Painting Pentecost

Painter Sawai Chinnawong saturates the outpouring of the Spirit with the colors Thai art traditionally associates with the holy.

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OPEN TO THE SPIRIT: Sawai Chinnawong's 1997 painting *Pentecost* (acrylic on canvas) puts Christian disciples in the position and postures assumed by the Buddha in Thai Buddhist art. COURTESY OF SAWAI CHINNAWONG

Over the past century the Christian center of gravity has been shifting from the Euro-American West to the Global South, where the prevailing forms of Christianity are Pentecostal and charismatic in character. It's not just that these are the fastest growing denominations. More significantly, the broad range of Christian traditions—including Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches around the world—are being touched and invigorated by Pentecostal and charismatic renewal.

One place where we can see expression of this is in art. The work of Thai artist Sawai Chinnawong, for example, gives a glimpse into the renewing presence of the Holy Spirit in other settings around the globe. In his painting *Pentecost*, Chinnawong depicts Acts 2:1–4. On the Jewish day of Pentecost all of Jesus' disciples are gathered in one place when a sound like a violent wind fills the house, and "they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them" (Acts 2:3–4, NIV). The text links the tongues of fire with a proliferation of speech in other tongues, reminding us of Jesus' pronouncement that when the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples it will propel them as witnesses from Jerusalem throughout Judea and Samaria and even "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Although many artists have depicted this event, Chinnawong does so in surprising ways. He situates the Pentecost event within the traditions of Buddhist painting. The bright red and gold colors, along with the triple-peaked blue sawtooth *sinthao* line at the top of the image, identify a holy space. In Thai painting it is common to see the Buddha seated in the center of this space, often with his head surrounded by a stylized flame similar to the one filling the center of *Pentecost*. But where one might expect to find the singular figure of Buddha, instead one sees a community organized around a massive holy fire that is repeated in the small tongues of fire burning above each of the disciples' heads. The Holy Spirit fills the space and the disciples, burning intensely but not as a consuming fire.

Paintings of this subject traditionally associate the tongues of fire with the tops of the disciples' heads. Chinnawong borrows this convention but seems to emphasize that the outpouring of the Spirit is filling the disciples, enlivening their minds and

their bodies. They gesture and “speak” (speech is conveyed in painting by bodily motion more than by open mouths) with a joy that is striking in its individuality and its commonality: their speech is an array of colorful patterns and gestures all vitalized and unified by the Spirit.

Chinnawong’s painting leads us to reflect and reconsider the implications of this outpouring as it relates to the global dynamics of Christian thought and practice. It is the Holy Spirit that propels Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth, and it is through the Spirit that people encounter God existentially and historically. Christian theology also ought to have such a starting point and acknowledge that it is the Holy Spirit that makes our encounters with God possible. Renewal movements realign traditional theological approaches by bringing the person and work of the Spirit into the foreground and reminding us that the Son and the Father come into focus through the Spirit.

Sawai Chinnawong is an ethnic Mon who was born in Burma and raised in Thailand in a Theravada Buddhist home. After losing both parents he moved to Bangkok to live with two older sisters. He decided to study art, and during his time as a student he became deeply curious about a Christian community located near his house. At age 23 he was baptized into the Christian church. For more than two decades he has devoted his artistic practice to painting biblical (or theological) images, while acknowledging and embracing his own cultural context. As Chinnawong says:

> I believe Jesus Christ is present in every culture, and I have chosen to celebrate his presence in our lives through Thai traditional cultural forms. . . . My belief is that Jesus did not choose just one people to hear his Word but chose to make his home in every human heart. And just as his Word may be spoken in every language, so the visual message can be shared in the beauty of the many styles of artistry around the world. (ArtWay.com)

Chinnawong’s work and beliefs have been controversial. The pastor who baptized him, for example, told Chinnawong that his artwork was “Buddhist” and that he must reconsider his entire approach to painting now that he was a Christian. Chinnawong responded by abandoning painting to attend seminary at the McGilvary Faculty of Theology at Payap University in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. In this period of his life, the language of Christian belief was incompatible with the modes of visual meaning that he knew—or at least all those that were indigenously Thai. This changed in 1984 when he attended a series of lectures on the history of

Christian art by Nalini Jayasuriya, a Sri Lankan Christian artist and professor who focused on Asian examples of Christian art. The lectures stimulated Chinnawong's imagination, launched him back into his artistic practice, and persuaded him that he must live into the gospel as a Thai artist.

In *Pentecost*, Chinnawong's adoption and adaptation of Thai Buddhist imagery are evident in several ways. In Thai painting gold and red are strongly associated with the holy: red is associated with a sacred life force, while gold (particularly in the form of fire) signifies a blazing divine energy. Chinnawong saturates the outpouring of the Spirit with these colors.

The gestures and postures of the disciples are also drawn from Thai painting. We might associate their gestures with the ancient *orans* posture of prayer (raised open hands) depicted in early Christian Roman paintings, but hand gestures are also common in Thai Buddhist iconography. Many of the disciples' gestures resemble the Buddhist *abhaya mudra*—a sign of spiritual power, fearlessness, and reassurance often seen in images of the standing Buddha. Chinnawong thus uses a symbol of liberation from fear to articulate the courage and boldness associated with the filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:13, 29). The upward-facing open hands of the *varada mudra* are an expression of compassion, giving, and willful acceptance. In the upper right corner of the painting, one disciple touches his index finger to his thumb. This suggests *vitarka mudra*, the gesture of wise teaching. In addition to hand gestures, the dancing of the disciples is reminiscent of images of flying deities and holy men, which are ubiquitous in Thai Buddhist painting. But here the energetic enlivenment depicted in Buddhist "flyers" is reassigned to an earthy Spirit-filled joyful dance. In all of these examples, the Buddhist iconography of spiritual power serves to illustrate the Spirit's power filling the church.

Thus in Chinnawong's *Pentecost* the tongues of fire are "articulated" in the visual language(s) of traditional Thai painting. As his painting comes from one end of the earth and this essay from another, the many tongues of the Acts 2 event invite theology in the third millennium to speak in the many languages of the peoples, nations, and tribes of the world. And this invitation points not only to the wide variety of verbal and written languages around the globe but also to a range of visual, musical, and kinesthetic "languages" and forms of meaning. For Chinnawong this includes the hope that Christian theology might be able to think eloquently within the visual vernacular of Thailand, notwithstanding the fact that this implies speaking and thinking in visual grammars inherited from Thai Buddhism.

Beyond the presumed incorporation of Global South perspectives, the many tongues of Pentecost are not only heard but also seen and felt. Chinnawong illustrates this in the way he pictures the exuberance of the disciples as they are filled with the Spirit, but even more significant is the very fact that a painting is the site for Chinnawong's theology. The throbbing red visual field, the winding linear forms of the disciples against the otherwise geometrical composition, the play between symmetry and asymmetry—these things carry meaning in ways that are different than in verbalized theology. For much of Christian history, visual art has functioned alongside verbal and written commentaries as a means of facilitating exegesis and theological interpretation of scriptural texts (and, like written commentaries, with varying degrees of effectiveness and orthodoxy). The benefits of employing images in scriptural exegesis reside in their capacities to drive readers toward concrete considerations of the realities behind the text, to facilitate empathetic and affective participation in the text, and to sensitize readers to how a text might operate in poetic and aesthetic registers of meaning. A sometimes overly intellectualized and conceptualized Western theological tradition can benefit from opening up to other aesthetic modalities of meaning.

For Thai viewers, this painting generates meaning in a very challenging way. The iconography and symbolism used to discuss a holy, enlightened, and fully alive human person within a Buddhist framework is here redeployed to discuss holiness, enablement, and enlivenment within a Christian understanding. This is a provocative strategy, and, as already noted, it is controversial with fellow Thai Christians. In his essay, "The Art of Sawai Chinnawong," William Yoder has noted that because the Thai Christian community often perceives Chinnawong's art as "Buddhist" and therefore believes "good" Christians should shun it, Thai Christians are much less likely to accept his Thai formulations and expressions of Christian concepts.

However, as Thai Christians continue to disentangle and differentiate Christianity from the Western cultural forms that have often carried it, the unease that Chinnawong's paintings provoke might be of real value. By reimagining scriptural narratives in a Thai visual form, he can help Thai Christians realize that their rich cultural heritage does not lie beyond the intelligibility of the radically many tongues of Pentecost.

For entirely different reasons, Chinnawong's image can also be challenging for Western viewers. On the one hand, in the context of the high art world this painting would be dismissed as didactic, beholden to the operations of what David Morgan

calls “visual piety” (from his book, *Visual Piety*). In the context of Western churches, on the other hand, the challenge of this painting is in its unfamiliarity. The colors, clothing, gestures, setting, and stylizations all deviate from (or heavily revise) Euro-American ideas of what a painting of Pentecost should look like. This disruption of expectations and our subsequent scrambling to make sense of the image is valuable: it may lead us to imagine and interpret the Pentecost event with a fresh alertness to the text.

Looking at the Acts 2 narrative through Chinnawong’s eyes might lead us to realize that our familiarity with the text has domesticated the strangeness that the original readers felt. On the one hand, we can think about how what Acts 2:2–4 communicates was first encountered—audibly (sound rushing), visually (fire alighting), perceptually (tongues of fire resting), and verbally (human tongues speaking). Chinnawong reminds us that behind the narrative are real, embodied encounters with the living God.

On the other hand, think about how those from the synagogue must have reacted to the fact that in addition to Jews and proselytes, “Cretans and Arabs” were receiving the Spirit (Acts 2:9–11). If we contemporary Christians doubt that Thai Buddhist cultural dynamics can be appropriate mediators of the gospel message, we may need to remind ourselves that some who had traditional views of God’s election of the Jewish people were aghast that even Cretans, who were considered to be “liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons” (Tit. 1:12, NRSV), were “speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11).

Last but not least, these considerations lead to the insistence that the many tongues of Pentecost exist not for their own sakes but for enabling Christ’s disciples to declare the wonders of God (Acts 2:11) and bear witness to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The sights, sounds, and words emanating from the Pentecost event are not just informative but performative: disciples are moved into relationship with others in anticipation of the coming reign of God.

Chinnawong’s *Pentecost* does not insist on depicting the event exactly as it unfolded in Acts 2. Instead it’s a distinctly modern Thai visualization of the event—or a distinctly modern Thai reiteration of the event. Whereas Pentecost is almost always depicted as a gathering of 12 Jewish male apostles (a symbolic allusion to the church as the new or reconstituted Israel), Chinnawong presents a community of 11 Thai Christians, including both men and women and even one child. This highlights the

“all” who were gathered on the day of Pentecost, which certainly included women and children.

It also prompts us to see this as another event altogether: the outpouring of the Spirit in a room in 21st-century Bangkok rather than first-century Jerusalem. Chinnawong sets the scene here not out of disregard for the historical particularity of the original event but as a means of imagining and visually praying for the Spirit’s presence in his own historical moment. For Chinnawong, the Holy Spirit’s filling is not isolated to a single event, a particular moment, or one place but may be repeated at any time and place and for any people. Thus the circle of believers being filled with the Spirit is repeatedly repopulated and renewed.

As in the *Pentecost* painting, the movement of the Spirit both turns the disciples toward each other and opens them outward toward us on *this* side of the picture plane. While the *sinthao* line denotes holy space in Buddhist art, in this context it may also be a stylized mountain range, suggesting that Pentecost opens ever outward across global and historical expanses. The very act of projecting Pentecost into a modern Thai vernacular implies the outpouring of the Spirit across temporal, spatial, and sociocultural localities, even “to the ends of the earth” and to the ends of the ages. The day of Pentecost thus historically anticipates a day when people of many tongues, tribes, and nations will gather around the throne of God.

The Spirit’s outpouring exists not only on the day of Pentecost. Lives are continuously being touched through the Spirit’s empowered witness (Acts 1:8). Chinnawong invites others to be filled with the Spirit whom he has experienced. If the Spirit’s outpouring did not include Thai Buddhists 2,000 years ago, today the Spirit is touching many Thai people and may touch many more.

There are new opportunities for Christian theology in the third millennium if it takes seriously the renewal movement around the world. Doing so invites us to see afresh the Spirit of Pentecost introducing all peoples to the Son in order to reconcile them to the Father and enabling witness to the Son and the Father through many tongues, cultures, and peoples. God is empowering human beings to participate in and perform the truth proclaimed by the Spirit of Christ.

This article is adapted from the forthcoming book by Amos Yong and Jonathan A. Anderson, Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity *(Baylor University Press).*