

Hans-Christoph Bär



Animistic Worldview and its Implication on Teaching God's Word

**With Special Reference
to the Karen People**

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I. Animistic Worldview

1. Introduction

“Ideas have consequences,” was a key sentence in Dr. Mel Loucks lectures on modern worldview. This is not only true for western thinking and its theology. It is also true for the animistic worldview of the Karen people in the mountains of North Thailand. Their ideas about God, good and bad spirits, power, cause of illnesses and accidents, meaning of dreams or meaning of body and soul have consequences in their lives.

As I have worked in grass root evangelism as well as in leadership training among the Karen in Omkoi district (Thailand) for twenty-five years I have made some observations about what the Karen with the background of an animistic worldview understand when they hear Christians talk about the spirits, the power of the Holy Spirit, God’s son and God as well as other aspects of essential teaching from the Bible.

In this book I will present some characteristics of an animistic worldview with special reference to the Karen. At the same time, I endeavor to find out the implication this may have on teaching the Bible into this context. Furthermore, we have to be aware that animistic beliefs do not only occur among remote hill tribe people but it influences all main religions. Stephen C. Neill estimated that the worldview of about 40 % of the world’s population is based on animistic thinking.¹

2. What is animism?

People quite often equate animism with spirit worship and occultism. But animism is more like a worldview. Therefore it is more than just another religion. You cannot derive animism from the mythology of a people but the other way round. Mythology does not make sense if you do not understand animism. Lothar Käser suggests that animism is to be understood best and in the deepest way from the concept of “soul” which people have.

He suggests that animism is founded on the following thinking:

- a. The world consists of material things and beings.
- b. The world consists of spiritual things and beings.
- c. Material and spiritual things and beings exist at the same time.
- d. They influence each other.

Käser then gives the following definition of animism:

¹ Stephen C. Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (New York: Oxford 1970), 125.

Animism in its most general form means to have faith in the existence and dynamic of spiritual beings, which manifest themselves in human or animal form and which have power and abilities people do not have. Cultures without script usually do not only count spirits in its literal sense to the spiritual beings but also the souls of people even things can possess soul stuff.²

Gailyn Van Rheenen gives the following definition of animism:

The belief that personal 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.³

Animism presupposes that life is holistic. The material world has got “a double in the spiritual world”⁴ and vice versa. Animists think that things can contain will and power. Things which appear to be lifeless still can do things. There is power behind the statue. They believe that there is a spiritual double behind or in the statue which will exert power. Animists use many expressions for power or force, e.g. life force or *mana*.

An animist has got many points of contact with the biblical worldview - more than a secular western person.

3. Some characteristics of animism and how these affect the understanding of biblical teaching

Lothar Käser suggests that we should try to understand animism from the point of view of an animist before we start teaching them. But for a westerner who lives in a technical and scientific world it is not easy at all because the animist lives in a spiritual world.

² „Unter Animismus in seiner allgemeinsten Form versteht man den *Glauben an die Existenz und Wirksamkeit von geistartigen Wesen*, die sich in menschen- oder tierähnlichen Formen manifestieren und über Wissen, Macht und Fähigkeiten verfügen, die der Mensch nicht besitzt. In traditionellen (schriftlosen) Kulturen zählen zu diesen geistartigen Wesen nicht nur *Geister* im eigentlichen Sinn des Wortes, sondern auch *Seelen* von Menschen, und unter Umständen können auch Dinge so etwas wie eine Seele besitzen.“ (translation by the author) Lothar Käser, *Fremde Kulturen. Eine Einführung in die Ethnologie* (Bad Liebenzell: Verlag Liebenzeller Mission, 1997), 225.

³ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1991), 20.

⁴ Lothar Käser has created a new word in German: “spirituelles Doppel” which could also be translated as “a double in the spiritual realm”.

A spiritual world

The animist is right when he asserts that our world is more spiritual than physical and material. But as children of a technological and scientific world we find it hard to enter that kind of worldview, because everything which we cannot proof or logically argue is rejected. But what does the Bible tell us? Hebrews 1:3a: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, **sustaining all things by his powerful word.**” And Hebrews 11:3 says: “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” God created the world out of nothing and he sustains it by his powerful word. That is a spiritual act. Colossians 1:16-17 tells us

“For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Everything is made through Jesus and everything holds together in him. Again this is a thoroughly spiritual view. If God were not to keep this universe together it would fall apart. Obviously, this is not a scientific perspective of things, but does that mean it is not true? A person with a background of an animistic worldview has got no problem to understand and to accept this kind of statements. The animist has no problem with “faith”. Among the Karen we have met people of great faith. The question is in what does he put his faith into? Does his faith have biblical foundations and structures or is it a kind of faith that is propelled by his own wishful thinking combined with superstition? Among the Karen we have seen that teaching God’s redemptive plan in form of storytelling in chronological order, is of great value and importance for a healthy understanding of God’s word.⁵

The spiritual and the material world are completely integrated

To differentiate between the secular and the religious world does not make sense to the animist. All of life is imbedded into the spiritual. The Enlightenment does not have left its mark on animism. The following diagrams show the difference between animistic and western thinking.⁶

A. Animistic Worldview

Technology	Economy	Science	Religion	Music/Arts etc.
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⁵ Hans Bär, *Heilsgeschichtlicher Bibelunterricht. McIlwains Programm ‚Building on Firm Foundations‘ im Einsatz unter den Karen im Bezirk Omkoi* (Nordthailand). (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1998).

⁶ I picked these diagrams up from Lothar Käser during his lectures on „animism“.

Everything is imbedded in the spiritual realm. It is a holistic view. Faith affects all of life. Science and medicine is integrated into the spiritual world.

B. Western Worldview

Technology	Economy	Science	Religion	Music/Arts etc.
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In our modern western thinking with enlightenment leaving its mark on our worldview we have put religion into one compartment besides many others. We have even privatized faith and it may not affect our daily life very much. It is kept separate from other areas of life. Again we may ask which view is nearer to a biblical worldview. And how does it affect our teaching from the Bible?

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”⁷

Even though the animistic worldview is nearer to the biblical than the secular is, we have to be aware that the animistic view needs correction as well. It does over spiritualize in a sense that everything is given meaning from the spiritual realm, but real physical life and physical laws which God has created is not given its full meaning. In this view people may not take responsibility for their own action but may blame easily spiritual forces for their misbehavior. Teaching God’s word into this context is a different story from a western context where we interpret most things from a physical scientific view point with little consideration to the spiritual realm.

The Bible shows us a lot of overlapping between the physical and the spiritual world. But it also shows that there is a real physical world and that there are purely spiritual areas in life.

3. It is a world of humanism and socialism

A. It is humanistic because mankind is in the center of the animistic worldview. This may look like a contradiction to what we said that in animism the real world is the spiritual world. The animist is very much involved in the spiritual world but mainly for the purpose of looking for help for himself. He wants to control the spiritual world in order to be able to manipulate them for the good of his own life. His view is humanistic because man is in the center. He is likely to see God as his helper and servant but not as his Lord. He wants to use God for his own purposes. The change of paradigm is not easily done in starting to focus on God.

B. If you are a good animist you will never think as individualistic as we do in the western world. The animist is concerned for the whole of his society. The Karen always do their fields together. You do what is expected of you from society. You

⁷ Colossians 3:17.

will discover that an animist is a good socialist. That is why communism appeals to them except that they do not like atheism in communism.⁸

Among the Karen sharing is very important. In the beginning of our stay in a Karen village I visited a Karen family and praised them for their weaving skills. The next moment they handed me over the woven blanket I had praised! In their cultural context I had asked for it! It then just came to my mind what it meant when they came to our house, commenting on certain things. Especially the essentials of life you have to share. People from other villages came to our house to ask for rice. We said that we only had a little bit just enough for ourselves until we were going into town again. But these people insisted that we had to share because we had said we still had some rice. The right answer would have been “we have no rice” (to share) which to us seemed a lie. On another occasion my wife accompanied her language informer to the hill field in order to harvest her corn. When they arrived there, a man from another village was picking her corn. As he left she told him that he should cut the empty stem when he has taken the corn. To the amazement of my wife that was all she said. Sharing goes very far in this culture. This may also have negative effects. We have seen people not planting fruit trees because they felt that everybody else is going to eat the fruit. What use is it then to plant trees?

We had to talk over what sharing means and where does stealing start? My wife asked the language informer whether it hurt her seeing that man taking corn from her field in a basket. She said that she did not feel well about it.

Obviously, Bible passages do apply differently in different contexts. God’s word wants us to share, no doubt, but it also prohibits stealing very clearly. A key passage is Ephesians 4:28: “Anyone who has been stealing **must steal no longer**, but **must work**, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may **have something to share** with those in need.”⁹ This verse sheds light on stealing as well as on sharing.

4. A world of fair balance and harmony

An animist is looking for harmony with his environment and the universe. It is his responsibility to keep up harmony between the spiritual powers and the seemingly physical world (“seemingly” because the world is spiritual). Among the Karen harmony is regarded the highest value. Whereas our western society is built on competition which we can see at school as well as in the economy, competition is strange to an animist. He is looking for input and help from anybody he can.

⁸ That is one main reason why African countries like Angola or Mozambique chose a communist government when they became independent. Even many Christians voted for the Communists.

⁹ Cf. 1Thessalonians 4:11 and 2Thessalonians 3:11-13.

This characteristic has been creating problems when it comes to sickness. Relatives of the sick person came to ask us for medicine and at first we thought we were the only ones giving it out. But Karen go around looking for any medicine they can get. They want the help of all the people they can and everybody will try to help as much as they can. But with strong medicine this can be deadly. We have seen one little child die because it was given far too much of medicine from different sources.

Or another example how harmony is kept: I remember a village meeting talking about the issue everybody seemed to agree. But I asked some questions. This was very awkward since the main leaders had agreed on the issue long before the meeting (which I did not know then). The meeting was only to get everybody on board. I only realized afterwards what had happened and that my questions were not appropriate at that time.

How can harmony be kept? There are several possibilities: Conflicts can be resolved through rituals because for the animist conflict does not come through sin but because the spirits are unhappy. Therefore, he needs to satisfy the spirits first through rituals and sacrifices. It is the task of the village priest to re-establish harmony.¹⁰ If he is not able to do that a family clan may move out of the main village and establish a satellite village nearby.

The message of the Bible that Jesus is our peace and that he has made peace between God and man as well as in between man, appeals to the Karen heart. As Ephesians 2:14 says: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility”. This is good news to the Karen. The longed for harmony is at hand through faith in Jesus. Serious questions arise when this does not happen. Or how do we behave and teach when wrong teaching creeps into the church. The Karen are unlikely to oppose. They are very inclusive and try to balance it.

Harmony is also asked for in marriage and family. It is taboo to divorce husband or wife. It is seen as one of the greatest sins which will disturb harmony not only in the family but in the whole village. The powerful “spirit of water and land” gets angry. Therefore, the guilty person has to give salt to each family and sacrifice a pig in order to satisfy the angry spirit. Among the Karen divorce has been seldom. What do you answer, when a Karen leader asks you: What do Christians do in your country when there is a divorce? What does the Bible teach?

5. A world where spirits or objects have power which can be manipulated for good or bad

This makes animism to what it really is. Power can be taken from anywhere and it can be manipulated. You only need to know the source and how it functions.

¹⁰ Cf. Paul and Elaine Lewis, *Völker im Goldenen Dreieck* (Stuttgart, hansjörg mayer edition, 1984) 86.

Through white or black magic is one able to manipulate powers. You only need to know the right means. When I was inquiring a Karen leader who knows a lot about the function of spirit priests because he should have become one himself - he asked me very seriously: For what purpose do you want to know this? Obviously, this kind of knowledge is not commonly shared.

The psalmist says: "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (37:4). What does it mean to take delight in the Lord? For an animist it may well mean to do the right ritual or ceremony and then God will answer! Does God work this way? If we look at Job or at the life of the apostle Paul with all their sufferings what does it tell us?

For an animist it is not essential where the power comes from. But it is essential for him to have power. He wants a religion that has got power and strength. Therefore, where power encounters happen people are likely to become believers. Very early in our work in Omkoi district such a power encounter occurred. The headman of Sop Lahn village, Cha-aso, who had become the first Christian in the southern area of Omkoi district was logging with another influential man and friend, Cha-loue, from Long village. As their elephants pulled the logs uphill both elephants stopped because they could not make it. Cha-loue from Long village went off the elephant in order to ask the spirits to give strength to his elephant. The headman from Sop Lahn climbed down his elephant and started to pray to God. Then both of them sat back on their elephants. To the amazement of Cha-loue, his friends' elephant which was smaller than his own pulled his log uphill but his own elephant would not move. Jesus obviously is stronger than the spirits. Then Cha-loue became the first Christian in the Long area.

Besides spirits animists believe in impersonal powers. It is often called *mana* which is kind of a life-force. An animist wants *mana*. He may have got it through being born into the right family or through having contact with ancestors. Others try to acquire it through drugs or hard self-discipline. Rituals, religious exercises, fasting, music or touching objects over which powerful men have prayed are other means to strengthen your *mana*. Being chosen for an official function or laying hands on somebody may increase *mana*. There are specialists who can catch *mana* and convey it to others. But they want to be paid for. I know of a rich man in Maeleakhi (Omkoi district) who would give injections which should help the receiver to become rich. He earned a lot of money by doing this.

A very clear example of this kind of thinking we find in the magician Simon who wanted to buy the power from the apostles in order to be able to put hands on somebody so that the person would receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Even though Simon had become a Christian and had even been baptized he was still acting in the old way. He wanted to be and to stay as "the great" (cf. Acts 8:9-24). This kind of mentality goes completely against the biblical outlook that we should leave all human power and give our life to the Lord completely. Another problem in a society with this kind of worldview is that Christianity may be understood as religion which knows the right rituals in order to increase *mana*. The Bible then is

the explanation how you can get more *mana*. As a missionary you may be viewed as the one who has got lots of *mana* because they see you having lots of money and knowledge.¹¹ The Holy Spirit may be viewed as life-force.

Without thorough biblical teaching such misunderstandings will remain. We need to teach a biblical worldview against the animistic one. Biblical concepts of power must be taught. God possesses all power and yet Jesus' incarnation shows us how he humbled himself and became "the servant"¹² who died on the cross, seemingly helpless. For most animists the story of the cross is a challenge because it goes completely against their own thinking and of what they believe God should be like. It may take a long time to grasp the concept of being a servant or a servant leader.

Against the concept of the impersonal power of *mana*, teachers of the Bible need to emphasize the personal God who wants a relationship and fellowship with us. The Bible also shows that everything was created in order to live in relationship to Jesus (Col. 1,15-23). If magic power is used people try to use God for their purposes. Magic reduces the Lord God to be a servant of people that can be used. The Bible therefore is in opposition to impersonal powers (cf. Ex. 22:18).

In the New Testament we see the apostle Peter teaching the magician Simon¹³ with strong means to look for a relationship with God instead of looking for power only. The true and living God cannot be manipulated or forced because in him is the source of all power. Therefore impersonal power negates the ultimate power of God in Christ.¹⁴

4. Summary

As we have seen an animistic worldview is neither primitive nor simplistic. It is in itself a coherent and rationale view. And because it looks at the world in a spiritual way people with an animistic worldview have generally been very open to the Gospel of the Kingdom.

This chapter has shown us that it is most important to know the worldview of the receiver of the message. Their original ideas have great impact on how they are going to understand the biblical message. To each characteristic of the animistic worldview there are stories in the Bible which relate very well to them and can be used to clarify the good news.

¹¹ Cf. Van Rheezenen, p. 211-212.

¹² Isaiah 41-53.

¹³ Acts 8:9-24.

¹⁴ Van Rheezenen, 235-236.

II. The Perception of *Y'wa* (God) among Animistic Karen

The Supreme Being in Karen culture is called *Y'wa*. In mission history of the Karen the *Y'wa*-tradition has played a significant role. The early Baptist missionaries to the Karen people in Burma found that the perception of *Y'wa* among animistic Karen was so similar to God in the Bible that they have used the word *Y'wa* for God in the Bible. Dr. Mason wrote in a letter to the Baptist Missionary Society, dated Oct., 1834 “that he had come to believe that the traditions were indigenous with the Karen, whom he thought to be the lost Hebrew tribes.”¹⁵

In this chapter I will explore

1. how the “Supreme Being” is generally seen in animistic cultures.
2. what are some of the distinctives of the Karen *Y'wa* tradition and what effects it had on Christian mission.
3. how is the *Y'wa* tradition perceived among animistic Karen nowadays? Is it as close to God who is revealed in the Bible as has been said? I have sought through some recent anthropological studies and did some research with Karen in the mountains of Omkoi and its adjunct area in Tak province through interviews.
4. Then I will deal with missiological applications of the results. How close are animistic concepts of *Y'wa* and the God who is revealed in the Bible? In view that the same word *Y'wa* is used for the traditional perception of God and for the God in the Bible, is there any area to which special attention needs to be given?

The study aims to contribute to the discussion how we take the gospel to a people with such a rich tradition without falling into the trap of syncretism or taking a western theology as the sole criterion for teaching God among this people.

1. The “Supreme Being” in animistic cultures

In many animistic cultures God as the Supreme Being is understood to be the God who once created everything but then he withdrew into another world. He is hardly active anymore. He is distant, unconcerned about humanity and unapproachable. He is *otios*.¹⁶ Animists are usually not much concerned about him. It is the

¹⁵ Harry Ignatius Marshall. *The Karen People of Burma. A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press. 1997. Reprinted from the 1922 edition with a new foreword), 10.

¹⁶ Cf. Roland Mischung, *Religion und Wirklichkeitsvorstellungen in einem Karen-Dorf Nordwest-Thailands* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1984), 121.

lesser spiritual beings they are busy with. They think they cannot manipulate the withdrawn “Highest God”, but the lesser spiritual beings they can. Most animists have a perception of a Supreme Being but at the best he is deistic,¹⁷ impossible to have a personal relationship with him.

The ethnologist Lothar Käser writes that “in non-written religions we usually have to assume that there is **only one Highest Being**.”¹⁸ He is usually a very old man, good-natured and wise. But he can get very angry. “It is not rare that the Highest Being is **married**, sometimes with several women, and it has many offspring.”¹⁹ The Highest Being may have many similar characteristics as a high God like Allah or Jahwe, especially the feature of being the creator of the world. Yet you cannot just take the name of their Highest Being, if you want to name the God of the Bible. In essential points the Highest Being is very different. Käser then cautions that if the name is taken as for the word “God” in the Bible, one has to be very careful to watch the features that people connect with that name.²⁰ **“In daily life of people with animistic background, the Highest Being is quite meaningless.”**²¹ It is just an explanation how things started in the first place.

Burnett writes: “Throughout Africa there are stories of a Supreme Being who is the creator of all and who is known by various names.”²² Does the widespread belief of a Supreme Being mean that most traditional religions are essentially monotheistic? But the Supreme Being does not play a big role in everyday life of the people. Usually there are no temples or priests to serve him. He is too far away. It is the lesser spirits which are feared and given attention to through ceremonies and sacrifices. Does that mean these religions are mainly polytheistic? Burnett shows that this question is answered in different ways. Some African theologians argue that the Supreme Being in African religion possessed very similar characteristics to those of the God revealed in the Bible, long before the missionaries arrived. “John Mbiti also accepted the concept of a common monotheism within African

¹⁷ “Doch die Vorstellung eines erhabenen Gottes ist im animistischen Denken im besten Fall deistisch.” Philip M. Steyne, *Machtvolle Götter*, (Bad Liebenzell: Liebenzeller Mission, 1990), 76.

¹⁸ „Es ist davon auszugehen, dass es in schriftlosen Religionen in der Regel **nur ein einziges Höchstes Wesen** gibt.“ Lothar Käser, *Animismus. Einführung in seine begrifflichen Grundlagen* (Bad Liebenzell: Liebenzeller Mission, 2004), 167. Translation by the author.

¹⁹ “Nicht selten ist das Höchste Wesen **verheiratet**, manchmal mit merheren Frauen, und es hat zahlriche Nachkommen.“ Käser, *Animismus*, 169. Translation by the author.

²⁰ Compare Lothar Käser, *Fremde Kulturen. Eine Einführung in die Ethnologie* (Bad Liebenzell: Verlag Liebenzeller Mission, 1997), 169.

²¹ **“Im täglichen Leben von Menschen mit animistischem Hintergrund ist das Höchste Wesen so gut wie bedeutungslos.”** Translation by the author. Käser, *Animismus*, 170.

²² David Burnett, *World of the Spirits. A Christian Perspective on Tradition and Folk Religions* (London: Monarch Books, 2000), 30.

traditional religions.”²³ Idowu, another African theologian, suggests “Diffused Monotheism” as a new term. “Though it is monotheism in which the good deity delegates certain portions of His authority to certain divine functionaries who work as they are commissioned by Him.”²⁴

On the other hand, some studies suggest that the lesser spirits were not intermediaries of the Supreme Being but were autonomous agencies. “S.N. Ubah, an Igbo historian, ... concludes that it was only in the thought of those with much exposure to Christianity that there is anything like the ‘Devout’²⁵ version of the Igbo worldview.”²⁶ Burnett concludes:

The debate between ‘monotheism’ and ‘polytheism’ in traditional religions depends much on the perspective taken. Supreme Beings have characteristics both similar to and different from those of the Christian God, and should best be understood as variations upon a common theme of transcendence and creation.²⁷

While the animist view of God as the distant unapproachable Creator or as the Supreme Being who reflects his nature in lower spiritual beings may be diffused among many peoples, the view of God, as an impersonal power which is present in all of nature, is quite different. This pantheistic concept of God rejects God as a personality. He is reduced to an impersonal it. This concept of God is found in Eastern mysticism and Hinduism as well as in New Age thought, where it is said: “We are gods.” In Hinduism is said ‘Atman is Brahman’ - the individual self is the universal Self. God is reduced to a force, a principle, an essence or ultimate reality. But God being a personal spiritual being is denied.

We can conclude with van Rheenen’s succinct summary:

“Animists view God in different ways. He is understood to be (1) a distant, unapproachable Creator; (2) the Supreme Being who reflects his nature in lower spiritual beings; or (3) the impersonal power that permeates all of nature. In each viewpoint the biblical view of God, the Creator who desires a personal, intimate relationship with his creation, is lost.”²⁸

²³ Burnett, 33. Cf. John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, (London: SPCK, 1970), xiii.

²⁴ Idowu, E. B., *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 203f.

²⁵ “Devout” means those who propose that before the arrival of Christianity or Islam, among all African peoples a Supreme Being existed who had similar attributes to those given to God in monotheistic religions.

²⁶ Burnett, 34f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁸ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 243.

2. *Y'wa* tradition in Karen culture and its effects on early Christian mission

Karen mythology has some amazing stories about *Y'wa*. One story, Karen often refer to, is about the lost book. At the beginning of times God gave a golden book to the white man, a silver book to a Burman or Thai and a parchment book to the Karen. While the white man treasured this book and learned from it - and so did the Burman or Thai with their silver book, the Karen went to work and left their book unattended. A pig tore it up and chickens ate it.²⁹ Since then the Karen have used the chicken bones and the gall bladder of the pig for divination since the chickens and the pig had eaten the book. "But according to some, pigs had helped eat *Ywa's* book and so have since shared divine knowledge with the chickens."³⁰

But the Karen also were expecting the white man - who is their youngest brother in their mythology - to come back and bring the Golden Book to them. This story with another story or prophecy that the white man would come back on water,³¹ have had a great impact on the Karen in Burma. When the British arrived in Burma in naval ships, and the American Baptist missionaries brought the Bible - the Golden Book - with them, many Karen saw their old prophecies fulfilled. After a long oppression under the Burmese they could take a breath under the English rule. From the missionaries early accounts it is clear that Karen traditional belief prepared them in a special way to accept Christianity. The Burmese Karen missiologist Saw Hay Moo writes in his dissertation:

Their beliefs about *Ywa* (God) are very similar to the God of the Bible. The concept of God as creator who is eternal and omnipotent is a characteristic of *Ywa*. The story of the fall of human beings and the temptation of the Satan can also be found in Karen accounts. In Karen tradition, a satanic figure known as *Mu Kaw Li* and its story of tempting human beings to break the commandment of *Ywa* is much the same as in the Bible.³²

²⁹ The story has also been recorded in *hta* form (Karen poem). See Appendix 2.

³⁰ Ronald D. Renard, *Kariang: History of Karen-T'ai Relations from the Beginning to 1923. A Dissertation for the Doctor of Philosophy in History* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 1980), 91.

³¹ "Great Ruler, the ancestors of the Karens charged their posterity thus: 'Children and grand-children, if the thing come by land, weep; if by water, laugh. It will not come in our days, but it will in yours. If it come first by water, you will be able to take breath; but if first by land, you will not find a spot to dwell in.'" Francis Mason, *The Karen Apostle*. Revised by H.J. Ripley (Boston: Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln, 1847). Copyright: BiblioLife, LLC, 18f.

³² Saw Hay Moo, *Doing Theology in the Karen Church: The Gospel as Incarnation (John 1:1-14) within the Karen YWA (God) Tradition. A Dissertation for the Doctor of Missiology*. (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 2002), 21.

Francis Mason has given a detailed account of the story of the Fall in Karen tradition.³³ While details may differ, I have heard the same story told among the Karen in the mountains of North Thailand. While *Mu Kaw Li* has been translated 'Satan' or 'Devil' in the Bible, according to the German anthropologist Roland Mischung *Mu Kaw Li* is "a mythical figure who as a feminine adversary of God takes a position between a trickster and a 'devil'."³⁴ Reading the accounts of Mason and hearing similar stories from the Karen, it is not amazing that the early missionaries used the word *Y'wa* for God and *Mu Kaw Li* as the word for the devil in the Bible. Under the next heading we will inquire more about the contents of those words of animistic Karen in North Thailand.

We do not only find the Karen *Y'wa* tradition in old stories, but in many poems they sing or speak of him. The Karen call them *hta*. The *hta* are a unique form of Karen poetry about many areas of life. They are sung at New Years' day - at weddings, funerals or at other occasions where rituals are done. The *hta* are part of the old Karen tradition and as such are to be seen as first class cultural documents.³⁵ Mischung further comments:

"These verses were regarded as the authentic speech of the remote 'ancestors of the olden days', the knowledge of which formed one of the most prominent markers of a person's identity as *pga k'nyau* ('Karen')."³⁶

The *hta* verses are not easy to understand because of their old poetical language. They use a lot of metaphors. *Hta* are not used very much anymore. The younger generation does hardly know them while only some of their fathers and mothers understand them. There are several reasons, but the main reasons are that ancestor worship (*au qai*) has diminished a lot over the last 40 years - many have become Christians or Buddhists. New rituals have been introduced. *Hta* are not used very often and forgotten. Secondly, most Karen children in Thailand attend Thai schools and are not involved in the old tradition of learning at home the different poems, even though many middle aged and older Karen love to hear *hta* or recite those they still remember. This has become very clear when I was asking about them. Some were ready to recite *hta* spontaneously and were proud of it.³⁷

The former principle of Karen Baptist Theological Seminary (KBTS), Insein, Yangon, Rev. Tun Meh has collected many *hta* in two books called "Remem-

³³ Mason, 98f. See Appendix 1.

³⁴ Mischung, *Religion* 245. "eine mythische Gestalt, die als weiblicher Gegenspieler von Ywa eine Mittelstellung zwischen Trickster-Wesen und 'Teufel' einnimmt." Translation by the author.

³⁵ Mischung, *Religion*, 243.

³⁶ Roland Mischung, "When it is better to sing than to speak. The use of traditional verses (*hta*) in tense social situations," in *Living at the Edge of Thai Society*, edited by Claudio O. Delang (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 133.

³⁷ Interview with Supopa, Michoepa and Repohpa in Thibokhi on 3rd Aug. 2012 on MP3.

ber”.³⁸ The titles he has given to the *hta* are to be understood as summary and explanation of the *hta*. Here are some of the titles given to the *hta* with the reference number as in his first book: *About God* (3), *Eternal and real God* (4); *Mighty God* (5); *God’s creation* (6); *God created forefather and mother and cared for them* (8); *Separation of God and men missed truth* (12); *The return of God* (14); *God will come again personally* (15); *The Good News comes to the Karen as prophesied* (17); *How to worship God* (22); *Poem for worshipping God* (23); *Poem of Paradise* (38); *Poem of the lost tree of life* (39).³⁹ Obviously, a lot has been said about *Y’wa* in these old poems. In it is also mentioned that *Y’wa* is the creator.⁴⁰ In Karen culture *Y’wa* is much more than a faraway unknown figure. “One of the sayings of the elders is, ‘All things in heaven and on earth, O children and grandchildren, *Ywa* created them. Never forget *Y’wa*, pray to him every day and every night.’”⁴¹ Even though these poems contain only bits and pieces about God, they have prepared many Karen to be open to hear the Gospel. The amazing similar stories to the Bible about the fall of man as well as the story of the lost book opened the way to receive the Good News when it came to them. When the early American missionaries reached Burma, thousands and thousands of Karen turned to God and became Christians.⁴² “There can be no doubt but that the above legend of the fall of man has been largely responsible for the readiness with which the Karen people have accepted Christianity.”⁴³ Francis Mason even thought:

The Karens do not require so much teaching, in the first instance, to bring them to a knowledge of the truth, as other unevangelized nations. Their traditions teach them the existence of an eternal God, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Their traditions teach that this God created the heavens and the earth, and all which they contain; that he created man holy, like himself, but that man fell from his state of holiness into a state of sin and misery by eating the forbidden fruit, through the temptation of Satan; but that God has promised to redeem and restore man to his favor, and that for his future salvation they are to wait in hope.⁴⁴

³⁸ Kue Kloe Doh Htu is his Karen name written on the book. *Remember* (283 pages) and *Remember 2* (159 pages) are the titles of the books. They are obviously published in Yangon, but no publisher or year of publishing are printed in the books. We received the books from Heidi and Fernando Peter who are friends with him and us. In book one Rev. Tung Meh has translated the titles of the poems from Karen into English for his friends.

³⁹ Kue Kloe Doh Htu, *Remember*.

⁴⁰ See Appendix 2. *Hta* about how God created everything.

⁴¹ Saw Hay Moo, 24.

⁴² Cf. Marshall, 296ff.

⁴³ Marshall, 217.

⁴⁴ Mason, 74.

Some have suggested that the Karen *Y'wa* tradition may be a reflection of early preaching by Catholic missionaries. But Saw Hay Moo and the early Baptist missionaries themselves contradict this argument. "The Karen *Ywa* (God) tradition had been there for generations long before the Baptist missionaries arrived in Burma."⁴⁵ But there are other critical voices regarding the *Y'wa* tradition. Anthropologist Mischung thinks that western missionaries used *hta* for their own purpose and "more or less disguise their original content."⁴⁶ Another outside view of what he thinks happened is given by anthropologist Keyes. He writes:

Protestant missionaries focused on the similarity between the name of Y'wa, the Creator-God for the Karen, and that of the Jewish Yahweh. They gave particular attention to a Karen myth that at the creation they, along with the other peoples of the world, had been given a book - that is a gift of literacy - but that the book had been destroyed. Although relegated to illiteracy, the myth also posited that one day outsiders would bring a 'golden book' to them. The Protestant missionaries presented themselves as the carriers of the 'golden book' which they equated with the Bible.⁴⁷

It is questionable that the Protestant missionaries presented themselves as the carriers, since first they would have needed to know the story. The mass movement to Christianity speaks another language, namely that the Karen themselves identified the missionaries as such carriers. But it is to say, that the missionaries used certain stories and *hta* for the preaching of the Gospel which of course is a very legitimate tool.

From this chapter it becomes very clear that the *Y'wa* tradition among the Karen is very rich and goes further in revealing the Most Highest Being (God) than in many other cultures. These stories and poems have made Karen people receptive for the Good News of the Bible and missionaries have used these old sayings of the elders for the purpose to present the Gospel into Karen culture.

3. How is *Y'wa* perceived among animistic Karen in Thailand today?

Having looked at the old *Y'wa* tradition in Karen culture, we are inclined to agree with the first missionaries and with Saw Hay Moo, "Their belief in the character and attributes of God is almost identical with the teaching of Christianity."⁴⁸ The father of my language informant did not go that far but said: "The *Y'wa* tradition

⁴⁵ Saw Hay Moo, 29.

⁴⁶ Mischung in Delang, 133.

⁴⁷ Keyes, "Afterword. The politics of 'Karen-ness' in Thailand, in *Living at the Edge of Thai Society*, edited by Claudio O. Delang (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 212.

⁴⁸ Saw Hay Moo, 24.

has helped Karen to become Christians, because the missionaries told stories which did not appear foreign to them.”⁴⁹

But we have to consider that not all the Karen *hta* or mythological stories are as near to God’s word as those given above. In Karen tradition there are also stories and *hta* about *Y’wa* which do fit other beliefs, but not the Christian. Chilapa⁵⁰, has some good knowledge about animistic and Buddhist beliefs of Karen people. He should have become a spirit priest among his people, but instead turned to Christ. He told me⁵¹ that some Karen Buddhist say that *Y’wa* is born again and again into different beings. They claim, because *Y’wa* is God, he can appear as anything he likes. The *Y’wa* tradition also speaks of *Y’wa* as having a mother and father who died, and *Y’wa* also has got two siblings, their names are Tataemae and Naraglo.⁵² Chilapa also said that one story tells about *Y’wa* having an affair with *Mu Kaw Li*. *Mu Kaw Li* entrapped *Y’wa*. *Y’wa* therefore has children. *Mu Kaw Li* wanted to destroy the name and the work of *Y’wa*.

The Thai anthropologist Kwanchewan Buadaeng gives some examples which underline the above statements about *Y’wa*. She says that one of the most popular stories about *Y’wa* and *Mu Kaw Li* in the village where she did her research was the following:

Once, there were two groups of people: those who drank whisky and those who did not. One day, Ywa disguised himself as a poor man with very dirty clothes and skin infections and sat by a forest trail. A group of non-drinkers was passing by. When they saw Ywa, they tried to avoid him. Later a group of drunken people came. They greeted Ywa and invited him to their village. With this, Ywa came to the conclusion that whisky was a very good thing. He later joined in drinking whisky and got drunk. He then slept with Mue Kawli who became pregnant and bore a son. Ywa once told his son who had come to see him to go back and convince Mue Kawli that whisky was a bad thing. Having heard her son say that, Mue Kawli argued that ‘if whisky was not good, you would not have been born.’⁵³

⁴⁹ Hans Bär, *Heilsgeschichtlicher Bibelunterricht. McIlwains Programm ‘Building on Firm Foundations’ im Einsatz unter den Karen im Bezirk Omkoi (Nordthailand)*. (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1998), 109.

⁵⁰ Chilapa is a rice farmer and part time evangelist. His four sisters and their families live in Pabako (Amphur Li) which is a staunch Buddhist area which does not allow Christians to live there. Chilapa has visited them regularly and had many talks with them. He is one of the few Karen who dares to talk to Buddhist monks.

⁵¹ Interview with Chilapa in Omkoi on 22nd January 2013, on MP3. Besides him there were two longstandig pastors Mr. Boon Ruang and Mr. Mula present.

⁵² Boon Ruang, in the above interview on MP3.

⁵³ Kwanchewan Buadaeng, *Negotiating Religious Practices in a Changing Sgaw Karen Community in North Thailand. A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy* (Sidney: University of Sidney, January, 2001), 41.

It is understandable that Karen Christians do not want to tell stories like this about Y'wa. It could be seen as blasphemy. But nevertheless these old stories exist and influence the mind of the people.

Mischung reports a story about the origin of the ancestor worship, called *au qai* ritual. In this story Y'wa is the inventor of the ritual. Y'wa came to help the Karen in a deep crisis and he said to the Karen: "Keep the *au qai* ritual!", and he taught them: When you or your women or children get sick, then do the *au qai* ritual. Y'wa explained it all to them.⁵⁴

Chilapa and the other two Karen leaders who were present at the interview agreed that the Christians do not tell those stories about Y'wa, but Non-Christians do. It is a common feature I have watched among the Karen, that they do ignore what they feel will not help their cause. They do not question or confront. When the headman of Sop Lahn became the first Christian in the area (1975) and a movement towards Christ started, he was discussing with the missionaries how to help the young people not to go back the old way. His suggestion was, not to tell them anything about the old ways.⁵⁵

Mr. Dipae who was thought to be the eye of the headman in that village, was very good in using Karen tales or poems and comparing them with biblical truth.

One day I told him that I enjoy his stories and teaching and I suggested to him: There must be some stories which do not agree with biblical truth. Would you tell once a Karen story which contradicts biblical truth? His answer was: "You can do that." This shyness of confronting has to do a lot with their value system. The basic theme in Karen culture is harmony. "They attempt to maintain harmony in relationships within the village by submission to the acknowledged leaders, and harmony with their neighbors by avoiding conflict whenever possible."⁵⁶ From this it is explainable why Karen Christians will not confront stories about Y'wa which do not consent with biblical truth. They just ignore them. From this point of view Mischung's and Keyes' critique on the anthropological insight of missionaries are understandable that they did not look at it objectively but used parts of it for their own purposes. But nevertheless the missionaries as sources of those stories and poems are trustworthy, but they only used those stories and poems which were in accordance with biblical truth.

Concluding from my own research and the above stories, I think it is impossible to maintain Saw Hay Moo's claim about animistic Karen that "Their belief in the character and attributes of God is almost identical with the teaching of Christiani-

⁵⁴ Mischung, *Religion*, 159f.

⁵⁵ These missionaries are my friends, Heinz and Christiane Mayer who have told me about this incident.

⁵⁶ Paul and Elaine Lewis, *Peoples of the Golden Triangle* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd. 1984), 10.

ty.⁵⁷ This is only true as long as you look at the stories and poems Christians convey about *Y'wa*. Mr. Dipae once said to me: “We knew that there is God, but we did not know him, until you missionaries came.” This statement is quite different from the claim made above.

Furthermore we have to be aware that Karen Buddhists use the word *Y'wa* for their purposes. They may think of the Lord Buddha as *Y'wa*. “The term *Ywā* is used by Buddhists and cult believers as well as by Christians, to designate Buddha or particular deity figures.”⁵⁸ Buadaeng reports the following interview with a 70 years old male Karen Buddhist and religious specialist:

Question: Is Ywa the Karen God?

Answer: Oh! Yes. It is Ywa we worship nowadays.

Question: Is it the same Ywa which is worshipped by Khon Muang⁵⁹

Answer: It is the same... the same Ywa. Sometimes, I asked Khon Muang, ‘have you ever seen Ywa?’ They said they had not ever seen him but only his footprints.⁶⁰

Question: What about the Ywa which is worshipped by Christians?

Answer: Well, the one worshipped by Christians is Ywa’s son. The Ywa worshipped by us and Khon Muang are the father.⁶¹

Here we can see very clearly that *Y'wa* will have very different connotations with Karen people from different backgrounds.

From what we have said in this chapter, it is clear that *Y'wa* does not only have similar characteristics of a high God like Allah or Jahwe but that he differs in many essential points from him. Only if we can acknowledge this we will find the appropriate answer to how we should teach about *Y'wa* to Karen with an animistic background.

4. Karen animistic conceptions of *Y'wa* and God who is revealed in the Bible

In the talk with Chilapa, Boon Ruang and Mula, all agreed that Karen with different beliefs cite different stories. Mula pointed out that sometimes each group uses its perception of *Y'wa* to show how right they are compared to others.⁶² It seems

⁵⁷ Saw Hay Moo, 24.

⁵⁸ Hayami Yoko, *Between Hills and Plains. Power and Practice in Socio-Religious Dynamics among Karen* (Kyoto: Kyoto University, 2004), 282.

⁵⁹ With “Khon Muang” Thai people are meant.

⁶⁰ All over Thailand, many Buddhist temples have Buddha’s footprints and legends of visits by the Buddha to those areas.

⁶¹ Buadaeng, 39.

⁶² Interview with Chilapa in Omkoi on 22nd January 2013, on MP3. Besides him there

that each group uses the stories or poems to legitimize their behavior or belief. Buadaeng sums these facts well up when she writes:

It is clear to me that specific myths and folktales are recalled and told to me by informants to make their present practices, both, religious and non-religious, meaningful and legitimate. They are also sometimes used to emphasize the perceived importance and power of their own practices relative to others, whose practices are different. This is one reason why there is so much ambiguity in the characteristics and functions of the supernatural beings as described by different informants.”⁶³

Taken the whole range of the *Y'wa* stories and poems it is clear that the animistic conception of *Y'wa* differs greatly from what is taught in the Bible about God. Yet there is so much of one string of tradition which is surprisingly similar to God's story in the Bible so that it cannot be ignored by animists or Buddhist animists either. On the other hand, Christians should not jump too quickly to the conclusion that the Karen *Y'wa* tradition is almost the same as God revealed in the Bible. Obviously, that *Y'wa* has got siblings and parents who died, begot children, was entrapped by *Mu Kaw Li* and had an affair with her - only to point out a view differences, cannot be ignored. If we then speak to animists about Jesus as the Son of God this may lead to grave misunderstanding, e.g. if one were to conclude that he is the product of *Y'wa* and *Mu Kaw Li*.

I have read many *hta* and stories, but have not found anything about **the holiness** of *Y'wa*. From a Christian perspective, *Y'wa*, as he is known in Karen tradition, is a sinner. He does not embody an absolute morality and therefore there is no divine perfection to measure human imperfection. Therefore “sin” as taught in the Bible is foreign to the Karen. Besides the many similarities to the Bible, the Karen *Y'wa* tradition has many short-comings compared to the God revealed in the Bible.

V. Summary

If a people group uses the same word of their Highest God and for the God who has revealed himself in Scripture there needs to be a very thorough teaching on the character and attributes of God. This should be taught with concrete Bible stories. The redemptive chronological teaching of McIlwain,⁶⁴ especially the first three volumes are a great help in achieving this. This very useful approach which we have used for discipleship training among the Karen for the last 23 years has brought forward lots of good fruit. Many of the young people who had come to

were two longstanding pastors Mr. Boon Ruang and Mr. Mula present, who gave some short comments.

⁶³ Buadaeng, 50f.

⁶⁴ Trevor McIlwain, *Building on Firm Foundations, Vol. 1 Guidelines for Evangelism and Teaching Believers, Vol. 2, Evangelism: The Old Testament, Vol. 3 Evangelism: The Life of Christ* (Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission 1989).

study the courses are now church leaders in the different villages. May God help us to teach his word faithfully and relevantly to the people he has entrusted to us.

III. The Relevance of “Kingdom of God Theology” in an Animistic Context

In the first chapter we have studied the character of animism and its emphasis on power. Then we have observed that most animistic cultures know of a Highest Being who created everything but is hardly relevant anymore to those people today. But even when “God” (Y’wa) is significant as with the Karen it is ambiguous. Going on from here we want to explore the “Kingdom of God Theology” and its specific relevance in the animistic context. Jesus himself had come to preach that the Kingdom of Heaven is near and he sent his disciples into the world to preach that the Kingdom of God has come near.

1. Your Kingdom Come – “Kingdom of God Theology”

Meaning of Kingdom of God

Ladd⁶⁵ concludes that some passages in Scripture refer to the Kingdom of God as God’s reign, others refer to it as the realm which we may now enter and some passages refer to God’s Kingdom as a future realm when Jesus returns as Lord. The primary meaning of “kingdom” (hebr. *malkuth*; gr. *basileia*) is the authority and sovereignty of a king not so much the domain or people belonging to such a realm. The “Kingdom of God” then is God’s reign, his kingship, his authority which is based on his power and glory.

The Mystery of the Kingdom

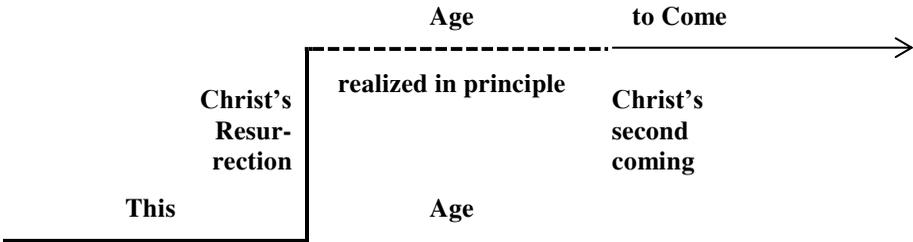
The Kingdom is a present reality (Matt. 12:28), and yet it is a future blessing (I Cor. 15:50). It is an inner spiritual redemptive blessing (Rom. 14:17) which can be experienced only by way of the new birth (John 3:3), and yet it will have to do with the government of the nations of the world (Rev. 11:15). The Kingdom is a realm into which men enter now (Matt. 21:31), and yet it is a realm into which they will enter tomorrow (Matt. 8:11). It is at the same time a gift of God which will be bestowed by God in the future (Luke 12:32) and yet which must be received in the present (Mark 10:15).⁶⁶

As we can see there is a big tension in explaining the Kingdom. Is it for today or is it only eschatological? Ladd points to a diagram by Geerhardus Vos which will explain this tension.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ George Eldon Ladd. *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (London: The Pasternoster Press, 1959), 22.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 18.

⁶⁷ George Eldon Ladd. *A Theology of the New Testament* (Guildford and London: Lutter-



The timeline gives a clear picture of the mystery of the Kingdom. It is the “Already” and “not yet”. God’s Kingdom has already broken into this world through the coming of Jesus Christ but it is not yet fulfilled. People from the nations are saved into God’s Kingdom. The satanic power has been broken. Signs of the Kingdom happen as people are set free and healed. But “This Age” still exists and is in tension with the “Age to Come”. The consummation of the Kingdom will be at the second coming of Jesus. “In the Age to Come, heaven descends to earth and lifts historical existence to a new level of redeemed life (Rev. 21:2-3).⁶⁸

From the OT perspective the Jews expected “the day of the Lord” as a day of judgment. They were expecting their Messiah as the King to save his people Israel and to judge the nations, their enemies.

In the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, there have been three surprises.

Firstly, instead of “the day of vengeance of our God” (Is. 61:2b) Jesus proclaimed a day of mercy for the nations. Patrick Johnstone points out⁶⁹ that at the beginning of Jesus’ teaching ministry in Nazareth the Lord omitted the words in the second part of Is 61:2 (“and the day of vengeance of our God”) but instead reminded the crowd of God’s mercy towards the nations mentioning the Syrian general Naeman and the Sidonian widow.⁷⁰ From the earliest days Jesus demonstrated that God’s kingdom purpose was for all the nations.

Secondly, many Jews expected the Messiah to come as the “Son of David”. They hoped for a great military leader as David to help Israel to overcome its enemies. But the Messiah came as the “Suffering Servant” as he is described in Isaiah.⁷¹ But it is also said of him: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a

worth Press. 1975), 68.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 69.

⁶⁹ Patrick Johnstone. *The Church is Bigger Than You Think*. (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1998).

⁷⁰ Luke 4:16-30.

⁷¹ Isaiah 42:1-12; 49:1-6; 52:13-53:12.

light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Is. 49:6).

A third surprise in the mystery of the Kingdom is that the Messiah will appear a second time, then as the King. He is going to reign in a new heaven and new earth. Satan will be destroyed and God will be all in all. The “Age to Come” will be consummated.

The Victory of the Kingdom

The coming of Christ into this world has been the beginning of the end for Satan’s reign in this world. He could not succeed in killing Jesus at his birth. After he had tempted Jesus he had to leave him without any success points. At the darkest hour of history when Jesus died on the cross he was seemingly triumphant, only to discover that the Lord of Lords was risen from the dead, proclaiming that all power in heaven and on earth has been given to him. God’s victory over Satan has been accomplished through Christ’s death and resurrection. Now is the time when people from all nations are saved from the power of darkness, and ultimately, to undo the curse over all creation.⁷²

Ken Blue⁷³ has used a helpful illustration to explain the victory of Christ at the death on the cross and his resurrection. He compares it with “D-Day” when towards the end of World War II the allied troops landed successfully on Continental Europe. Military experts have pointed out that this operation secured ultimate victory. There were many more bloody battles before “V-E Day” (Victory in Europe Day). In God’s war with the evil “V-E Day” comes when Christ returns as King. This will be the consummation of the Kingdom. In the meantime the church is involved in a spiritual battle. Paul reminds us to put on the full armor of God and stand.⁷⁴ The Bible leaves no doubt that at this time when God’s Kingdom has broken into the present age that means battle. But we are being assured that Christ has won the victory and it belongs to us in Christ. “We are certain of the future victory because of the victory which has already been accomplished.”⁷⁵ Ladd goes on to explain that the enemy has been defeated and at the second coming of Christ he will be destroyed.⁷⁶

⁷² Cf. Romans 8:21.

⁷³ Ken Blue. *Authority to Heal*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979).

⁷⁴ Ephesians 6:10ff.

⁷⁵ Ladd. *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, 127.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 128.

The Mandate of the Kingdom

The Message of the Kingdom

The message of the Kingdom is the good news that Jesus through his death on the cross and through his resurrection has overcome death, Satan and sin. Christ's ministry of healing and throwing out demons is part of the Kingdom's message. In Christ this victory belongs to us. He has given his authority to his disciples. The gospel of the Kingdom proclaims what God has already done and is still doing in This Age. "God intends to bring substantial healing and transformation in the present day and eternal life in the eternal kingdom."⁷⁷

The Mission of the Kingdom⁷⁸

The mission is put succinctly in Matthew 24:14 where Jesus taught: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." If we read this statement with the Lord's commission at the end of the Gospel (Mt 28:18-20) we realize what staggering mission the Lord has entrusted to us. Only when the Gospel of the Kingdom has reached all peoples the end will come. "Here are the facts: God has entrusted this mission to us; and unless we do it, it will not get done."⁷⁹ And Ladd goes on:

Let this verse burn in our hearts. ... This is *God's* programme. This means that for the ultimate meaning of modern civilization and the destiny of human history, you and I are more important than the United Nations. ... From the perspective of eternity, the mission of the Church is more important than the march of armies or the actions of the world's capitals, because it is in the accomplishment of this mission that the divine purpose for human history is accomplished. No less than this is our mission.⁸⁰

"Then the end will come", contains a mighty motive. Why has he not come until today? One answer is that not all the peoples have been reached. If God's church takes Jesus' statement serious it has no choice but accomplish the mission as soon as possible – then the Lord will return!

Wright puts the mission of the kingdom in the following way:

"But when we reintegrate ... the kingdom-inaugurating public work of Jesus on the one hand and his redemptive death and resurrection on the other – we find that the gospel ... is the story of God's kingdom being launched on earth as in heaven, generating a new state of affairs in which the power of evil has

⁷⁷ Steven C. Hawthorne. *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. The Study Guide*. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009 Edition), 26.

⁷⁸ Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, 123-140.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 134.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 134-135.

been decisively defeated, the new creation has been decisively launched, and Jesus' followers have been commissioned and equipped to put that victory, and that inaugurated new world, into practice. ... To put it another way, if you want to help inaugurate God's kingdom, you must follow in the way of the cross; and if you want to benefit from Jesus' saving death, you must become part of his kingdom-project."⁸¹

It becomes clear that in Kingdom theology the followers of Jesus are actively involved in God's mission on this earth. God has chosen, commissioned and equipped his disciples to be part of his universal saving plan.

The Prayer: Your Kingdom come

Part of the mandate of the Kingdom is the prayer Jesus taught us. It helps us to understand that it is not only our going and doing which will accomplish the given task but God himself is active. Only when God is at work we can be his co-worker. Therefore, the prayer "Your Kingdom come" is at the heart of any mission in Jesus' name. "We are to ask that His kingdom rule will become effective even where it is defied and that His will be accomplished even where it is opposed by His enemies."⁸² This prayer also indicates that we are not satisfied with the status quo. David Wells put it well when he wrote an article on "Prayer: Rebelling Against the Status Quo". Wells declares that a biblical Hebrew/Christian worldview refuses to accept that the evil we find on earth is God's will and plan.⁸³ We desire God's Kingdom to come into This Age more and more and we desire that Jesus is returning as King, soon. "The Spirit and the bride say: 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' ... Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:17+20).

2. Why Kingdom Theology Is Important in an Animistic Context

Points of contact and relevance

Kingdom of God Theology gives us an "interpretive model based on the Word of God for explaining the world."⁸⁴

Where do spirits come from? What belongs to Satan's side and what belongs to God's side? Kingdom theology gives answers to those burning questions. It also helps new Christians from an animistic background to gain a new worldview from a biblical perspective which has many points of contact to their former outlook.

⁸¹ Tom Wright. *Surprised by Hope*. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007), 217.

⁸² Hawthorne, 27.

⁸³ David Wells. *Prayer: Rebelling Against the Status Quo*. In: Christianity Today, Vol. XVII (17), No. 6, November 2, 1979.

⁸⁴ Van Rheenen, 139.

For example, an animist's morality is relative. In many animistic cultures how you act towards a person will depend on how the person is related to you. Is he one of his family, clan or tribe or is he an outsider? Their ethical standard will be different. In Kingdom theology morality is defined by the holy God who does not have any racial favorites. We are all the same, sinners who are in need of His grace.

Kingdom theology emphasizes the powerful reign of God

Jesus taught with authority and power and not as their teachers of the law.⁸⁵ Jesus gave this power and authority to drive out demons and to heal the sick to his disciples when he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God.⁸⁶ Paul wrote to the Corinthian church that

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.⁸⁷ And in his second letter he reminds the Corinthians, "For though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds."⁸⁸

"Kingdom theology introduces the reign of God, which equips believers to attack and defeat the powers of Satan."⁸⁹ This message of power and authority appeals to the animist. He wants to worship the all-powerful God who has made heaven and earth. He wants to see what happened at the time of Jesus to occur in the present day as well.

While western worldview and theology has been more truth-conscious, animistic worldview is more power conscious. In the history of missions power encounters have often been door openers for the gospel. This is especially true for people in animistic cultures.

The Kingdom prayer: "Your Kingdom come"

Prayer is emphasized in Kingdom theology, especially prayer concerning spiritual warfare. Wagner has introduced spiritual warfare prayer against territorial spirits. Even though I do not agree with that kind of practice it is to be said that prayer is taken seriously. We may give lip service to the importance of prayer but very often we do not practice it much because we may have rationalized that things are going to happen with or without prayer anyway. But Jesus taught us to pray that

⁸⁵ Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22.

⁸⁶ Luke 9:1-2.

⁸⁷ 1Corinthians 2:4-5.

⁸⁸ 2Corinthians 10:3-4.

⁸⁹ Van Rheezen, 140. Cf. 2Corinthians 10:3-4.

God's Kingdom shall come – now and in the future when he will come as the King.

To an animist prayer is very important. He hopes to get God's power into his life situations! It is obviously more important than reading in the Bible. Praying all together aloud is a sign of Christians with animistic tribal background around the world even if they do not belong to the so-called charismatic movement. To pray together is a very powerful way to ask God's presence and leading into our ministries.

Kingdom theology asks for faith

While in western worldview and theology we often rationalize or let our faith go through a filter of “enlightenment” (what might be humanly possible), in animistic culture faith is no problem. There is no question that God is at work today. One of the most heard quotations from the Bible among Karen believers is: “For nothing is impossible with God.”

Kingdom theology's message is holistic

“Kingdom theology makes no dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural.”⁹⁰ The same is true for animistic cultures. God reigns over all domains of life. Whereas in western worldview we tend to separate faith/religion from other parts of life, in animistic cultures all is embraced by faith.⁹¹ The message of the Kingdom not only comes through teaching but in many other ways, like dreams, miracles, healing and feeling. The driving out of demons, the healing of lepers, the dreams of Joseph are messages. Kingdom theology expects Joel 2 to happen in our days as well. Therefore the message of the Kingdom appeals to the person with an animistic worldview.

Kingdom theology takes into account the reality of the devil and spirits

In Kingdom theology the encounter between God and Satan is openly declared. This of course relates very well to animistic thinking.

It was Paul Hiebert who pointed out the “The Missing Middle” in western worldview as follows.⁹²

⁹⁰ Van Rheezen, 140.

⁹¹ See diagrams on page 7.

⁹² Paul Hiebert. *The Flaw of the Excluded Middle*. In Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. A Reader. Edited by R.D. Winter and S.C. Hawthorne. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 4th Ed. 2009). 411.

Western Two-Tiered View of Reality

Religion	faith, miracles, other-worldly problems, sacred
Excluded Middle	
Science	sight and experience, natural order this-worldly problems, secular

In animistic culture the middle part is the world of the spirits and life-force.⁹³ Here are the following questions dealt with: How can one avoid accidents or guarantee success in the future? Who is behind the illness of my child? How can I make sure to marry the right person? If the Christian missionary has no answer to these questions the person may go and consult the diviner again. I remember well in our early days in the Karen village of Sop Lahn. A foot and mouth disease had killed several cows. One day a Christian elder went to consult a seer in order to know what he could do to stop the disease. The non-Christian seer told him to kill a pig and ask the Christians to come and pray at his house. I was very glad that the pastor of the village took the opportunity to teach the elder as well as the church about this practice. We were going to pray but without any pig being killed.

“Kingdom Theology is systemic”⁹⁴

In contrast to conversion theology which is individualistic, kingdom theology aims at the entire cultural system to be changed. Not only the individual but the whole family, village or tribal group with its customs and laws needs to be influenced and adapted to the laws of the Kingdom. The different ceremonies and rituals need to be adapted from giving acknowledgment and honor to the devil and the spirits to give honor to the all-powerful God who has made heaven and earth. Animistic tribal culture is in opposition to individualism – decisions are taken together. They think of the wider family and community as an entity. It has been interesting to see how one of our leading evangelists built a big church in a village where only about ten houses had become Christians. When I asked him about, he said: “When the whole village is going to believe we need that space.” It is obvious that Kingdom theology gives a better foundation for ministry among people with an animistic worldview than an evangelical conversion theology will provide.

⁹³ It might be comparable to what Paul is hinting at in Ephesians 2:6 and 3:10.

⁹⁴ Van Rheezen, 140.

Kingdom theology is taking miraculous biblical stories seriously and literally

Western liberal theology takes the story and asks, where is the “Sitz im Leben” – what is the real teaching behind the story, what was the historical saying of Jesus and what has been the editor’s (Redaktor’s) work.

Traditional evangelical theology has often asked, “What is the spiritual truth behind the story?” The blind man stands for the spiritually blind. The leper stands as a type for the sinner.

Kingdom Theology takes the story as it happened then and wonders what needs to be done that this will also happen today! It wants the Age to Come to break into This Age. But it has to take into account “the already” and the “not yet” of the Kingdom. It is obvious which of the three approaches comes nearest to the thinking of an animist.

Kingdom theology anticipates an ideal Kingdom under God’s reign

Kingdom theology is working for and looking forward to the re-establishment of God’s complete reign over heaven and earth without interference of evil spirits. The rebellion and corruption which occurred in ancient times has brought us sin and death and an enemy who fights a fierce but losing battle against God and His people. But God has promised to create a new heaven and a new earth. He has promised his people the bodily resurrection into HIS Kingdom. This promise gives hope for those who long for an ideal state and harmony as we have seen that this is the case in many tribal cultures.⁹⁵ Jesus himself is the fulfillment of this longing and he will come to bring into completion what he has said. His teaching when followed, allow people to live in harmony and peace. Kingdom theology gives an explanation why harmony is tested and has to be looked for actively. It also gives a vision and hope for the future when this harmony will be completely re-established.

Kingdom theology proclaims Jesus as the Victor

Fear is one of the main driving forces in the life of animists. Kingdom theology proclaims Jesus as the victor who has overcome the enemy. If we are in Jesus we do not need to fear the spirits because all power is given to Jesus. If we stay humbly under God’s mighty hand, the devil which goes around like a roaring lion will not be able to devour us. Because Jesus has won the victory on the cross and through his resurrection all glory and worship belongs to HIM.

While not each of these 10 points is found exclusively in Kingdom of God Theology, yet in their being found together it is unique.

⁹⁵ See point 5 on page 10.

Pitfalls to avoid

Dualism

In some respect Kingdom theology comes very close to a dualistic view. Here is the reign of Satan (This Age) and there the reign of God (Age to Come) breaking into This Age. But we have to remember: “There are not two spheres but one. God loves the world and enters into it. He comes to seek and save the lost and redeem the world to Himself.”⁹⁶ When we speak about spiritual warfare we have to make it clear that the war has been won by Christ. Satan is unequal to God - he is created by God. He is rebelling against God but that does not put him on the same stage. When God’s time has come his time comes to an end.

For people with an animistic background the danger of falling into this pit of dualism is real, since in their old belief they were sacrificing and praying to different kinds of spirits while God has been far off for them. So if they think God is not intervening on their behalf they may be tempted to offer prayer and sacrifice to the spirits again. With new Christians the supremacy of God has to be established firmly.

Triumphalism

The animist conceives the relationship with spirits in terms of power. Animism is a power religion and therefore power is the kind of belief he is looking for. It is easy to see that this can lead to triumphalism. Aware of this danger Van Rheenen writes:

Therefore, the preaching of the triumphal savior who defeated the principalities and powers must be tempered with the preaching of the God who suffers, cries, and finally punishes when humanity sins and the relationship with him has been broken. Christianity is a religion of love based on a relationship with sovereign God in Jesus Christ.⁹⁷

It is a must to point the animist to the cross. The cross signifies liberation but also suffering. The animist wants a religion to avoid suffering. But the cross shows him that the Lord suffered and that his followers may have to suffer, too. “The cross offers a theology of suffering to explain why the Christian suffers even though he is in Christ.”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Stephen C.R. Taylor. *Theological Foundation for Ministry*. Documentation for the DMin course at BBS in Bangkok, 10th-14th Oct. 2011, 9.

⁹⁷ Van Rheenen, 302f.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 304.

A religion of doing and fighting in once own strength

As we have seen the animist is prone to a religion of works and actively seeking his own redemption. He thinks it is in his hand to find happiness and success you only need to know the key to it.

Wright puts it very clear: “Let’s be quite clear on two points. First, God builds God’s kingdom.”⁹⁹ But he does it through human beings who reflect his image.

And, following the disaster of rebellion and corruption, he has built into the gospel message the fact that, through the work of Jesus and the power of the Spirit, he equips humans to help in the work of getting the project back on track. ... The second point is to distinguish between the final kingdom and the present anticipations of it. ... He alone will make the ‘new heavens and new earth’. It would be the height of folly to think that we could assist in that great work.¹⁰⁰

It has to be taught very clearly that it is not our works which saves us, not our doing which will be pleasing to our God but it is God’s grace on his beloved children that makes the difference. It is also his grace that he honors us to be his co-workers.

Using a Christianized animistic worldview as foundation for theology

“Today there is a danger of returning to a Christianized animism in reaction to the secularism of the modern worldview.”¹⁰¹ Especially in some of the books of Charles Kraft and Peter C. Wagner I have felt uneasy how far they have used animistic views to build their theories on.

In confronting animistic worldviews, our central message should always focus on the greatness, holiness and power of God, and his work in human lives.¹⁰²

3. Summary

Kingdom of God Theology gives a firm biblical foundation for the ministry in an animistic context. As I have shown, Kingdom theology is much more relevant to an animist than a traditional individualistic conversion theology. Kingdom theology gives so many points of contact to the animistic worldview. Therefore it is easier to explain the Gospel of the Kingdom in these terms because some of the strong felt needs of an animist are dealt with. Still, we have to be aware of some

⁹⁹ Wright, 218.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 218f.

¹⁰¹ Hiebert, 413.

¹⁰² Ibid, 414.

pitfalls which need to be avoided or rectified. The suffering servant can be used as a corrective to the power religion which an animist is looking for.

As we have considered the reality of spiritual powers, the missionary must be aware of the spiritual battle that is going on. The sovereignty of God, his greatness and power and his work in human life needs to be at the focus of the message to the animist. This needs to be done with a passion for God as the animist's passion for self is challenged. By proclaiming God's sovereignty and giving total allegiance to him, the principalities and powers are overcome.

IV. How should God be taught to Karen with an animistic background?

1. Using poems (*hta*), stories and sayings of the old

The early missionaries in Burma did well when they used *hta* and stories from the Karen tradition. They initiated an amazing movement to Christ which has lasted. As we have seen *hta* and Karen stories help people to perceive God not as foreign but as one of them. Especially in (pre-) evangelism it is a great asset. I remember going into villages with Mr. Dipae and how people were eager to hear his stories and as he compared it with the teaching of the Bible. Even though the knowledge of stories and *hta* has diminished (especially among Christians!) it is still an excellent tool to reach out with the Good News. It also gives opportunity to ask the Karen about their knowledge of *hta* which then can lead to interaction, instead of ignoring their knowledge about *Y'wa*. Some missionaries have collected a great deal of *hta*¹⁰³ and used them successfully. Besides conveying spiritual truth about God it also helps to better be accepted by animistic Karen. "In everyday negotiation, appropriate use of proverbial expressions, metaphors, and stories are appreciated as a mark of a leader."¹⁰⁴ Therefore, to use *hta* and stories of the *Y'wa* tradition in teaching about God is an excellent tool.

2. Teaching God's redemptive plan chronologically with stories from the Bible

McIlwain's program "Building on Firm Foundations"¹⁰⁵ - especially phase I + II - are an excellent tool to teach those who are interested in knowing God or have already decided to become Christians. It is teaching creation with special reference to God's characteristics. Karen like to hear the creation story and McIlwain uses it very well to show who God is. This is an excellent tool to counter wrong images of *Y'wa*. Since Karen Buddhists and Karen Animists use *Y'wa* as the word to refer to their images of god, it is essential to build a solid foundation of who God is.

Secondly, the redemptive plan gives a structure in order to understand God better. The bits and pieces which have been handed down through tradition will find together to a whole picture about God and his plan.

¹⁰³ E.g. Ed Hudspeth, retired missionary of KBC. Keith Hale (WEC) has produced several CD's with *hta* and he gives short explanations on it. He recently has published an evangelistic booklet based on *hta*.

¹⁰⁴ Hayama, 282.

¹⁰⁵ Trevor McIlwain, *Building on Firm Foundations, Vol. 1-4*. (Sandford, FL: New Tribes Mission, 1987-1988).

Thirdly, the Karen get to know the Bible as one book with one message which helps them to understand that the Bible is the lost book, found.

Fourthly, it emphasizes grace in contrast to a legalistic view which animists in general are prone to fall into.¹⁰⁶ Saw Hay Moo sees one of the main problems in reaching the Karen with the Gospel in the fact that they do not have an understanding of sin. "It is a fact that because of the rich religious culture of the Karen, it is not pleasant to speak about sin. . . . They may want to hear only positive things about themselves and their culture."¹⁰⁷ He then goes on to say that "The Karen people feel they are righteous on their own right. They may argue that they are moral and upright."¹⁰⁸

As pointed out earlier, I have not found holiness as a characteristic of *Y'wa*. Could it be that because of the lack of understanding "holiness" in the first place, that there is no understanding of sin? For a Karen animist "sin" may have mainly to do with doing a ritual in a wrong way or breaking an ethical taboo which of course will have grave consequences for him. This misunderstanding of sin - because there is no divine perfection to measure human imperfection - then leads to a lack of understanding of grace. Again, phase I of the chronological teaching of McIlwain is correcting this misunderstanding since through all the stories he again and again points to God's holiness, the sinfulness of man, and the judgment of sin by God.

In order to make clear who the God revealed in the Bible is we have been teaching the redemptive plan of God chronologically by telling Bible stories. Emil Brunner once said: "Each and every people must somehow follow the way which God went with his own people."¹⁰⁹ The benefits of teaching God's redemptive plan can be summarized under seven points:¹¹⁰

1. God's character and attributes will be taught thoroughly through the creation story as McIlwain has done it¹¹¹
2. It gives new believers a clear structure for their faith.

¹⁰⁶ Hans Bär, *Heilsgeschichtlicher Bibelunterricht*, 113.

¹⁰⁷ Saw Hay Moo, 187.

¹⁰⁸ Saw Hay Moo, 188.

¹⁰⁹ „Jedes einzelne Volk muss irgendwie diesen Weg, den Gott mit seinem Volk gegangen ist, nachgehen,“ Emil Brunner, „Die Unentbehrlichkeit des Alten Testaments für die missionierende Kirche (1934),“ in *Ein offenes Wort* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981), 392.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Bär, *Heilsgeschichtlicher Bibelunterricht*, 128-129.

¹¹¹ Trevor McIlwain, *Building on Firm Foundations, Vol. 2, Evangelism: The Old Testament* (Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission, 1988). Lesson 5-10.

3. God's redemptive plan is anchored in history. In that way it helps to guard against viewing the Bible stories as mythology on the same level as the tribal tradition.
4. Old Testament and New Testament are seen as one book with one message.
5. Telling God's redemptive plan along stories is a guard against legalism.
6. It brings out very clearly that Jesus is the unique Son of God.
7. It results in a biblical basis of mission. Our age is the age of missions until Jesus returns.

Just to recite Pathi Dipae, an older man of Sop Lahn church (Omkoï) again: He said to me: "We have known that there is God (*Y'wa*) but we did not know him. Now we know him through the missionary's teaching of the Bible."

3. Preaching the Kingdom of God - the relevance of Kingdom Theology for animists¹¹²

Building on what we have learned in the last chapter, I would like to show an approach to teach the Word of God which has great relevance to the animist. Our western individualistic theology of conversion one by one, will not be understood or misunderstood in an animistic culture. I remember a weekend outreach to a Karen village where there was a small church. After the preaching I challenged each one in the congregation to stand up if he or she wants to follow Jesus with new commitment. At first the attendants were not sure what to do. Then there was a little talk going on whether they should stand up or not. One man suggested that they all should stand up since the missionary had come to them. So everybody stood and we prayed. This incident confirmed to me that tribal people usually do not make individual decisions but are looking for a common one. Usually a whole family decides to become Christians or even two or three families in a village together. Our individualistic approach is often irrelevant.

We also need to understand that the message of the Bible is not only about confession of sin and conversion. A message that is relevant to the animist will also be about Jesus coming into this world to destroy the works of the devil. It is about the truth that God reigns, as David proclaims it "The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all."¹¹³ Or as John saw it

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For

¹¹² Cf. Van Rheenen, 127-142.

¹¹³ Psalm 103:19.

the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.¹¹⁴

The kingdom of God has got a cosmic dimension which needs to be proclaimed among animists. This is more appropriate than just wait for an individual reaction. Already in the Old Testament we find the word “king” over 40 times. There is a clear thread through it that God reigns.¹¹⁵ The gospel of Matthew refers to the Kingdom of God very often, especially with the parables in chapter 13. Besides Jesus was proclaiming the Kingdom of God¹¹⁶ and he says “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”¹¹⁷ To cast out demons is a sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God. David Burnett concludes:

Christians from a background of folk religion need to develop a worldview and theology that acknowledges the demonic, but does not continue to captivate them. They, like all Christians need to have their eyes fixed upon the Lord Jesus Christ who has all power and authority. We all must be aware of the radical nature of the Kingdom of God that manifests not merely the power of God, but the shalom of God that transforms people and societies.¹¹⁸

Kingdom theology does this. The young Christians among the Karen usually speak a lot about the devil (*mue-kaw-li*). It is their world of spiritual experience and source of fear. The more mature Christians speak and teach more about God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. They still are aware of the evil spirits but the devil does not captivate them anymore.

Kingdom theology offers a worldview to the animist which he can easily understand. Bad or ambivalent spirits belong to the kingdom of Satan. Worship of the Highest God who has made heaven and earth belongs to the Kingdom of God. Demon possession, magic and divination belong to Satan’s dominion. But God protects his children from evil spirits.

Kingdom theology introduces God’s authority and power to the believer and gives him the power to overcome the power of darkness through Jesus Christ.

Kingdom theology does not open a gap between the natural and the supernatural. God controls the physical and the spiritual world.

¹¹⁴ Revelation 12:10.

¹¹⁵ Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Judges 8:22-23; 1Samuel 8,1-8; Isaiah 52:7; Daniel 2:44; 7:13-18.

¹¹⁶ Matthew 4:23-24.

¹¹⁷ Matthew 12:28.

¹¹⁸ David G. Burnett, *Spiritual Conflict and Folk Religion* (<https://www.lausanne.org/content/folk-religion> [26.12.2016]).

While a theology of conversion aims at the individual, kingdom theology wants to influence the whole culture. Not only the individual believer should give himself to God but traditions and laws which have been distorted by the influence of Satan shall be renewed under the authority of Jesus Christ. The dominion of Christ shall be seen in all areas of life, not only in one's personal life.

What excites the animist most is Christ the triumphant who has overcome all dominions and powers

having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.¹¹⁹

Conversion therefore is not only to be saved personally but it is the redemption from all evil powers. There is a danger of triumphalism but on the other hand without God's power the animist cannot be freed from the powers of Satan. That Christ's triumph has been accomplished through the cross is in itself a help not to fall into the trap of triumphalism.

4. Summary

The living God is at work today, he is not *otis*, but sign and wonders are signs of the coming of his Kingdom. Therefore to teach "Kingdom of God Theology" is essential in an animistic context. But there is not just one approach to teach animistic Karen about God. We have looked at three different approaches.

In the first place, we should use the many points of contact which are given in their rich tradition. It helps them to realize that the Gospel is not foreign to them but that they have not understood it yet.

The many shortcomings can be corrected by teaching the redemptive plan of God along stories from the Bible. The new concept of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man can be introduced through the many different stories leading to the meaning of the cross, the ultimate sacrifice God has made for us in order to redeem us.

But with any animist, teaching alone is not enough. They need to see the power of the living God as well. When they see that God answers their prayers or when they experience that evil spirits have to leave "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ of Nazareth who came in the flesh," they are likely to adhere to this new way of life.

¹¹⁹ Colossians 2:14-15.

Appendix 1 Karen stories of the *Y'wa* tradition¹²⁰

“Father God said, My son and daughter, Father will make and give you a garden. In the garden are seven different kinds of trees, bearing seven different kinds of fruit. Among the seven, one tree is not good to eat. Eat not of its fruit. If you eat you will become old, you will die. Eat not. All I have created I give to you. Eat and drink with care. Once in seven days I will visit you. All I have commanded you, observe and do. Forget me not. Pray to me every morning and night.”

“Afterwards Satan came and said, ‘Why are you here?’ ‘Our Father God put us here,’ they replied. ‘What do you eat here?’ Satan inquired. ‘Our Father God created your food.’ And they went, with Satan following behind them, to show him. On arriving at the garden, they showed him the fruits, saying, ‘This is sweet, this is sour, this is bitter, this is astringent, this is savory, this is fiery, but this tree, we know not whether it is sour or sweet. Our Father God said to us, Eat not the fruit of this tree, if you eat, you will die. We eat not, and do not know whether it be sour or sweet.’ ‘Not so, O my children,’ Satan replied; ‘the heart of your Father God is not with you; this is the richest and sweetest. It is richer than the others, sweeter than the others, and not merely richer and sweeter, but, if you eat it, you will possess miraculous powers, you will be able to ascend into heaven, and descend into the earth; you will be able to fly. The heart of your God is not with you. This desirable thing he has not given you. My heart is not like the heart of your God. He is not honest. He is envious. I am honest. I am not envious. I love you, and tell you the whole. If you do not believe me, do not eat it. Let each one eat, carefully, a single fruit, then you will know.’ The man replied, ‘Our Father God said to us, Eat not the fruit of this tree, and we eat it not.’ Thus saying, he rose up and went away. But the woman listened to Satan, and thinking what he said rather proper, remained. Satan deceived her completely, and she said to him, ‘If we eat, shall we, indeed, be able to fly?’ ‘My son and daughter,’ Satan replied, ‘I persuade you because I love you.’ The woman took one of the fruit and ate. And Satan, laughing, said, ‘My daughter, you listen to me well; now go, give the fruit to your husband, and say to him, I have eaten the fruit; it is exceedingly rich. If he does not eat, deceive him, that he may eat.’ The woman, doing as Satan told her, went and coaxed her husband, till she won him over to her own mind, and he took the fruit from the hand of his wife and ate. When he had eaten, she went to Satan, and said, ‘My husband has eaten the fruit.’ On hearing that, he laughed exceedingly, and said, ‘Now you have listened to me, very good, my son and daughter.’”

“The day after they had eaten, early in the morning, God visited them, but they did not (as they had been wont to do) follow him, singing praises. He approached

¹²⁰ Francis Mason, *The Karen Apostle*. Revised by H.J. Ripley (Boston: Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln, 1847). Copyright: BiblioLife, LLC, 98-99.

them, and said, ‘Why have you eaten the fruit of the tree that I commanded you not to eat?’ They did not dare to reply, and God cursed them. ‘Now you have not observed what I commanded you,’ he said; ‘the fruit that is not good to eat, I told you not to eat, but you have not listened, and have eaten. Therefore you shall become old, you shall be sick, and you shall die.’”

“After this, one of their children became very sick, and the man and his wife said to each other, We did not observe God’s command, ‘Of the fruit of the tree eat not,’ but we ate. Now, what shall we do? God has cast us off; we cannot tell what to do. We must go and see Satan, and ask him. They arose and went to him. ‘O Satan,’ they said, ‘God commanded us, Eat not of that fruit. Thou saidst, Eat; and we hearkened to thy words, and ate. Now, our child is sick; what wilt thou say? What wilt thou devise?’ Satan replied, ‘To your Father God you did not hearken; you hearkened unto me; now that you have hearkened unto me, hearken unto me to the end.’”

Appendix 2 *hta* (Karen poems)

Ywa gave us the leather book;

The book disappeared before dark;
white ants and red ants took it away.

Ywa gave us the white book.

The book disappeared before evening.
White ants and red ants carried it away.

Found again the bits and pieces;
Thrust them in above the ridge pole

A yellow hen chanced to fly by;
The book dropped down and was destroyed.

Pigs rooted it, chickens scratched, buried it.
Don't know what to do.

Only the cover remains above the ridge pole.

The chickens have the good part in their bones.

The pigs have the good part in their gall bladders.
henceforth observe the ancestral rites.¹²¹

The following *hta* about creation was recorded by a missionary in early 20th century¹²²

God took up foam

It became a banyan's flower

Foam was what God took up

It became a banyan's seed

...

When the earth was firstly formed

It was void and without form

When the earth was newly made

It was formless and empty

...

Termite ate and arranged the earth

Edolius made it, God formed it

¹²¹ Anders P. Hovemyr, *In Search of the Karen King: A Study in Karen Identity with Special Reference to 19th Century Karen Evangelism in Northern Thailand* (Upsala: Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia, 1989), 67.

¹²² Hayama Yoko, *Between Hills and Plains. Power and Practice in Socio-Religious Dynamics among Karen* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2004), 284. Cited from H.M.N. Armstrong, *Karen Folklore: An Unwritten Bible*. MS. Chiang Mai: Payap University Archives.

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