerry Falwell (on which, see Harding 2000).

4Terence Ranger observed that, for Asian Christians, like the Protestants in Latin America but unlike the Christians in Africa, “there has never yet been a cultural or religious decolonization” (2003:116), despite their often vigorous organizational independence.

5Surveys of the term’s uses, including its uses by secular scholars, can be found in Colpe (1987), Droogers (1989), Levinskaya (1993), and Shaw and Stewart (1994), each portraying a somewhat different cross-section of the literature.

6There is also concern to proscribe certain behaviors in the area of sexuality, marriage, and procreation, such as polygamy, homosexuality, abortion, and premarital and extramarital sex. In some times and places violations of these rules have also been considered forms of syncretism.

7Extensive reference to the Catholic churches is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth noting that the growth of Catholic institutions roughly paralleled that of the Protestants. The Catholics began their work in the 1600s, but after some initial successes they encountered strong nationalist reaction due to their association with the scheming of the then politically influential European adventurer Constantine Phaulkon. In the aftermath, the Catholic institutional presence was kept minimal until the 1830s, about the time the Protestants were becoming active. Thereafter they grew at a roughly parallel rate, being twice as numerous as the Protestants throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
For more on the Catholics in Thailand, see the relevant portions of Smith (1982), Surachai (1990), and Wyatt (1984).

Histories of the early years of Protestant missions can be found in Prasit (1984), Smith (1982), Swanson (1984), and Wells (1958). No comprehensive history exists of the more recent years. More extended summaries of the recent material can be found in Zehner (1996) and Zehner (2003: 37-49). There also exist histories of various components of the Protestant churches in Thailand, particularly the Pentecostals (Nishimoto 1996, Ruohomäki 1988), the Church of Christ in Thailand (Swanson 1995), and some of the (mostly evangelical) independent congregations (Mäkelä 2000). In recent years the Church of Christ in Thailand has also produced local histories of several of its congregations.

The reference here is to Michael Pye’s notion (1971) that syncretism involves an ambiguity of reference that has not yet been resolved yet may be long-lasting.

Reference to “signifier” and “signified” draws on Ferdinand de Saussure’s classic terminology for the relationship between symbol (signifier) and its conventional meaning (signified).

My sample of formerly Buddhist Bible school students did not include, of course, the many former converts who today would point to similar disillusionment about the reliability of God’s love or the love of Christians.

A Thai Buddhist movement that similarly stressed family-like relationships among its participants likewise spoke of a mystical power drawing people together. In that case, instead of talking of the power of God, the movement talked of the power of merit (raeng bun).

Thai evangelical Christians do use the term metta, but usually in specific contexts. Most commonly it is used in theological discourse as a synonym for or expansion on the Christian notion of “grace” (normally translated phrakhun), the magnanimous bestowing of favor on one who does not necessarily deserve it. It is also used by Thai Christians for the related notions of “mercy” and “to show pity through magnanimous action,” especially when done by Jesus/God or another person of high status or authority. The term metta also has a common-language use—among Thai of all religions—to denote what Americans would call a “kind-hearted” person, especially when the kind-heartedness is accompanied by an overall gentle manner. However, despite these common usages, for the most part among Thai evangelical Protestants the term metta takes a back seat to the term rak.

Preoccupation with the exotic has long been criticized in anthropology (for example, see Fabian 1983, Trouillot 1991, Geertz 1988, Appadurai 1996), though anthropologists continue reproducing the exotic not only in their preoccupations but also in their styles of writing.

There are exceptions, of course, especially modern Buddhists who take an anti-syncretistic stance toward many local traditions, and also secularly educated individuals who try to leave the supernatural behind altogether.

The independent church studied by Engelke cannot really be considered evangelical, because its adherents reject the authority of the Bible in favor of the message of their founding prophet (2004:86), and most evangelicals would consider such a stance heretical. However, in the matter of spirits and ancestors this church’s approach parallels the cases studied by Robbins, Meyer, and myself. For example, the convert interviewed by Engelke says “that an African must never appeal to the ancestors because salvation lies with the Holy Spirit. If a spirit is not of God, it is against God” (2004:93). This strongly parallels the position avowed by most Thai evangelical leaders (see Zehner 1996).

The nature of nirvana and the degree to which it may be attainable in this life are among the most vexed questions in contemporary Thai Buddhism. To greatly simplify the terms of this multi-sided debate, positions range from the traditional notion that nirvana is something afar off that can be attained after many lifetimes, to the psychological notion that nirvana is an inner state of settledness that can be attained through religious practice, to the notion that “nirvana” has multiple valid meanings. For useful discussions of these and other


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