

# **Modernisation and the Importance of Rituals in Isan for Cross-Cultural Missions**

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## **Abstract**

Based on recent sociological research in Northeast Thailand, this article reflects on the impact of modernisation on the religious roles of Isan women in Northeast Thailand. The transformation to modernity has occurred rapidly in Thailand due to globalisation, industrialisation and urbanisation. These changes have affected the socioreligious roles of women. A brief discussion of Western secularisation theories and their applicability to an Eastern setting

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is undertaken. Secularisation theories were explored in relation to three groups of women to determine if modernisation had impacted women's attitudes towards the supernatural realm within their lives. The qualitative research determined that secularisation occurred in some aspects of women's religiosity. However, the belief in karma, merit-making, demerit and ancestor veneration remained as essential principles in women's lives. At the same time, the expression of these principles is shifting amongst educated women. New sectors of society have emerged with no religious connections; therefore, the impact of religious influence and authority has decreased. Nevertheless, the place of ritual and ceremonies is essential in the women's worldview. Rituals reflect the women's understanding of their cosmology and must be incorporated into any gospel message brought into Isan by cross-cultural missionaries.

**Keywords:** Animism, Buddhism, Cross-cultural missions, Isan women, Rituals, Secularisation

### Introduction

This article draws on a qualitative study investigating the changing religious environment in northeast Thailand in 2019. I had been working as a missionary with women in northeast Thailand for some years. I observed how the younger women had much higher levels of education and were using modern

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technology more frequently than their mothers and grandmothers. Many young women moved from the villages to urban areas to access more economically lucrative careers. I wanted to explore how modernisation processes had impacted women's religious beliefs and practices and understand what these changes meant for cross-cultural missions.

Northeast Thailand is rapidly moving from an agricultural-based society to an urban-based society due to modernisation through industrialisation, urbanisation and technological advancements, according to Nuttayai and Promphakping (2014, p. 1455) and Rambo (2017, p. 217). There has been a significant shift from agriculture as the primary means of production to the industrial production of goods exported worldwide (Asian Development Bank, 2015, p. 1). The population of Thailand in 1965 was 30 million people, while in 2022, the population was over 69 million people (Worldometer, 2023) as the standard of living improved and as mortality and morbidity rates declined through the provision, in part, of better health practices and services and better economic standards. The Northeast region of Thailand is commonly called 'Isan' and comprises almost one-third of Thailand's land mass (Keyes, 2014, loc. 397). Isan contains one-third of Thailand's population, with the lowest income per capita (Lao et al., 2019, p. 7) in Thailand. As Bangkok needed labour to develop industrial factories and increase economic production,

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many working-aged people left Isan villages. They relocated to Bangkok or other major urban cities to work in factories and industry. Allister McGregor stated that “the considerable economic growth that the country has experienced resulted in changes in the economic structure of the society and has been accompanied by rapid social and cultural change” (2008, p. 2). Over recent years, there have been significant advances in education, the introduction of modern forms of communication, advances in agriculture and industry and other forms of technology in Isan. Urbanisation has also been rapid, with some major cities providing universities, well-equipped hospitals and many other modern facilities. Modernisation has occurred in Isan.

### **Modernisation**

For the purposes of this article, the definition of modernisation, is based on Michael Saler's definition of modernity for clarity. Saler's broad description of modernity covers many changes:

Modernity has come to signify a mixture of political, social, intellectual, economic, technological and psychological factors, ....which merged synergistically in the West between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. These factors include (but are not exhausted by) the emergence of the

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autonomous and rational subject; the differentiation of cultural spheres; the rise of liberal and democratic states; the turn to psychologism and self-reflexivity; the dominance of secularism, nationalism, capitalism, industrialism, urbanism, consumerism, and scientism.... There is one characteristic of modernity, however, that has been emphasised fairly consistently by intellectuals since the eighteenth century: that modernity is disenchanted (Saler, 2006, p. 694).

This leads to consideration of the point: Has modernisation in Isan led to some forms of 'disenchantment' for local women? Moreover, if modernisation is accompanied by secularisation in some form, what does that mean for missionaries who come to work amongst women? To further our understanding, we first discuss the current religious environment for Isan women.

### **Religiosity in Isan**

Theravada Buddhism is professed by most Thais and is considered the national religion (Taylor, 1999, p. 3). Thai identity is closely aligned with being Buddhist, with many Thai political leaders promoting Buddhism and Thai identity for political gain

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(McCargo, 2004, p. 156). Religiosity in Thailand is a very public matter, with outward appearances vital to Thai identity. The public performance of respect to various religious authorities is a necessary social trait learnt from earliest childhood. Religion is a shared community experience, rather than a private affair, part of the 'cultural framework' (Hughes et al., 2008, p. 369) that Thais live amongst. Acts of reverence, rituals and ceremonies are a public demonstration of allegiance to the various religious deities and codes. There appear to be two forms of Buddhism: the official state-sanctioned institutional form (Larsson, 2019, p. 306) and the local folk or popular form of Buddhism (Zeamer, 2008, p. 40). Religion for the women of Isan is a mixture of the official institutional Buddhism found in the temples and cited in canonical teachings and local animistic practices and beliefs, superstitions and magic, as well as many other spiritual influences that have made their way to Isan over the centuries (Saiyasak, 2007, p. 17). Religiosity is part of the everyday fabric of life, not a compartmentalised facet of life.

Chanasome Saiyasak, a Thai pastor and scholar, stated that the three primary sources of religion for the Isan people were animism, Buddhism and Brahmanism (Saiyasak, 2007, p. 13), with each fulfilling different roles within the Isan cosmos. Animism, with its belief in invisible spirit entities, dealt with aspects of life and provided people with ways of dealing with "felt needs for survival,

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safety, security and prosperity" (Saiyasak, 2007, p. 94). With its monks, scriptures, philosophies and temples, Buddhism dealt with rules and behaviours for attaining freedom from suffering and merit, making a way to heaven, and allowing connections to loved ones to continue after death (Saiyasak, 2007, p. 69). "The notions of karma, merit, reincarnation and sin" have resulted in a "value system that is merit-oriented and karma-conscious" in the minds of the Isan people (Saiyasak, 2007, p. 69). This led to daily decision-making within a moral framework. According to Dhammananda, "a religion of cause and effect or karma, is based on the principle of self-help and assumes that the individual alone is responsible for his or her own happiness and suffering as well as salvation" (Dhammananda, 2002, p. 336). Theravada Buddhism teaches the law of karma: that there is a moral cause and effect for every action or thought a person has. The belief in karma is a universally held truth for the Isan women I interviewed. They believed good fortune or circumstances were evidence of good karma.

In contrast, unfortunate circumstances, illness or disability are perceived as evidence of bad karma from a previous or present life. The women interviewed, both young and old, all adhered to the Buddhist philosophy of karma, 'do good and receive good, do bad and receive bad'. This philosophy appeared to underlie all actions. Several women spoke of different versions of this belief.

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For instance, one woman said: 'If we give and then we will receive' (78-year-old village woman). Another woman said, "We need to do good things and give away things. This is best. The temple needs to exist; it is the centre of everything. It is best to give to the temple" (53-year-old worker). Another 59-year-old businesswoman stated: "I believe that when we do good things, life will be good....I do not depend on others. I depend on myself, diligence and hard work. I take care of myself... When we are born, we are alone, and when we die, we are alone". Buddhist women have a faith system centred on actions and doing rather than correct doctrine. One woman in the study stated,

We give offerings, we give food, we listen to monks preaching and chanting and we receive a blessing. These are the things women have to do to be a good Buddhist – go to the temple, listen to the monks, give offerings, clean the temple and make merit.

Merit-making is one of the most essential actions or rituals that Isan women perform. Saiyasak stated, "merit-making is the central ingredient in the religious experience of the Isan of Northeast Thailand" (Saiyasak, 2006, p. 1) and "merit-making is a way of life" (Saiyasak, 2006, p. 5). Merit-making (good works) is undertaken for various reasons, as an individual, family, or as part of a community or whole-community activity. Those individuals

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who do not participate or contribute to the village's merit-making efforts are perceived as "disrespectful to ancestral traditional customs and would likely be ....ostracised by the villagers" (Saiyasak, 2006, p. 12). The significance of and subsequent effects of merit-making, as seen by Saiyasak, are:

It gives psychological security; builds a peaceful state of mind; provides behaviour control and incentives for good behaviours; provides a secure and stable community; establishes family and community solidarity, communicating respect and gratitude for parents, elders, and ancestors; offers mobility within the hierachal system; and creates access for status, power, and wealth (Saiyasak, 2006, p. 14).

The function of Buddhism in society, inferred from the interviewed women, was to give a fundamental sense of identity and a set of rules that governed their morals, beliefs and understanding of the world around them. It provided a basic meta-narrative of life. Buddhism answered all the big life questions for the women interviewed. It allowed the women to understand why they were born, where they are going and why things have happened to them as they have. The idea of merit and demerit is associated with every action in their life and governs the women's behaviour.

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with those around them. Furthermore, it provided a means of obtaining a sense of inner peace. Buddhism encouraged good moral and altruistic behaviour to gain a better life in this life or the next one. Moralistic behaviour ensured the smooth running of society and allowed women to accept their lot and position in life. It governed relationships and the expectations individuals have towards each other. Buddhism in the women's lives helped facilitate harmony in all areas, elucidate community mores and values and affirm identity and belonging. Magico-animistic practices functioned as a power play to bring good luck, protection, prosperity or health to them and their families. Animism and magic, alongside Buddhism, encompassed the religious grounding of Isan women.

### **Animism**

Animism is a belief system that sees all the world, including animate and inanimate objects, as having spiritual associations with beings and forces that influence people's everyday affairs. These beings can include spirits of ancestors, gods, ghosts, lost souls, demons or mischievous spirits, and many other spiritual forms. Animism is related to power and the engagement with those powers, where possible, for the person's benefit. Animism underlies most religious daily activities and beliefs in Isan. According to Van Rheenen, a definition of animism is,

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The belief that personal and spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power (Van Rheenen, 1991, p. 20).

Animism is believed to be the earliest form of religion and is transactional, meeting the every-day felt needs of its adherents. It does not need a person to be morally good; as long as the correct rituals are performed with the correct postures and formats, spirits can be influenced to do as one requires. All areas in an Isan village are gendered (Sparkes, 2005, p. 31), with associated male or female spirits tied to the activities performed in different areas. Several spirits are associated with the household and extended family compound. Women are responsible for performing many of the rituals and ceremonies (Trankell, 2003, p. 137), including the daily offerings of food, drinks, flowers or candles to the spirits at the spirit houses (Reichart & Khongkhunthian, 2007, p. 1) or places of spirit habitation. Women also perform the duties and obligations concerning ancestral spirits. Animism is part of the everyday world of Isan women and is closely associated with many daily rituals, ceremonies, superstitions, magic beliefs and

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icons of their world. Lisa Battaglia, writing about Thai women, stated that: “popular religion in Thailand emphasizes orthopraxy over orthodoxy: the importance granted to ritual and ceremony outweighs the importance granted to beliefs and theology” (Battaglia, 2007, p. 81). Orthopraxy is one of the most essential components of women’s religious understanding. Isan women engaged in practices that they believed would give them power in their daily lives, especially in times of uncertainty or crisis.

### Rituals

As an individualistic philosophical pursuit of happiness and peace, Buddhism adjusts well when modernisation occurs. Theravada Buddhism is constructed on the efforts and promotion of self and the journey of self-improvement. Religions, such as folk Buddhism and animism, based on rituals and ceremonies (orthopraxy) rather than correct beliefs or orthodoxy, withstand modernisation and accompanying secularising processes better. Isan women consider themselves less religious if they can only attend the temple occasionally. For the women, their religiosity is based on the frequency of practice – the more times they attend the temple, the more often they give alms to monks, and the more times the women do meritorious services, the more religious they consider themselves. Their religiosity is not based on an understanding of institutional Buddhist doctrines but on the frequency of their

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meritorious actions. Karma, merit and demerit and ancestral veneration are the guiding Buddhist principles of their lives. However, these principles are understood through the rituals and ceremonies performed to honour them.

Tambiah described the ritual as having the capacity to construct social reality, with the effect of “creating and bringing to life the cosmological scheme itself” (Tambiah, 1985, p. 129). Ritual is a vital part of the Thai cosmological viewpoint, full of physical acts and behaviours that others can discern rather than an intellectual undertaking for most women at the village level. The behaviours and acts that form the ceremonies and rituals are taken-for-granted as normal and effective. Animism and popular Buddhism are amoral, based on right actions and postures rather than the right thoughts or beliefs. Rituals can be performed in one’s own company as an individual, as part of the family unit or as part of the greater community at the temple or in the streets of the village or town. Rituals are described as physical acts of respect, worship and honour in ceremonial form through a series of actions that may or may not be accompanied by words or chants performed in strict order and manner. As a social construction, each woman constructs her version of the ritual and her thoughts and emotions embedded into it. There are set patterns of rituals passed down by women teaching daughters and granddaughters to perform the rituals. As such, the ritual is a living link between

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families that is not easily broken. As it is a performative action that is undertaken to alter the state of affairs within the women's world, women engage in rituals regularly.

### **Secularisation**

This section introduces a brief description of secularisation theory. Most early sociologists believed that the rise of modernisation in society meant the declining power and influence of formal and informal religions and religious structures. This is commonly defined as secularisation. Historically, secularisation, as a theory, has been strongly contested and debated in various forms since the nineteenth century when sociologists, such as Auguste Comte, anticipated that the influence and power of religion in society would lose ground as scientific knowledge and rational thinking through education and advancement increased (Jones, 1998, p. 41). Early sociologists of the nineteenth century debated the place and importance of religion in society as societies modernised. Industrialisation, urbanisation, technological advancements and socioeconomic stability changed the landscape of society. Religion (and superstitious beliefs) were seen to oppose modernity and societal advancement. The concept of secularisation emerged from Northern European sociological thinking, and there has been widespread debate about its applicability in other parts of the world. The theories of

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secularisation have undergone much debate and have changed drastically, with some sociologists such as Peter Berger, who initially supported the secularisation thesis in the 1960s as an “inevitable by-product of modernisation and ... religion was slowly fading out of society” (Reaves, 2012, p. 11) but later reversed his thesis to “the world today ....is as furiously religious as it ever was” (Berger, P. (ed.), 1999, p. 2).

It should be noted that many secularisation theories have focussed on the decline in institutional forms of religion. However, Volkan Ertit, a Turkish sociologist, has argued that secularisation can be more generally conceived as a decline in the influence of the supernatural realm and thus is relevant to animism and Buddhism. Ertit's definition of secularisation was:

The relative decrease in the social prestige  
and social influence of the dominant  
metaphysical realm, i.e. that is, religions,  
folk religions, religion-like mechanisms, and  
supernatural beliefs, within a defined period  
of time and in a particular place....  
secularisation is not the description of a  
situation but the definition of a process  
(Ertit, 2017, p. 46).

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By including the broader definition of the supernatural realm in discussions about secularisation, the concept of secularisation as a process can be applied to other societies where religion combines many different religious orthodoxies and orthopraxis. As the belief in spirits, amulets, omens, and various superstitions is important in Isan, Eritit's theory was relevant to studying women's religious thinking and roles in Isan. Changes in the importance or influence of substantive or functional forms of religious structures, beliefs, behaviours or influence within Isan society were examined utilising secularisation theories. Two of these theories are discussed in subsequent sections.

### The Research Process

For many Isan women, the world centres around family, both the living and the dead, friends, earning merit by doing good works every day, earning income to support the family and educating children. Religion is an integral part of women's daily lives. In 2018, after living in Isan for approximately five years, I began a PhD thesis by reviewing sociological literature associated with religion, secularisation and modernisation. Likewise, literature on Thailand, Buddhism, women and education, urbanisation, social structure and social values in Isan was examined. This led to the formation of the research question, 'Is modernisation in Isan leading to transformations in the roles that religion plays in the

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everyday lives of Isan women and the attitudes/beliefs that Isan women hold?' The question was posed to determine if secularisation was occurring within a Buddhist setting and what it occurring would imply for future missiological endeavours in Isan. Various theories of secularisation were utilised to assess if secularising processes were occurring in a Buddhist environment in the continuation of modernising processes. From the research question about social and religious change in Isan, specific hypotheses were formulated about the impact of particular social changes. After the literature was examined, the research question proposed, and the hypotheses formulated, the interview questions were devised to fill the perceived gaps in the literature. The hypotheses were then tested against the research findings gleaned from the interviews.

The research aimed to discover the relationship between women's higher socioeconomic standards, levels of education and urbanisation and to investigate if changes in these domains had led to transformations in how women were engaging with the supernatural realm compared with the recent past. The research aimed to explore if this was a reflection of the following forms of secularisation:

- 1 Higher levels of education lead to rational thinking and less religious participation,

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- 2 greater individualism in religious behaviour and attitudes of women and
- 3 to more secular social values altering women's religious and gender roles and
- 4 in general terms, to changes in religious practice within Northeast Thailand.

The objectives of the research were to explore the dominant religious discourses of different groups of women in Northeast Thailand. It endeavoured to discover if there was a relationship between emerging religious narratives and social changes as an indicator of secularisation in an Asian location. The findings of the research would hopefully assist in cross-cultural ministry in Isan.

## Methodology

The qualitative research was conducted in 2018-2019 after gaining official approval in Thailand and ethical approval in Australia. Two insider assistants were appointed to gather data and ensure cultural appropriateness and understanding of the research process. Interviews were a core part of the research approach. It allowed the women to speak about their attitudes and thoughts regarding the spiritual dimensions of their lives and their reasoning for practices associated with those attitudes. Data was gathered from fifty-nine participants regarding their age, occupation, economic status, level of education and the structure

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of their families today and when they were children. The research used a qualitative, deductive approach to gather data on the thoughts and religio-social attitudes of groups of women via in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Three different research sites were chosen to give a small cross-section of different groups of women in Isan society. The three groups in the study were twenty-four older village women (aged 52-86 years old drawn from two different villages), fifteen older urban women (aged 52-86 years old) and twenty younger women (aged between 25-47 years old). The urban women mainly adhered to Theravada Buddhist teachings, while the older village women were inclined to be folk Buddhists, and a few were Christian. The urban women were generally educated and living in a major city in Northeast Thailand, while the other older women lived in villages surrounding that city. The younger women lived mainly in large urban centres. Educated women consisted of those women who had attained post-secondary qualifications at university, while lower-educated women had received primary or some secondary school education.

Based on the literature review, a series of questions were framed to gather responses in five key areas, including household and kinship, religion and religious practices, sociocultural practices, employment or farming activities, and education. Each section consisted of open and closed questions to generate

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information or opinions from the participants. For example, one question was, "Would you have liked to attend school for a longer period? If so, what prevented you?" "How has education changed since you were a girl?" Another question regarding societal changes was, "How are the women of today different to your mother's generation?" A question on religious change was, "Do you think you are more or less religious than your mother? In what ways? What is the reason for the change?" The questions were asked to make more apparent any changes in women's lives in recent times. All interviews were conducted with at least one research assistant and generally with two women at a time. Data was gathered with the invaluable assistance of two research assistants who were educated Isan women. All the data were analysed using the CAQDAS (Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) program NVIVO. The limitation of the research was that the sample was from a small group of women at a particular time and place, and the findings cannot be generalised to all of Thailand.

The following section discusses two hypotheses formulated to answer the research question. Each hypothesis is articulated, and responses to the hypotheses are briefly noted.

## **First Perspective of Secularisation Theory - Hypothesis One: Educated Women are Less Religious**

Classical Secularisation Theory proposed that increasing secularisation is associated with the progression of modernisation and the advancement of scientific thinking. The first approach to secularisation theories explored changes in women's thinking regarding their religious selves in relation to increased levels of education and knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge. The hypothesis presumed that as Isan women have become more educated over the last forty years, their thinking and behaviour patterns will have changed. Superstitions, magic, animistic behaviours and beliefs should be decreasing in significance in the lives of educated women while remaining important to women with no or little formal education.

The study revealed that modernisation was occurring in Isan, with today's generation of young women being far more educated through school attendance than their mothers. The mothers of the older cohort of women in this study had little or no education, as previously, only boys were taught at the local temples in the villages as education was the province of the temple, monks and men. One village woman stated, "The older generation finished school after Primary grade 4. It was difficult to continue on". A village woman said, 'Children in mother's generation - became

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monks so they could stay at the temple and learn, but mother didn't go to school as she was a girl'. An older nurse said, "Mum studied for two years (primary school), and father studied for four years at primary school. There are lots of changes, now I can study for 12-16 years. My siblings all have bachelor's degrees". Modernisation has occurred in education, with many young women studying to gain university or vocational qualifications. However, increased educational levels were found to have had little impact on underlying Buddhist beliefs in karma, merit and demerit.

Older, educated women spoke of merit-making similarly to older, uneducated women. One retired teacher stated, "I make merit in my home. I invite the monks to my house to do a ceremony. I then give them food to eat". Regardless of a woman's formal educational level, women in Isan believe in the efficacy of merit-making to improve one's karma. A primary school teacher believed in both merit-making and karma. She said:

I have been a nun three times. I did not cut my hair. I wore a white uniform. I had eight rules to follow, and I had to stay at the temple. I slept on the floor. I only ate two meals a day and meditated. I had a car accident before, and the monk said I had bad misfortune, so I went to be a nun to

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change my karma. When I was a nun and meditated, that was a good thing. I believe the ghost or spirit was fighting me, or I had done something bad in my past life. I do meditation to forgive them and give them some good things. It is both a Buddhist and a natural belief; you receive what you do for many past lives, whomever you are born.

However, the study found that younger, educated women had less involvement with local temples or monks due to several factors. They were time-poor due to work, family or educational commitments, but the attitudes of some women were also changing. A young science graduate said:

It [temple going] is not that important. I offer food to the monks, also water and medicine. It is not important to do, and I do not do it often, maybe once a year. We have a big ceremony in my family for ancestors.

This woman also said:

I go to the temple less now than when I was a child. I am not into going. I am into thought. You do not have to actually go there. It is the idea rather than the actual

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ceremony. I listen to a monk preaching on Youtube before bed.

The study found that urban, higher-educated, young women were the least likely to attend the temple regularly, followed by urban, lower-educated young women, which supports the first thesis. Village women attended the temple at least every month, though usually every week or fortnight, regardless of age. Forty per cent of urban, lower-educated women attended the temple at least weekly or fortnightly. In contrast, among higher-educated urban young women, only twenty-two per cent attended the temple weekly to monthly. Education and urbanisation have impacted the frequency young urban women attended the temple in this small sample.

Some animistic rituals and ceremonies persisted in older women's lives, irrespective of their education levels, especially ancestral rituals. Isan women are responsible every day for making rituals, ceremonies and offerings to those spirits who inhabit their world. Usually, older women make offerings for the household as they are traditionally spiritually responsible for the family and household. As one Isan woman said, "It is important to make offerings because it makes me comfortable, and I ask for blessing and protection of my family and children". Another woman explained it this way,

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I give offerings. I give flowers, candles and incense. I have a Buddha room in my house where I pray every day before I go to bed. Also, I perform a water ceremony, pray and spread goodwill to the spirit. I believe the spirit follows us for revenge, so I pray to them so they do not harm us. I pour water. Water is like a bridge or a sign that connects spirit to a person. I give something and do something.

For Isan women, the spirit world is closely connected to the physical world, and the women believe that the spirits of their deceased relatives are living in another realm and waiting for the women to make offerings of food and merit so that the relatives can have a good afterlife. An older woman said,

When I miss a person and want to honour them, I pick their favourite food and give it to them at my house. I do the '*gruad nam*'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*iti Gruad Nam Yatha* (water pouring ceremony) is an ancient ceremony that most women in Isan participate in, regardless of their social standing and education. The ceremony is thought to transfer merit to a spirit of a deceased person from the person making the ceremonial offering. The notion is that water is poured from one receptacle to another or from a receptacle onto the ground, usually at the temple, while chanting the '*Yatha*' (prayer). It is often performed in the presence of a chanting monk. The ceremony is of Brahman origin but is also thought to be associated with animist ancestor practices and its associations with

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ceremony and pour water out. I share with others, especially I offer for my dead ancestors. I collect merit for my ancestors. I need to offer them food to collect after they are dead. Every day, I need to give food. I believe that in the next world, they still eat, especially their favourite food. I offer food to monks to store up [merit] for the next life, to save for the future, or I can share with others already dead. All living and dead live together; the dead have some authority over the living. They can receive the food through merit, to nourish their spirit.

Educated women continued to practice *Piti Gruad Nam Yatha* (water pouring) ceremonies. One 42-year-old Master's degree holder stated:

At *Songkran*, I use perfumed water to clean my ancestor's bones, and I invite monks (to my home) to do a small ceremony for them. Then I give money to the monk. I go to the temple to make merit and think of my ancestors. The monk is the bridge to my ancestors.

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mother earth and nature.

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She said, "I need to get food and happiness to my relatives. I especially offer for my dead ancestors to collect merit for them. I need to offer food after they are dead. Every day, I need to give food". These beliefs were similar between older and younger educated and uneducated women. Education has not changed either ancestor beliefs or merit-making beliefs.

Isan women maintain religious beliefs, but the expression of these beliefs is shifting among educated women. Younger educated women are changing their folk beliefs and practices, as judged by fewer spirit houses on the land cared for by the young urban women. However, younger, uneducated women maintained traditional religious beliefs. Younger educated women were less engaged with and more critical of the monkhood, had more individualised spiritual practice and were centred on self-improvement, for instance, through meditation, healthy living or caring for the environment. Therefore, their merit-making focused more on individual acts than on merit-making in association with the monks at temples. Modernisation in Isan is leading to transformations in the roles of religion in the everyday lives of some interviewed Isan women and the attitudes/beliefs that some Isan women hold. In the study, there was some support for hypothesis one that educated women were more likely to be less religious than uneducated women. However, education itself had not significantly impacted the underlying attitudes and beliefs of

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Isan women. Hypothesis one was partially supported by the evidence presented in the interviews/opinions of the Isan women regarding the decline of some animistic practices and beliefs. However, belief in karma and the spirits had yet to be entirely replaced by scientific ideas. They remained an essential part of their world.

### **Second perspective of Secularisation Theories**

#### **- Hypothesis Two: Society is more complex and Religion is personal**

A second approach to the secularisation theses focused on changes in the structure of society. Nations modernise through technological and scientific development, urbanisation to meet the labour demands of industrialisation, economic development and capitalism. As modernisation progresses, it involves increased complexity of society and the development of distinct sectors, each with its areas of knowledge or specialisation, with the accompanying loss of religious influence in some sectors. For example, the healthcare sector has its source of medical knowledge and its experts and, to quite a large extent, has pushed religion out of its operations and knowledge base. Hence, religion has tended to be pushed into the personal and family areas of life where adequate healthcare exists.

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According to Belgian sociologist Karl Dobbelaere, as society becomes more functionally differentiated and specialised, religion becomes another subsystem competing alongside other subsystems, thereby losing its dominance and influence on other subsystems (Dobbelaere, 1999, p. 232). According to Dobbelaere's theory (1999, p. 230), there are three levels of secularisation. Firstly, there is a loss of religious power and influence in society at the societal or macro level as state and religious powers separate. Society differentiates as religion becomes more privatised and other private organisations take over functions previously undertaken by religious institutions (Ng, 2013, p. 512). Secondly, secularisation can occur within religious organisations and their practices where religious practices or thinking adapt to societal changes over a given time period. This is considered the organisational level of secularisation. The third type of secularisation that can occur is the micro or individual level, where religious thoughts and practices become less frequent in the lives of individuals, or individuals turn away from previously held religious practices, behaviours or beliefs. Religious beliefs and practices retreat to the private sphere (Ng, 2013, p. 523).

Dobbelaere argued that religion survives at the level of private beliefs and behaviours, whereas it does not survive at the societal or organisational level. Dobbelaere stated that as modern

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societies are primarily differentiated along functional lines, subsystems developed different functional domains, each with their own communication forms, values and norms (Dobbelaere, 1999, p. 230). Dobbelaere (1999) defined secularisation as:

A process by which the overarching and transcendent religious system of old is being reduced in a modern functionally differentiated society to a subsystem alongside other subsystems... As a result, the societal significance of religion is greatly diminished (Dobbelaere, 1999, p. 232).

Today, Isan society is more complex than in the 1980s, when education for women became more widely available. Urbanisation and industrialisation have changed the lives of Isan people. The space religion occupies in society is under competition from other contesting systems, which have differentiated, rationalised and specialised systems within the framework of Isan society. Secularisation in this perspective suggests that society becomes increasingly rational, scientific and based on impersonal roles and skill sets (Dobbelaere, 1999, p.

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233) rather than relationships or virtue. However, Thailand's workforce encompasses a patron-client system, which alters some aspects of this theory as many advancements within employment sectors are relationship-based within the workforce.

In the research, the second hypothesis was: 'With modernisation in Isan, there has been an increase in the complexity of systems in society, resulting in increased competition for religion. Therefore, religion has been removed to a more private and individualised sphere of life with an accompanying decline in the authority of religious institutions'. This hypothesis was explored by asking the women questions regarding their working lives and thoughts.

Within modernisation, the choice of occupation in Thailand has expanded many-fold. Women can gain employment in new sectors in developing businesses in Thailand. For instance, one 27-year-old woman gained employment working for a large telecommunications company in a large urban city. Her job was to help people with problems with their mobile phones. This new field of employment was unheard of forty years ago. This young woman, who was not university-educated, had moved to a large city from her village to gain employment. She accessed the internet to learn to speak English by watching English language

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movies and YouTube clips on learning how to speak English. She was self-taught and became proficient in English. She gained employment for a telecommunications company helping foreigners in Thailand troubleshoot problems with their internet services for their phones, computers and televisions. This woman gained suitable employment in a large company in a newly developing business sector by having regular access to the Internet by visiting urban coffee shops and places where they offered free Internet services. This business sector was outside the influence of the religious domain.

The choices for Isan women today no longer adhere to traditional roles for women. One 42-year-old teacher said:

My mum's generation did not have a lot of choices like me. Mum had to stay at home, be a good housewife and take care of the family. However, I am single; I can do anything, and it is very easy. I do not have to marry.

Modernisation in Thailand is bringing in a new range of social subsystems. Education, economics and business, justice and governance, infrastructure and resources or science and technology (food, water and environment) and telecommunication sectors have broadened immensely in Thai society, counteracting

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the religious domain, which is shrinking into ever smaller compartments (Nuttayai & Promphakping, 2014, p. 1455).

Religious influence is still apparent in ceremonies and rituals on special occasions or societal events. However, the daily running of society, including commerce, law, health and science/technology sectors, now exists outside the sphere of religious regulation.

Instead, religion is concentrated in other spheres, such as personal practice or ceremonial symbols for important occasions or formalities. Religion maintains a façade of authority within these developing sectors as monks are an intricate part of all ceremonial occasions within social life in Thailand. The *Sangha* (monastic order) gives authority and authenticity to commercial undertakings by blessing the new business or formulating auspicious times for grand openings but has no particular authority in directing future commercial transactions and development. Business owners look to the *Sangha* for their blessing and the prestige it gives their business affairs. However, within the complexity of the business or commercial world, there is little religious authority.

Many facets of the lives of younger women were no longer associated with religion. Previous generations of women who grew up in villages had lives centred on religion and religious practices. If a young person became sick, natural village healers were called upon to make prayers and supplications to ancestral spirits to

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heal the child or prayers from the monks were sought. Many ceremonies and rituals were performed to improve the health of the child. However, today, if a woman gets sick, she attends the local doctor at the nearest hospital for medicine which will improve her health. This has nothing to do with religious practices; medical science has shown that it is more reliable and trustworthy than previous religious rituals. The young women grow up knowing that medical science is better at helping sick people than religious rituals. Thus, religious beliefs and practices are playing less of a role in this area of life. In this study, many women responded to the question, 'What happens if you or a member of your family becomes sick?' by saying they would go to a medical doctor. Seven women said they would pray first (either to Buddha or God) and then seek medical care. The older woman, who said she was a natural healer, said:

I go to the doctor (if I am sick). I used to be a '*mor phii*', a 'spirit healer' to cast away bad spirits. People who were possessed came to me, and I told it to go, then the bad spirit went. I do not do it much now.

All forty-two women who responded to this question said they would seek medical care in the first instance or pray and then seek medical care. Young women are not relying on old wives' tales, prayers or incantations to prevent pregnancy and sickness.

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They were relying on medical knowledge and pharmaceutical companies. The health system is a good example of a component of society which has emerged through modernisation, which includes little if any reference to religion and is, in part, replacing some previous functions of religion and religious practitioners.

Childbearing is another sector that has changed dramatically with increased knowledge and improved scientific advances regarding reproduction. Childbirth occurs in hospitals and has become a medicalised procedure that requires the intervention of specialists like doctors and midwives to achieve good outcomes for mother and baby. Modern women trust the medical system more than older rituals and ceremonies, as most babies are born in hospitals. Many religious practices, rituals and beliefs were associated with pregnancy and childbirth, but these are fading due to a lack of usage amongst younger women. Previously, childbirth was a precarious time for mothers and babies. Before, the *kwan* rite '*sukwan maemaan*' was a ceremony performed in the village with the mother-to-be and female relatives to counteract the dangers of childbirth. There were many local traditions around birthing and child-rearing. One elderly woman spoke about childbirth and the many babies she helped deliver in the village. The burial of the afterbirth was a critical part of this process as it had to be done quickly, soon after birth, to prevent the baby from being adversely affected by malevolent spirits. She stated:

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Babies are not born in the village anymore; they go to the hospital. I am a midwife and help with massage for a mother having a baby. The method we used is this - if the mother is having a contraction, we tell her not to move as otherwise, the baby will hit her heart, and it could be a problem for the mother. With the knife, I sterilise it with fire to cut the cord. After we bury the afterbirth, we use a leaf of a special tree to cover it all to prevent any spirit from getting the blood from the placenta. If the spirit drinks the blood, the baby will die.

These practices and beliefs are no longer practised in the village. Some other practices are adhered to, such as the smoking ceremonies for women in the postpartum period, where new mothers are required to lay beside a fire so the smoke can purify them. Today, this is done more for health reasons than spiritual reasons. Urban women have a lying-in period where they are cared for by female relatives for up to four weeks postpartum, but many urban women do not have the 'smoking' element today.

Society has changed, becoming more complex and demanding in terms of negotiation and time management; as a result, religion is no longer as central to the lives of some groups of women.

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Hypothesis two was supported by the evidence from the interviews/opinions of the women that society is much more complex and technologically advanced than life before the 1980s when most women resided in villages. Isan society is more multifaceted than ever, resulting in smaller spheres of influence for institutional forms of Buddhism. Modernisation in Isan is leading to transformations in the roles that religion plays in the everyday lives of Isan women, as religion is not as relevant in many areas of life.

### **Discussion and Significance for Cross-cultural Missions**

Earlier, the questions were asked, “Has modernisation in Isan led to some forms of ‘disenchantment’ for local women? Furthermore, if modernisation is accompanied by secularisation in some form, what does that mean for missionaries who come to work amongst women?” In response to those questions, modernisation in Isan has led to some forms of ‘disenchantment’ for local women as women have adapted readily to the changing socioreligious environment. Urban women are becoming more educated, individualistic and self-determining in their lives. They are less likely to attend a local temple and less likely to engage with institutional forms of Buddhism. Village women continue to be more traditional in their religious practices and roles. Some

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animistic practices and beliefs are vanishing because they are often less required due to 'modern' innovations and practices such as in the health care field. As these processes occur, what does that mean for missionaries?

In the particular context I have been working, the need is to create different ways of connecting the gospel of Jesus Christ with the heart of the Isan women. Missiologists such as Kraft (1996), Hiebert (2000), Van Rheenen (1991), Hovey (2019), Tippett (1987), Shaw and Burrows (2018), and scores of others have approached the issue of the gospel within the indigenous culture from different perspectives. The issue of how to bring the gospel so local people can understand it and formulate their encultured Christianity needs to be carefully worked through with local people, local church leaders and local believers. According to Hibbert and Hibbert, "As both missionaries and local leaders depend on the Bible as their authority, biblical practices can be identified and corrected, and authentic leadership patterns that result in healthy, multiplying indigenous churches will be nurtured" (2019, p. 250). Extending these principles to all aspects of working cross-culturally in Isan, missionaries need to engage with locals and local church leaders to discover the biblical principles for the churches in Isan that can be implemented as the Isan develop their brand of Christianity. Some parts of Isan culture can be utilised to bring the gospel appropriately to the Isan

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people. For instance, honouring and respecting parents is a deep core value for Isan people that can be utilised as an example of the relationship between God and human beings. Hibbert said, “Each culture reinforces some biblical values, opposes others and includes many other values which appropriately vary from one culture to another. This results in differing expressions of the same biblical principles in different cultures” (Hibbert & Hibbert, 2019, p. 243). Each culture will bring a different flavour of what it is to be Christian to Christianity.

Charles Kraft stated, “We give solid attention to developing Christian functional substitutes for the customs traditional people practice in the exercise of spiritual power” (Kraft, 2016, p. 329). Kevin Hovey, referencing Tippett’s concept, “uses the term ‘functional substitute’ to describe the new replacement elements that the local people apply in order to meet their felt needs and maintain a sense of cultural cohesion and integration ...” (Hovey, 2019, p. 255), when traditional practices are realigned with biblical Christianity. Using functional substitution principles as a tool for working in animistic-based cultures allows the replacement of practices that are opposed to biblical principles with culturally-appropriate biblical practices. It is initiated from the ground up and fulfils the needs of the local people in all areas of their lives – spiritually, emotionally, physically and intellectually. Hovey stated:

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Functional substitutes, when understood well and applied effectively by local people as they innovate the cultural change brought about in their lives by the gospel, provide the means to enable Christianity to fit into their culture in the same spiritually, emotionally and psychologically satisfying way, and to do this without theological compromise (Hovey, 2019, p. 255).

For this to occur effectively, it needs to be a local initiative, not forced by outside evangelists/missionaries (Hovey, 2019, p. 256), so that it is “the people themselves who determine what is truly satisfying to them” (Hovey, 2019, p. 260). Indigenous churches need to develop culturally appropriate ways of being Christian rather than importing Westernised ways that do not transplant well into Isan soil. Lim, Spaulding and De Neui (2005, p 158) suggested that “a rational or apologetic approach may not work well with the majority of Thai people but an intuitive, feeling or affective approach, seeing Christ as the ‘man for others’ and the one who can deliver them from all fears... for the Thai, religion is felt emotionally, not rationalized cognitively (Lim et al., 2005, p. 158).

### **Missiology - thoughts of Isan**

Working across cultures to bring the gospel's message to a new people group, and place is described as 'mission', but what is missiology? Missiology is, according to Marvin Newell, an American missiologist, "The reflective discipline that undergirds and guides the Church's propagation endeavours as it advances the knowledge of the gospel in all its fullness to every people everywhere" (Newell, 2019). As an interdisciplinary field of research, Missiology originated from Western missions using some aspects of several social science disciplines, late in the nineteenth century (Kim, 2019). In other words, missiology is the reflective study of the methods used to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ in different cultural contexts. Culture, according to Paul Hiebert, is "The more or less integrated system of ideas, feelings and values and their associated patterns of behaviour and products shares by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel and do" (P. G. Hiebert, 1985, p. 30). Culture guides the standards for what is acceptable and understood by a group. It is vital that missionaries, who leave their familiar culture to travel to new places and people to share the gospel, are aware of their impact on their new world through the culture and belief systems they bring with them. The awareness of their impact is necessary as sometimes missionaries unintentionally or

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intentionally bring behaviours, attitudes and cultural beliefs that are inappropriate in a new cultural setting.

Cross-cultural missions can be challenging, learning to live in new places, learn new customs and language and be polite and non-offensive in society while grappling with eating new foods in a strange environment. For Evangelical and charismatic traditions from which I come, missiology entails first knowing God and the Bible. A missionary must understand their message and the biblical basis for their 'missions' before they embark on the journey. The Bible informs all actions undertaken, and as a missionary, I need to understand the biblical foundation (from Mathew 28: 18 -20) for being 'sent'. One of the tasks of the missionary is to understand the local culture, language, belief systems and everyday social interactions between different groups of people that make up that society. According to Van Rheenen, "missionaries who communicate God's eternal message in the contemporary contexts of the worlds people cannot base that message on Western cognitive domains because they cannot assume that all people accept these domains" (Van Rheenen, 1991, p. 57). Culture is a social construction that continually restructures in response to influences and events within and around that culture. As a missionary, knowing the changing social milieu and values is important to respond biblically to new thoughts, habits or trends. Research completed recently in Isan in

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Northeastern Thailand shows that women aware of modernising processes in their society are changing some of their religious behaviours in response to modernisation. Transformation is occurring in Isan society, so I need to understand how that affects the local religious beliefs of the women I work amongst.

Before reaching others with the gospel, missionaries need to know and experience God and hear His voice to follow him. Training must be undertaken pre-missions regarding working in different cultures and minimising bringing ‘cultural baggage’, expectations and assumptions into the field. Bringing Western behaviours and practices into an Eastern cultural setting and rigidly enforcing their usage has led to numerous problems historically for local Christian identity and the formation of a thriving Christian presence. David Johnson states that for “missionaries serving in Asia, whether from the West or elsewhere, this means taking the time and making the effort to learn history, culture, and language of their host culture” (Johnson, 2020, p. 86). Johnson stated that “theology must address real issues” and that people have pre-existing worldviews that are in place when they become Christian (Johnson, 2020, p. 85). The challenge for missionaries is to find aspects of that pre-existing worldview that can be drawn on to link the gospel to local culture and to challenge other aspects of the worldview that need changing to align it with the gospel. Missionaries must understand the local culture intimately by

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knowing the local language, participating in daily life over extended periods and having an in-depth understanding of local customs and lore, leading to honest and honourable relationships with local people. As Johnson has said, “He [Paul] adapted his presentation of the gospel message to the worldviews of his audiences without compromising that message or removing the offense of the cross” (Johnson, 2020, p. 85). Missionaries will be seen as irrelevant if they fail to answer the local people’s real heart-felt issues (Johnson, 2020, p. 85). Using the example of Paul preaching to the Athenians (Acts 17: 22 -32), we need to establish a relationship with the local culture and people and use aspects of that to bring the gospel message in a culturally contextual manner.

In past times, missionaries were agents of secularisation by bringing Western thinking into their new fields. Providing medical services, educational facilities, scientific or technological development and infrastructure, modernising agricultural practices and introducing new knowledge, all accompanied by different religious viewpoints and agencies, contributed to secularising processes. Missionaries established schools and hospitals as a means of social engagement with local people, which imported Western knowledge focusing on healing sickness and disease or educating people and where religion played a secondary function. Secularisation was a side-effect of dividing

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knowledge and service from religious underpinnings and community sensibilities. By bringing pluralistic ideas about religion to Thailand in forms that were separated from the communal life of the villages, missionaries contributed to general trends in secularisation. Kraft stated that “without our intending it, our strategy has been to secularise in order to Christianise” (Kraft, 2016, p. 229). This occurred not just historically but also in the contemporary context. After the Indian Ocean tsunami affected Southern Thailand in 2004, it was alleged that some Christian organisations offered aid in the recovery period in exchange for ‘conversion’ to Christianity (Falk, 2015, p. 146). As Falk has stated:

It was believed that the motivation for conversion was the aid and financial support they received. My informants found it strange that those who converted were forbidden to listen to the Buddhist monks and partake in Buddhist ceremonies. The conversion had created divisions within the village and lack of trust between the villagers.

As missionaries, it is necessary to be sensitive to local beliefs and practices, especially in times of disaster. Understanding underlying purposes and intents needs to be scrutinised by the

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'outsider' before entering new cultural contexts and relationships. Genuine relationships and living together in community are necessary to understand the surrounding culture as a first step for introducing the gospel.

### Conclusion

Missionaries who come to Isan to bring the gospel message need to be aware of the different functions of Buddhism in Isan society and understand that practices and thinking that hold in Western countries do not necessarily hold for practices in a Theravada Buddhist environment. Working cross-culturally means being aware of your host culture as well as being aware of your prejudices and assumptions. Secularisation is occurring within institutional forms of Buddhism for some groups of urban women in Isan, but the underlying deep-seated Buddhist philosophies continue. The rituals and ceremonies that the women perform are important indicators of their underlying belief systems. For women, it is more important that a ritual is undertaken to the right god or spirit in the proper manner using the correct postures and accompaniments at the correct times and places. It is not about rational deduction or thinking but rather about 'doing'. Local women, alongside missionaries and local Christian leaders, need to develop Christian rituals and ceremonies that reflect their

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love of God, their love of community and the church that reflect Isan women's love and understanding of ritual.

For many Western Christians, religious faith is about correct beliefs and creeds in the one true God of the gospels. However, faith for Isan women is about doing things considered religious. Missionaries coming to work amongst the women of Isan must understand the importance of rituals and ceremonies in the life of Isan women. The ritual is an essential element to the Isan cosmology, and performing rituals ensures the correct behaviour, attitude or respect for family and God. When missionaries come to Isan with a Western mindset of teaching and preaching the gospel, the gospel does not always take root. The gospel message needs to be contextualised to a 'doing' or active gospel. A gospel based on biblical orthopraxy and orthodoxy has to resonate with Isan women expressing relevant biblical truths. For women, the correct manner in which a ritual is performed is significant. As a Christian worker in Isan, understanding the local women is essential in enabling the gospel to spread in Isan. The undertaking of the ritual reinforces the Isan women's cosmology and beliefs. We need to preach the Jesus of the Bible, accompanying that word with Christianised rituals. Ceremony and rituals need to be developed and incorporated into the Isan Christian practice. Education and rational thinking do not alter underlying belief systems in Isan. There must be the development of teaching

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grounded in rituals and ceremonies that reflect the gospel and the power and goodness of God.

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