Gods Have Names: Addressing the Translation of "God" in the Thai Language and Culture

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Abstract

This article is a practical missiological examination of the word used to reference God in the Thai language. The problem is that the term used in Thai, Phrajao (พระเจ้า)*, is a generic term that can be used for any number of different gods or royalty and is easily misunderstood. After an examination of the words used for "God" in Chinese and Hindu contexts, the biblical terms for "God" are examined. Although the Bible uses generic terms for God (*Elohim *and* Theos*), God has a name. The name of God, Yahweh, was revealed to Moses and used throughout the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the name of Jesus is equated with the creator God. In a polytheistic, non-Christian culture like Thailand, we should emphasize the name of God, with explanation and clarity to avoid confusion, in evangelism and discipleship.*

Introduction

This article is a practical missiological examination of the word used to reference God in the Thai language. I do not claim to be an expert in translation. I respect the complexities of translation, the difficult choices that must be made, and the varied opinions of translators. My concern is more practical. What word should Thai Christians use to reference God?

When speaking to non-Christians or new believers, what is the best word to use when speaking of God?

In a church that my wife and I started over twenty years ago in Bangkok, a mother and her three daughters came to Christ, the whole family, except the father. They have now been faithful and active followers of Jesus for two decades. However, the father had chosen to stay loyal to the Thai religion, Theravada Buddhism. The man had not opposed the faith of his wife but had chosen to be apathetic and disinterested in the issue. However, during the Covid crisis, the father became ill and was admitted to the hospital. He was found to be afflicted with cancer and tested positive for Covid. (He is now cancer-free.)

Following hospital protocol, the man was placed in isolation for many days until he tested negative for Covid. The father was not allowed visitors nor any contact except for medical personnel. During his isolation, however, the father claimed that a heavenly being visited him in his room. The father recounted that the God of the Christians visited him and spoke with him. After the incident, the father contacted one of his daughters by phone. The father told his daughter about this visitation and expressed his wish to now follow the daughter's religion. The father had one question, however, "What is His name? What do I call Him?" His daughter wisely advised that her father may call him Phra Yesu (พระเยซู), Jesus, a title of respect (Phra) with the translation of Jesus' given name (Yesu).

After the father's release from the hospital, the leaders of the church began several months of discipleship, explaining the identity of Jesus, leading to his eventual baptism in the faith. It would be common for a Westerner to declare that Jesus is God or that Jesus is the Son of God. But these titles or phrases, even in the Western context, need elaboration and explanation. Words have meanings that are not always shared among cultures. In many cultures, the word we use for God can be problematic. What do we mean by "God?" Who is God?

The Problem

In Western culture, there is an understanding that the word "God" (with a capital G) refers to the singular, unique creator God of the Abrahamic religions. As Paul stated, "Yet for us there is one God" (1 Corinthians 8:6, ESV). This is not true in many non-Western contexts. The question often asked in the Western world is, "Does God exist?" The question most often asked in a polytheistic or animistic world is "Who is this Christian god and what is his name?"

The word for a god or God in the Thai language is "*Phrajao*" (พระเจ้า).

But this term can be used in different forms for many divine and human beings. For some, the term *Phrajao* (พระเจ้า) "refers to the King of Thailand in Bangkok. And when it is combined with other words or phrases it almost always refers to royalty of some level" (Hatton, 1992, p. 447). From a Western perspective, the term is used to refer to both divine and human beings. However, in Thailand, the distinction between divine and human are more blurred. Some believe the king to be a divine human.

As in English, the word "god" can be a generic term. For example, Zeus is a god. Thor is a god. The Buddha may be considered a god or given a god title. Within the Thai worldview, many beings, spiritual and human, are called "gods." Some Thai Christian leaders have argued that the terminology is not really an issue. One Christian leader, in a discussion of this topic, proclaimed to me that Christianity has been present in Thailand for so long that most Thai people understand the singular term "*Phrajao*" (พระเจ้า) to be a reference to the Christian God. I would argue that this may be true among younger urban educated Thai people, but in my experience, this is not true for many Thais outside of Bangkok. We must be aware of our listeners and how they hear the message and understand our terms. Paul chose his words and examples carefully when communicating the message of God to the Athenians (Acts 17).

Boon-it (2008) wrote that Thai Christian language is often a barrier to communicating with the majority Buddhist population. Christians sometimes use "Thai vocabulary that is incomprehensible" (Boon-it, 2008, p. ii). This is not a uniquely Thai problem. Across various cultural contexts, including Western societies, adherents of Christianity employ an inherent lexicon, characterized by a distinct manner of expression and unique terminology, which may remain incomprehensible to the broader populace. In a profoundly non-Christian culture, this insider vocabulary becomes a significant barrier to evangelism and discipleship.

The word Christians choose for "God" is important. The word choice can open doors for evangelism or even cause political difficulty as it has done with the use of *Allah* for God in Malaysia (Neo, 2014, Klett, 2021). What is the nature of the problem when using the term "god" for the Christian God in Thailand? Although dated, the observation of Hatton (1992) above, that *Phrajao* often refers to royalty, is still relevant to the rural situation in Thailand.

Boon-it wrote, "The understanding of the word 'God' for a Christian is very different from a Buddhist's understanding. For a Buddhist, 'god' can mean several things, but the most common understanding is that 'god' means one of the many deities who occupy the different heavenly realms"

(Boon-it, 2014, p. 17). Therefore, the sentence, "I worship God," is rather ambiguous. Which god? Whose god? The Chinese context may provide some insight into the Thai problem.

A Lesson from China

What can we learn from the translation of the word for God in the Chinese context? Choi (2023) approached the Chinese linguistic issue from a historical perspective. As the first Christian missionaries to China, the Syriac-speaking Nestorians were the first to wrestle with the contextualized terms used for God in Chinese. "It is clear that Nestorian translations of the Holy Names are both phonetic (based on Syriac) and paraphrased, even borrowing Buddhist terminology" (Choi 2023, p. 3). The Nestorians were not afraid to use indigenous concepts, ideas, and words to explain the Christian faith.

> The term Elohim/Theos is variously translated in Nestorian literature spanning a century as Huáng fù ē luó hé (皇父阿羅訶 Elohim the Imperial Father), Fó (佛 Buddha), Tiān zūn (天尊 Heavenly Reverence), and Zhēn zhǔu (真主 True Lord). (Choi, 2023, p. 3)

Roman Catholic missionaries, many centuries later, introduced the term, *Shàngdì*, meaning the Emperor of Emperors or the high God (Keightly, 1978; Ricci, 2016). *Shàngdì* is the name of a deity worshipped even today in China as the high God. The Catholic missionary, Matteo Ricci, argued that this deity was the God of the Bible remembered by the Chinese as *Shàngdì* (Ricci, 2016).

However, some Christians were not comfortable with importing words from the indigenous culture or equating the Christian God with an indigenous deity. This raises questions of the limits of contextualization. Would equating the Christian God with *Shàngdì* be contextualizing the understanding of God by using the many connecting points and similarities between *Shàngdì* and the Christian God? *Shàngdì* is the high god in the Chinese pantheon, above all other gods. No idols or pictures can be found of *Shàngdì* (Ex 20:4; Lev 26:1; Ross, 1909). *Shàngdì* is qualitatively unique among the Chinese gods as is the Christian God (Ross, 1909). Or would the identification with *Shàngdì* be like equating the God of Israel with Baal, a deity at the head of a pantheon of gods, but not the supreme creator God of Israel?

To avoid such a conflict, a new word was created, a neologism, *Tiānzhǔu* (Heavenly Master; Choi, 2023). Later Protestant missionaries

were not unanimous in accepting the terms used by the Catholics, although some were inclined to adopt *Shàngdì*. By 1850, the American Bible Society suggested a generic term, *Shén*, equivalent to *Elohim/Theos*, or the ambiguous term for god (Choi, 2023). However, in the later part of the 19th century, the diverse Protestant community reinvigorated the debate. Several names were proposed, "Tiandi (天帝), Dadi (大帝), Di (帝), Tianshen (天神), Tian (天), Tianfu (天父)" (Choi, 2023, p. 10). Other names were also proposed, but none of these suggestions were adopted and are not found in any published Chinese Bible translations.

The issue has not been definitively resolved. Presently, "modern Protestant Bibles…exist in two versions: the *Shàngdì* version and the Shén version, while the term *Tiānzhǔu* (Heavenly Master) has become the preferred term among Catholics and Orthodox Christians" (Choi, 2023, p. 13).

What do we learn from this historical overview? Ricci (2016) believed that God already revealed Himself to the Chinese as *Shàngdì*, therefore, we should honor God's revelation by using that name. Many Protestant Christians agree and use the word *Shàngdì*. Other Christians wish to stay close to biblical revelation. These Christians use the term *Shén*, which is equivalent to the biblical terms for God (*Elohim/Theos*). Some Catholics and the Orthodox chose to seek clarity of meaning. They wish to avoid confusion in their terms. These Christians use a descriptive term for God *Tiānzhǔu* (Heavenly Master). How we view God's revelation to a culture, our values, and the assumptions we make about contextualization will influence our choices in this matter.

A Lesson from South Asia

Next, an examination of the translation struggles in South Asia is warranted. Although China has culturally influenced Thailand through trade and immigration, the religious worldview of Southeast Asia is predominately Hinduistic (Wyatt, 2003). The predominant religion of Thailand is Theravada Buddhism which is rooted in the religious stories and worldview of Hinduism (Hilderbrand and Sritrakool, 2020). Furthermore, the religious language found in Thailand has its roots in the Pali language of South Asia (Stargardt, 2000). Buddhism and Hinduism do not have a unique high God like *Shàngdì*.

Thus, we might glean from the experience of Bible translators in South Asia. In Southern India the term used for God is the generic term *Deva* "(*deus* in Latin, *theos* in Greek) … The term means 'respectable or glorious being,' so it has a positive sense" (Rai, 1992, p. 444). However, "this is not

a personal name: it is a term to refer to any divine being, of which there are plenty in the Hindu pantheon" (Rai, 1992, p. 444). According to Rai (1992), some Hindus will often ask for the name of the Christian God. Why? Because gods have names in Thai culture. "The Hindus claim that all Hindu gods and goddesses have a personal name such as Ram, Krishna, Brahma, Bisnu, Savitri; and when they know the names of gods and goddesses, they can relate themselves to the deities" (Rai, 1992, p. 446). A quick examination of all religions and cultures will reveal that gods, in general, have names.

In Northern India, Bible translators have experimented with other words to communicate the identity of the Christian God. For example, *Ishwar* or *Param-Ishwar* (Supreme Ishwar) are used as names for God. According to Rai (1992), this name is usually used as a title for the Hindu god, Siva. However, in some Hindi scriptures *Ishwar* is used as the personal name of the creator and "master of the universe (see for instance Svetasvatara Upanishad 6.7)" (Rai, 1992, p. 444). Thus, we collide again with the difficulty of possibly confusing the Christian God with another deity.

We learn from the South Asian context that gods have names, but South Asia does not have a unique high God with a specific name, except possibly in some localized areas. The solution in South India is to again find equivalent biblical terms for God. Therefore, we next turn to the biblical context for solutions.

Is Scripture the Solution?

Hebrew speakers in the Old Testament context had similar linguistic and cultural issues with the use of the term "god." The Scriptures use three primary words to refer to God, two generic, El (אֵל) Elohim (אֱלֹהִים) and one specific name, Yahweh (יְהוָה). The God of Israel competes against the gods of the Levant and Egypt. The God of Israel reveals and defines himself to Pharaoh. "But Pharaoh said, 'Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.'" (Ex. 5:2, ESV). God identifies himself, not as the only god, but as the unique, creator God above all other gods (Ps. 95:3, 95:4, 97:9, 135:5), the high God [El-Elyon] (Gen. 14:17-20, Deut. 26:19, Is. 14:13-14), Mighty God [El Gibor] (Is. 9:6), Almighty God [El-Shaddai] (Gen. 17:1, 49:24, Ps. 91:1, 132:2, 5), Everlasting God [El-Olam] (Is. 40:28), the judge of all other gods (Ps. 82:1).

The God of the Bible sometimes defined himself relative to other gods. However, God has a specific name that is revealed to Moses. (Ex. 3:13-16).

The people of Israel are able to relate to Yahweh because they know His name. "And those who know your name will trust in you, for you do not forsake those who seek you, O Yahweh" (Psalm 9:10, LEB). We see in Scripture that Yahweh is the God of Israel, "O Yahweh, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath" (1 Kings 8:23, LEB). Yahweh is also the God of the universe, unique and different from all other gods. "But Yahweh is the true God, he is the living God, and an everlasting king." (Jer. 10:10, LEB). The problem in Thailand is the same as in the time of biblical Israel. God needs to be defined beyond the mere generic word. He is the high God, the great God, whom we know by name, Yahweh, the uncreated, self-existent one.

In my own teaching and preaching in Thailand, I have chosen to use Yahweh (พระยาห์เวห์) instead of using the generic term for God (พระเจ้า). This avoids confusion as to the identity of the god to whom I am referring. I also avoid confusing the Christian God with any other deity. The name, Yahweh, still must be defined. This can be done through teaching and discipleship, but the Christian God has a name that was revealed to Moses and to us in Scripture (Ex 3:13-16). The latest Thai standard translation of the Bible (THSV 2011) wisely, in my opinion, transliterates the name of God as *Phra Yahweh* (พระยาห์เวห์). Other Thai translations still prefer to use the more ambiguous "the Lord" (องค์พระผู้เป็นเจ้า) as do most English translations except for a few like the Lexham English Bible.

The solution to the problem is more clarity in our vocabulary by returning to the original language of Scripture and not being afraid to use Yahweh where appropriate. Using Yahweh gives clarity to hearers as to whom we are referencing. Many Thai people believe that Christians worship the god of the Westerners, one god among many. When we name our God, we are able to define Him. This does not mean we should reject the more generic word for God *Phrajao* (พระเจ้า). The generic terms *Elohim* and *Theos* are used liberally in Scripture. Many Thai Christians are comfortable with the term and it is the accepted term in most contexts. However, we might choose to clarify the term when speaking by saying the high God (พระเจ้าสูงสุด) or God above all (พระเจ้าเหนือทั้งปวง), especially in evangelistic settings or when teaching new believers.

However, using God's name also implies relationship. We know his name. Again, the name, Yahweh, still needs to be defined and clarified as will most Christian concepts in a predominately Buddhist culture. However, using the name of God creates a bond. As was noted above, gods have names (Rai, 1992).

Therefore, we should not abandon the biblical example of using the

generic term for God when appropriate. However, we should be bolder in using the biblical name of God, Yahweh, to distinguish the Christian God from other deities. Knowing the name of God implies relationship and the name of God also reveals His character and essence to those who are seeking to grow closer to Yahweh.

The Name of Jesus

The situation changes with the New Covenant and the New Testament. We are told of a new name for God.

> And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12, ESV)

> Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11, ESV)

The success of the Free in Jesus Christ Church Association (FJCCA) is a demonstration of the power of using a specific name for God. The group exclusively uses the name of Jesus (พระเยซู) in its evangelism and teaching. The generic term for God *Phrajao* (พระเจ้า) is avoided as it is deemed too confusing for the Thai context.

> [T]he use of the term *Pra[j]ao* (lord or god) by Thai Christians is confusing to Buddhists because it can refer to any number of Hindu deities, local spirits, angels or even a king. To avoid this confusion FJCCA only speaks of *PhraYesu* or Jesus. This is no trivial change of nomenclature, since it clarifies the story of the gospel for Thai who now understand that the message is about a God named Jesus who was incarnated and died to take away our bad karma. Jesus, they are told, is ready to help us with our problems and guide us today. (Bailey and Martin, 2020, p. 43)

Uniquely using the name Jesus has led to great success in evangelism, including large numbers of people being baptized as reported in numerous periodicals including *Christianity Today* and *Charisma* (Berglund, 2019; Shellnutt, 2020). However, the movement has caused some controversy.

> [W]hile the FJCCA acknowledges the Father, the Son, and the Spirit

as they read of them in Scripture, it does not teach the doctrine of the Trinity. Pastor Somsak explains, "It's not my history." By this he means that the doctrine is not articulated in the Scriptures and the philosophical debates that gave rise to the doctrine are not relevant to Thai people. (Bailey and Martin, 2020, p. 43)

Thus, many, but not all, mainstream Christian organizations are hesitant to welcome the group into the wider fellowship of Protestant Christians. Yet, the success of this experiment gives impetus to the wider debate about what word to use for God. In the Thai context, identifying the Christian God revealed in Jesus by name seems to be very beneficial. Calling God by name brings clarity and distinguishes the Christian God from the various other deities respected and worshipped in Thailand.

Summary

What word should Thai Christians use to reference God? I argue that we should not reject the generic term for God as even the Scriptures use the nonexclusive terms *Elohim* and *Theos*. However, clarity of terminology is important in evangelization and discipleship. Therefore, when speaking, we should often pair the term for God with superlatives like the most high God (พระเจ้าสูงสุด), God above all gods (พระเจ้าเหนือพระองค์ทั้งปวง), the creator God (พระเจ้าผู้สร้าง).

Furthermore, Yahweh has revealed to us his name. Although in the Western context, some may be hesitant to use the name Yahweh for fear of offense to some; that offense is not present in Thailand. People want to know the name of our God. Depending on the context of our conversation, preaching, or teaching, we should not be hesitant to say Yahweh (พระยาห์เวห์) or Jesus (พระเยซู) or even Yahweh Jesus (พระยาห์เวห์เยซู) who is Yahweh incarnated as the human Jesus. Clarity and explanation will always be needed for those who do not understand or who are new to the message, but we must not continue to use a term simply out of habit. We must use the clearest terms and concepts to communicate the message of the True God to those who need to hear.

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