

**PRELUDE TO IRONY THE PRINCETON THEOLOGY AND THE PRACTICE
OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONS IN NORTHERN SIAM, 1867-1880**

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CONCLUSION

Foreign missionaries invariably stand between two sets of cultures, the ones on the field and the ones at home. The truth of this statement does not "go without saying," however commonplace it may seem, as the very future of a Christian mission depends on how it relates to its host cultures and utilizes its home cultures. A mission's "system of doctrines and meanings" is a cognitive mechanism, with a strong affective substratum, that plays a crucial role in determining the way in which the relationship between field and home cultures plays out. It strongly influences what a missionary notices and fails to notice concerning the host culture and provides an equally crucial interpretive framework for understanding and making judgments about what is noticed. That system also helps to determine how the missionaries feel about what they notice. As the term "system of doctrines and meanings" itself suggests, missionary thought contains both conscious (theological) and semi-conscious or unconscious (ideological) components that, when taken together, comprise an ordered system of cognition. By their very nature, missionary records tend to reveal that system in terms of events, policies, decisions, and attitudes rather than in formal statements of doctrines and principles. The student has to read through the historical record to the system, in and of itself a difficult task unless one has access to formal statements of the missionaries' system of doctrines and meanings from other sources. The Laos Mission and the Princeton Theology provide a fascinating case in point.

On the field, the Laos Mission carried out its mission in the midst of northern Thai culture, while it maintained a vital link with the central Thai state culture and its power center in Bangkok. Commentators have long noted that the mission took an essentially negative attitude towards northern Thai culture, especially towards its religion and its ceremonial practices. It consciously attempted to preserve the Western character of the Christian faith that it preached, and it required that its converts publicly renounce their former religious allegiance and permanently sever relationships and activities based on Buddhism and animism. This stance, as we have seen, exerted an immense influence on the history of the mission between 1867 and 1880. It precipitated major crises in 1869 and 1878. In 1869, the mission defied the Prince of Chiang Mai, Chao Kawilorot, by instructing its converts to refuse to work on Sundays. In 1878, it disputed the manner in which northern Thai society legalized marriages through the payment of a "spirit fee." The mission called on its system of doctrines and meanings in both instances to determine crucial matters of policy. It also usually spurned the advice of its own converts on how best to proceed with the evangelization of the region, advice that reflected an indigenous perspective and that, if taken, might have reduced tensions between the mission and northern Thai society. The missionaries, again, drew on their system of meanings and doctrines to dismiss the convert's "local wisdom," because that wisdom seemingly violated what the missionaries took to be the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. More largely, the Laos Mission's system of doctrines and meanings virtually programmed a "scholastic approach" that characterized its

evangelistic, medical, and educational activities throughout the mission's pioneer era.

Scholars have argued, in light of the Laos Mission's denial of northern Thai culture and religion, that the Laos Mission misunderstood Buddhism and improperly communicated the Christian message. In one sense, these arguments point to the important insight that the mission viewed Buddhism and communicated with the people of northern Siam from within a closed system of doctrines and meanings that disparaged the self-understanding of northern Thai Buddhists themselves. For those who do not share in a narrowly constructed, Old School Presbyterian system of doctrines and meanings, the Laos Mission certainly appears to have misunderstood the religion of northern Siam and improperly communicated the Christian message to the northern Thai people. From within the mission's own doctrinal and ideological system of thought, however, it did not misunderstand Buddhism. It delivered its message to the people in an appropriate manner. It is at this point that the Princeton Theology sheds important light on our understanding of missionary behavior in northern Siam up to 1880. It brings us face to face with the Old School Presbyterian missionaries' own cultural and religious experience, an experience that wove the strands of Reformed confessionalism, Common Sense Realism, evangelical piety, and a touch of romanticism into a single, if complex, system of thought. The historical record does not reveal precisely and clearly the degree to which the Princeton Theology directly influenced the thinking and work of the Laos Mission. The biographical data presented in [Chapter Two](#), however, makes it likely that Princeton did exercise at least some influence on Daniel McGilvary and Jonathan Wilson, the two key leaders of the mission before 1880. That record also indicates that the theological stance of other pioneer members on the mission, as far as we can reconstruct it, did not differ markedly from Princeton. It was like Princeton, if not Princetonian. Dr. Charles Vrooman was the exception that proves the rule.

From a nineteenth-century, orthodox American evangelical perspective, the pioneer members of the Laos Mission conducted themselves in an exemplary manner—from, it must be repeated, that perspective. It was the perspective articulated by the Old School Presbyterian theologians at Princeton Seminary. The Princetonian circle comprised a group of highly educated thinkers, men well versed in the history of Western thought and widely respected for their intellectual skills and breadth of learning. By the standards of their day and nation, they were also moderates who had a profound respect for scientific thought and resisted the supposed excesses of popular American religious enthusiasm just as much as they dismissed the supposed excesses of German philosophical skepticism. The Presbyterian practice of missions in northern Siam and missionary theological expression conformed closely to the doctrines of these moderate, articulate, and influential theologians. If we could step back in time and if we accepted as our own a theological system similar to Princeton's, we would surely feel that McGilvary and his colleagues were doing as well as could be expected under unusually trying circumstances. Arthur J. Brown, one of the most highly respected figures in the history of American Presbyterian missions, considered McGilvary to be "one of the great missionaries of the Church Universal." After summarizing McGilvary's leading role in the formation and conduct of the Laos Mission, Brown writes, "He was a Christian gentleman of the highest type, a man of cultivation and refinement, of ability and scholarship, of broad vision and constructive leadership."^[1] This is the praise of a skilled mission administrator for one of his most skillful colleagues working out in the field. One might take the early members of the Laos Mission to task for particular failures, but in terms of their own system of meanings and doctrines, it is hard to find fault with the general direction and policies of the mission in its pioneer era.

If, however, we step beyond the carefully circumscribed confines of the mission's Princeton-like system of doctrines and meanings a different picture quickly manifests itself. The critics described in the [Introduction](#) have a strong case, one rooted in the fact that down to this day northern Thai Protestants remain religious strangers in their own villages and even extended

families.[2] Protestant churches offer a message that only a tiny proportion of northern Thais find interesting, let alone meaningful. Given the manner by which the Laos Mission founded the northern Thai church, one finds it hardly surprising that northern Thai Protestantism has made only very modest headway since 1867, making its greatest impact in terms of modernization rather than evangelization.

The problem does not seem to have been with the Christian message as such. For whatever reasons, the message concerning Jesus Christ struck a responsive cord in many northern Thais—or so, as we have seen, Daniel McGilvary firmly believed. The facts that the Laos Mission gained its first converts fairly quickly, that in 1869 it was preparing for a people's movement, and that Chao Kawilorot felt constrained to use violence to snuff out the new religion all support the impression that the people of Chiang Mai did show a serious interest in Christianity. Under other circumstances, many of them *might* (there is no way of knowing with certainty, of course) have converted to the new religion. The problem potential converts faced was that as things stood they had to refuse much more of traditional northern Thai religious and cultural life than the great, great majority of them were willing to reject in order to convert. If they wanted to become Christians, that is, they had to cross a sharply delineated Western-style boundary, sometimes at no little personal risk. Princeton and the Laos Mission both demanded such a conversion, as we saw in [Chapter Five](#). Several early converts and potential converts, as we also saw, desired a more Southeast Asian conception of religious boundaries, by which conversion might be seen—in a less confrontational way—as a journey across loosely drawn spheres of power and influence.

Presbyterian missionary Christianity in northern Siam built itself, we can only conclude, on rejection as much as it did on affirmation. In a paper he sent to Davidson College, North Carolina, McGilvary explained that those who were discouraged by the small statistical results in new missions forgot that,

There is a double process to be carried on, a double work to be accomplished—just as if we were to be required to rear an edifice on the grounds occupied by some ancient stronghold, some fortress or palace, which must be rased to the very foundations before the new superstructure can be reared. 'Hath a nation changed its gods?' Yet, difficult as this is, it is the first thing to be done; it is what we demand of the heathen as an indispensable prerequisite towards embracing the gospel. Many of them would love to combine the two—to lift up the hand and offer a flower to the name of Jesus and Buddha—as many in Christian lands would combine the service of God and mammon.[3]

With these words, McGilvary explicitly rebuffed a Southeast Asian understanding of conversion. Converts had to change their gods, which in the northern Thai context meant discarding vast chunks of family, social, and cultural life. Chao Kawilorot took the missionary understanding of conversion to mean nothing less than rebellion against the authority of the state, which authority rested in him personally. The Laos Mission never ceased to expect its converts to divorce themselves from much of their cultural and social heritage. Writing at the turn of the century, Lillian Curtis, formerly of the Lampang Station, unfavorably compared Buddhism's conquest of northern Siam many centuries earlier with the arrival of Protestant missions on the scene in the 1860s. She acknowledged Buddhism's success. It came, however, at too high a price, because Buddhism had so adapted itself to northern Thai "superstitions" that it had lost its power to transform the people.[4]

What captures one's attention in the records of the Laos Mission, however, is not the bare fact that it demanded that converts make a complete break with northern Thai Buddhism and animism plus a partial break with northern Thai culture. What stands out in those records is the

fact that the pioneer members of the mission never doubted the necessity of making that break. They consistently rejected the possibility of compromise in matters of religious faith. They failed to listen to the views of the converts about the way one should convert in Chiang Mai—or how one might adapt traditional medical rites to Christian medical needs. Their self-assurance in these matters is striking. There is not the slightest trace of a doubt in their writings that they should demand an absolute, abrupt conversion. They never questioned the appropriateness of using Presbyterian ecclesiastical structures and forms in the northern Thai context.

Apart from the Princeton Theology, we might simply brand the missionaries as "stubborn" or consider them to have been incredibly "ignorant." In light of Princeton and in all fairness, they were neither stubborn nor ignorant. Their approach and attitudes were based on an Enlightenment epistemology integrated with Reformed confessionalism. That epistemology affirmed the essential unity of all of humanity. It gave the missionaries a sense of assurance that they could know reality, divine as well as natural, as it is. They could know God and God's will for them. Enlightenment epistemology also assured them that the great majority of humanity, on one level, and the vast majority of orthodox Christians, on another level, agreed with their views concerning God and the world. Presbyterian Princeton shared all of this with the Presbyterian Laos Mission, and it is through the lens of the Princeton Theology that we come to appreciate how fully the missionaries accepted a commonsensical and confessional epistemology. They took their own personal beliefs and views to be nothing more or less than a matter of faith in God and good common sense.

We must emphasize repeatedly that the Laos Mission's Enlightenment and Reformed epistemology assured its pioneer members that the northern Thai were essentially like Americans, having the same religious needs and the same fundamental consciousness. It was neither arrogant nor a mark of ignorance to use American methods and apply Old School Presbyterian attitudes in Chiang Mai. It was wise—and necessary. It was not, then, merely that the missionaries did not listen to the views of their converts or that they failed to adapt their message to the northern Thai context. Within the constraints of their system of doctrines and meanings and their Reformed-Common Sense epistemology, they could not listen. They could not contextualize. Equally important, they were entirely confident that they should not attempt to adapt the Christian faith to a heathen context. The result could only be, for them, the "heathenization" of the Christian faith, a tragedy to be avoided at any cost.

Standing outside of the Laos Mission's inherited system of doctrines and meanings, we cannot help but sense the ideological and consequent behavioral constraints that system placed on the early members of the mission. It provided them, as we saw in [Chapter Three](#), with sets of absolute principles, again supposedly grounded both in "the truth" of Christian doctrine, the Bible, and human consciousness. It then assured them that they alone knew the true truth and had true knowledge of God. They also believed that the Holy Spirit confirmed the truth of the mission's system of doctrines, as did the common beliefs and consciousness of common people throughout history and across the boundaries of cultures and nations. Most importantly, the Laos Mission's system of doctrines and meanings assured its members that they could truly know God's will for them and, consequently, the proper way to carry out the evangelization of northern Siam. *This* is the point at which their theological beliefs became an ideology. The assumption that they could unerringly know how to conduct themselves lay quietly embedded in their whole system of thinking, always assuring them of the ultimate correctness of their views and actions. It lay beyond the possibility of critical analysis. Given their dualistic views of heathenism and their confidence in the truth of their own beliefs, it was simply impossible that the pioneer members of the Laos Mission would consider adapting the Christian faith to the northern Thai context. They could not contextualize. As far as they could see, the Christian message represented timeless truth that stood beyond culture and context.

To make the flat, unadorned assertion that the pioneer members of the Laos Mission "could not contextualize," would appear to be an overstatement of the case since we cannot know that events might not have taken a different course than they did. Still, the experience of another ideological movement in Thailand, the Communist insurgency of the 1960s and 1970s, lends some credence to that bold, bald assertion. Tom Marks' *Making Revolution* seeks to understand, among other things, why the Thai government in the 1960s and 1970s was able to "beat the Communists," a feat not everyone at the time thought was possible. The reason for the failure of the Communist revolution in Thailand, according to Marks, is clear. Thai Communism wedded its revolutionary aspirations to what he describes as a rigid, ideologically driven form of Maoism, which the insurgents failed to adapt to changing circumstances in Thailand. The Thai government, although subject to its own internal dissensions, sufficiently adjusted itself to the conditions it faced to defeat the insurgents.[5] The government took, that is, a pragmatic, contextual rather than an ideological, anti-contextual approach to its conflict with Communism and succeeded, while the insurgents acted ideologically, rather than pragmatically, and failed.

The situations facing the Laos Mission in the nineteenth century and that facing Thai Communism in the twentieth were, obviously, quite different. The two revolutionary movements were themselves also quite different, the one comprising radical leftists dedicated to the violent overthrow of the existing system and the other moderately conservative pacifists who desired the overthrow of only parts of the existing system. Still, they shared a dependence on ideology that constrained them both tactically and strategically to the ultimate frustration of their central goals. Given the anti-contextual approach of each, their failures do seem inevitable—on hindsight.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* adds further texture to the perception that the ideological nature of the Laos Mission's system of doctrines and meanings ultimately frustrated its drive to Christianize northern Siam. Smith claims that, historically, much of Western knowledge about non-Western peoples has amounted to "imperial knowledge," which is self-serving, self-involved, and takes European realities as the bench marks for defining the non-European world. Imperial knowledge, furthermore, circumscribes indigenous peoples and their life ways with a set of pre-fabricated categories that provides the knower with an unwarranted confidence in what she or he "knows" about those peoples.[6] Smith's concept of "imperial knowledge" may be commonplace in the sense that most people most of the time tend to fit their knowledge of others into a preconceived framework, but it still reminds us that on the mission field the Laos Mission's nineteenth-century system of meanings and doctrines functioned as imperial knowledge. That system placed the northern Thai into a pre-assembled framework of categories summarized by the concept of "heathenism". Its Enlightenment epistemology, in combination with its Reformed theology, then guaranteed the missionaries that their understanding of the heathen was valid, universal, and timeless truth.

In the northern Thai context, then, the Laos Mission's system of doctrines and meanings amounted to an alien ideology grounded in an imperial, self-fulfilling epistemology. Reinhold Niebuhr's, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, summarizes the consequences of this imperial ideology with a stark clarity. In the course of his arguments, Niebuhr devotes considerable attention to intellectual pride, writing, "All human knowledge is tainted with an 'ideological' taint. It pretends to be truer than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge." He continues, "Intellectual pride is thus the pride of reason which forgets that it is involved in a temporal process and imagines itself in complete transcendence over history." [7] He claims that intellectual pride manifests itself as a desire to dominate others, a will to power that reflects a sense of fear or insecurity in the face of humanity's limited, conditioned situation.[8]

The system of meanings and doctrines that the Laos Mission shared with Princeton Seminary betrays all of the epistemological marks of Niebuhr's description of the sin of

intellectual pride. It was, to state the matter once more, a closed system hugely confident in its ability to know reality, know the truth, and know God. It led the missionaries to behave towards the people, religion, and culture of northern Siam in a manner that can only be termed arrogant, when viewed from outside of that system itself. They generally shut their ears to any voice that did not speak with the peculiar accents of Old School Presbyterianism, a Scottish-Genevan dialect set to a New Jersey brogue. McGilvary praised Nan Inta when he sounded like a Baconian (regarding the eclipse of 1869) and ignored his advice and wishes when he sounded like a northern Thai (concerning his desire to be an "unofficial" convert). Niebuhr's analysis points to the conclusion that the Laos Mission fell victim to its own system of meanings and doctrines, placing in that system more trust than was warranted and allowing it more authority than was wise. The pioneer members of the Laos Mission, if Niebuhr is correct, fell victim to the reified meanings of the terms they applied to the northern Thai such as "heathen," "benighted," "godless," "devil worshippers," and "superstitious". They fully believed, without question, that God concurred in those judgments, a belief that froze their Reformed-Enlightened-Evangelical and thoroughly American Good News into forms and contents that were not Good News to the vast majority of northern Thais.

We conclude, then, that, first, the pioneer members of the Laos Mission conducted themselves in light of a system of doctrines and meanings that they brought with them from the United States. Second, that system combined the marks of an overt, self-conscious theology and a covert, semi-conscious ideology and demonstrates strong affinities with the Princeton Theology. Third and finally, the affinities and parallels between Chiang Mai and Princeton provide us with a valuable tool for understanding why the first generation of Presbyterian missionaries to northern Siam thought and behaved as they did.

It is one of those ironic twists of history that the very theological and epistemological traits that so aptly fitted the Princeton combination of Reformed theological exclusivism and Enlightenment epistemological self-assurance to the nineteenth-century American context prevented the Laos Mission from similarly fitting its message and means to the northern Thai context. The Laos Mission's Princeton-like system of doctrines and meanings introduced a central tension into the life of the northern Thai church, a tension between its Christian identity and its northern Thai cultural heritage. Where the mission's system of religious doctrines and cultural meanings complimented each other, it is almost as if the northern Thai church's religious meanings are at war with its cultural meanings. Like water and oil, they seem unable to form a single solution. The northern Thai church, subsequently, has found it incredibly difficult to resolve the tension between loving God, who commands exclusive allegiance, and loving its neighbors, who demand a communal loyalty that seems to violate that allegiance. That, however, is another story, the one that comes after 1880. This study is about what came before the irony and led to it—what one might call the "prelude to irony."

Notes

Abbreviations:

AHR	<i>American Historical Review</i>
AP	<i>American Presbyterians</i>
AQ	<i>American Quarterly</i>
BRPR	<i>Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review</i>
CH	<i>Church History</i>
JAH	<i>Journal of American History</i>
JER	<i>Journal of the Early Republic</i>
JPH	<i>Journal of Presbyterian History</i>
JSH	<i>Journal of Social History</i>

NCP	<i>North Carolina Presbyterian</i>
NCP NS	<i>North Carolina Presbyterian New Series</i>
LN	<i>Laos News</i>
PQPR	<i>Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review</i>
SCJ	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
WJT	<i>Westminster Journal of Theology</i>
WWW	<i>Women's Work for Women</i>

[1] Arthur J. Brown, "An Appreciation," in McGilvary, *Half Century*, 1, 3.

[2] See Kummool and Swanson, "Religion and the Formation of Community in Northern Thailand."

[3] McGilvary, Extracts from a paper sent to the Society of Inquiry, Davidson College, *FM* 28, 2 (July 1869): 31.

[4] Curtis, *Laos of North Siam*, 224.

[5] Tom Marks, *Making Revolution: The Insurgency of the Communist Party of Thailand in Structural Perspective* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994), 211ff.

[6] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999). 80ff.

[7] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 194, 195.

[8] Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 197-98.