

Buddhism in Public Sphere and Concept of Religion: State-Religion Relationship in Contemporary Thailand¹

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1. Introduction

The concept of religion is deeply connected with secularization and state-religion relationship in modern Western society. On the other hand, secularization, especially the decline and privatization of religion, is not necessarily a universal phenomenon in modern societies. Thailand, where Buddhism plays an important public role, is such an exceptional case. Therefore, focusing on religion in Thailand, which has a unique state-religion relationship, sheds light on an aspect of religion that typically receives little attention.

In this research, I focused on “monarch,” “morals and ethics,” and “religious activities by the government.” These three spheres are loosely connected and form a kind of public religion or “public Buddhism” in contemporary Thailand. This is neither the Buddhism practiced by monks in a temple nor the Buddhism practiced by people in local communities. This is a type of Buddhism in which the government takes a leading role. Moreover, it is constructed in a modern society and is based on religious nationalism. This type of Buddhism in the public sphere is not only used as a symbol of the cultural and spiritual unity of the people, but also as a resource by which the government tackles various administrative projects.

Examples of studies on this type of Buddhism in the public sphere include research on the ideological dimension of the monarch’s role in Buddhist cosmology and socio-political studies about the role of monarchy or government in a monastic administration [Tambiah 1976, Ishii 1986]. But these studies do not

mention the religious dimension of the monarchy itself and its transformation in modern society. The relationship between the religiosity of the monarch and the governmental administration is also not covered in these studies. In other cases, Buddhism is viewed as morals and ethics in Thai public education. However, the researchers, especially foreign researchers, consider such discourse as an official position and as separate from the real practical Buddhism. Furthermore, many researchers do not focus on the religious activities led or supported by the government. This may be because such governmental intervention in religion is undesirable within their normative position. This lack of homogeneity in research may be influenced by the images of “religion” or “Buddhism” that are constructed in modern Western society. In this context, the following topics may shed a new light on religion, especially Buddhism.

2. Relationship between State and Religion in Thailand²

To consider the state-religion relationships in modern and contemporary Thailand an analysis must first establish the relationship between the two in pre-modern Thailand. During this period, the monarch gave financial and labor support to the Buddhist Sangha, each monarch was charged with preserving the teachings of Buddha, purifying the Sangha by enforcing the moral discipline of monks, and observing the ten royal virtues or “*thosaphit rachatham*.”³ This monarch was called the righteous ruler, “*Thammarat*,” and the monarchy was based on Buddhist teachings and ancient Thai law. The maintenance of Buddhist Sangha and its teachings provided the rule of the monarch with an appearance of legitimacy.

However, although the Buddhist Sangha had authority over the spiritual dimension of the monarch, it did not have the same control over his political rule. A lack of political and economic power kept the Sangha from being involved in political matters. Furthermore, at this point in time, the kingdom’s temples were

not unified, which prevented the Sangha from obtaining the strength it would need to become politically influential. Furthermore, although the majority of the populace practiced Buddhism, this was sometimes syncretized with indigenous spiritual beliefs.⁴

Modernization of the polity in Thailand has progressed from this monarch-Sangha relationship. Previously, temples and monks filled the gap between traditional and modern education systems. The modern Thai education system had been developed since the end of 19th century by utilizing temples as schools and monks as teachers. In 1921, the Thai government passed legislation making primary education mandatory. This resulted in an increase of the number of lay people trained as teachers, forcing monks to step away from their role in education. Furthermore, teaching also shifted to a more secularized focus based on developing a scientific worldview. Today, as a vestige of an earlier time, many schools are located in or adjoined to temples.

During the time of this change in the education system, temples and monks across the country united under the banner of the Thai Buddhist Sangha, an organization that exists even today. Since this change, Buddhism has been treated as a core institution of modern Thailand. Since the 1930's, Thailand has operated with the triad of monarch, religion, and people or nation as the main components of Thai life.

Even after the 1932 political revolution that transformed the country from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy this triumvirate was maintained, even so far as to it being taught in public schools. However, as politics again shifted from a monarch to political parties and career bureaucrats, including military personnel, little political power was left to the monarch. The Thai constitution identifies the country's political system as a "democracy with a sovereign monarch," and the monarch as the commander-in-chief of the army. Regarding religion, the

constitution stipulates that the “monarch is a Buddhist and a supreme protector of religion(s).”

Since 1932, the Thai government has also supported religions other than Buddhism, and after 1969, the government went so far as to recognize and approve Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism. These groups have even received support through public funds and have been provided with an opportunity to join in the public education system. Thailand, therefore, has a system of established religions.

The Thai constitution, however, does not identify Buddhism as the official state religion. Even Thai Buddhists are divided about who does and does not require government approval. However, Buddhists comprise almost 95% of the Thai population; at 3%, Muslims are the next largest represented religion, followed by Christians at 0.1%. Because of this, it is not uncommon for the Thai government to consider Buddhism as more important than other religions when allocating funds to public education. Muslims, especially those located in southern Thailand, have an Islamic education system in public schools, but they are the only other case of religious education being provided in the country. Unapproved religious groups have the freedom and right to practice their religion, but do not have privileges like those of established religions in the same country.

3. Monarch and Religion

With regard to the state-religion relationship in Thailand, some areas of religious studies are controversial. Typically, the most controversial of these are the subjects that do not fit under the topics of secularization and division of state and religion. One of these subjects is the role of the monarch. Although the Thai monarch is not a religious person, he is still not able to be included in the secularized state in the strictest sense, as the Thai constitution allocates religious

importance to the monarch.⁵

In traditional Thai society, the monarch is part of the social strata—the legendary origin of society—written in Buddhist scriptures. The monarch is the righteous ruler possessing the ten royal virtues found in Buddhist teaching. Sometimes the monarch was labeled as a “Bodhisattva.” Furthermore, in the enthronement ceremony, the seat of the monarch is made to appear like Mount Sumeru, the center of the continents in Buddhism cosmology; similarly, in the funeral ceremony, the monarch's coffin is also shaped as Mount Sumeru to signify that the monarch is Indra, a God who dwells at the top of Mount Sumeru. In some cases, deceased Thai monarchs are worshiped as spirits having considerable power, for example, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1853-1910), who was responsible for modernizing the Thai state, has been worshiped since around 1990 [Yano 1996]. In other situations, the monarch symbolizes the incarnated Vishnu. Some of these representations still exist and some of Thai individuals believe the monarch to be a reincarnated God or the most moral person in society.

In addition, the constitution identifies that the “monarch is a Buddhist and a supreme protector of religion(s),” which shows that the monarch is intended to support religious plurality.⁶ In 2004, representatives of Muslims living in southern Thailand submitted a petition to the monarch demanding the dismissal of Prime Minister at that time because of his counter-terrorism policies [Post Reporters 2004].

How can such a monarch operate in the modern state-religion relationship? Secularization theory, especially those theories analyzing the decline of the power of the Christian Church in Western society, has a tacit understanding that the monarch is on the side of the secular realm, even though its legitimacy is partially based on a religious dimension. Also, the theory of secularization assumes that the reign by a monarch has shifted to the reign of a secular state without a monarch.

However, in countries such as Thailand and Japan, the monarch has been maintained with a portion of its original spiritual authority and power by “official nationalism.”⁷

Thai Theravada Buddhism and its Sangha are different from the medieval Catholic Church that historically possessed extensive economic and political power. However, both have undergone the same functional differentiation processes, as the result of which they have lost their former roles such as giving an explanation of the natural world, working as educators for children, and establishing legal foundations. But the loss of these social roles not only led to acceptance of the new definition of “religion” in the modern context, but also caused a change in the religious justification for a monarch. Therefore, secularization in Thailand can be found in relation to the change in its monarchy.

That said, it has not yet been determined whether it is possible to analyze the changes in monarchs as an example of privatization and functional differentiation with regard to secularization theory. It is difficult to say that a monarchy is privatized if its authority and power still exist. And it is also difficult to mention the specific social function of the monarch in modern society, because functional differentiation theory is based on modern society wherein a monarch has little or no influence. Therefore, state-religious relationships with modern monarchs may have to be analyzed differently from how secularization or state-religion relationships as usually thought of.

What is the meaning of the religious dimension of a monarch? Is it just a borrowed suit worn to justify political and militant power or is it some unique divinity different from that of authoritative, established religions? Can it be both? In the case of the Thai monarch, who has sometimes been represented as a righteous ruler based on Buddhist teachings, this question is almost unanswerable. While the monarch is viewed as a promoter of modernity, his soul is worshipped as

powerful spirit. Here, the monarch is inclined to be decorated by religious or secular values, but also to sometimes possess his own sacredness or divinity.

When the concept and image of religion has been fixed in the modern Western sense, the monarch and his/her religious dimensions may be forced out and suspended with no certain terms. Focusing on the monarch and his/her evolution in modern society may lead to the reconsideration of the concept of religion in modern society.⁸

4. Morals, Ethics, and Religion

Another point that has not been comprehensively discussed in studies on Thai Buddhism is the relationship of morals and ethics with Buddhism. In general, it is said that once modernization and rationalization developed, the magical dimensions of religion weakened and the moral and ethical dimensions strengthened. This is certainly true in the case of Thai Buddhism. For example, some elements of the Buddhist worldview and practices are treated as morals and ethics suitable to be taught in secular public schools. In the process of modernization, Buddhism lost its authority to explain the natural world, history, and laws, and was absorbed by the state. Now, Buddhism has been changed into a basis for moral and ethical behavior.

However, an important question remains: are the concepts of morals and ethics in the context of Thai Buddhism entirely the same as those formed in modern Western society? For example, modern Thai society gives an emphasis on the moral or ethical dimensions of Buddhism, but the words of morals and ethics are interpreted differently based on Buddhism.

In Thailand, morals and ethics are hard to separate from Buddhism. For example, in the educational curriculum used from the late 1970's until 2001, the subject of moral education in elementary education taught Buddhism or non-

religious moral education for non-Buddhists.⁹ In secondary schools, students were offered the choice of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity for their ethical teachings. After 2002, this subject was renamed “Religion, morals, and ethics” and each student was required to make a religious choice; however, the choice of non-religious moral education disappeared. [Morishita 2003]. Because of this, moral and ethical education in Thailand can be said to be religious education, composed particularly of Buddhist teachings. Non-religious moral and ethical education is not emphasized or even available. In this sense, it is safe to say that “moral and ethics has transformed into Buddhism or religion.” This relationship of Buddhist education with public school teachings on morality is described by an influential monk:

Universal ethics (*chariyatham sakon*), which is not based on religious moral or ethics (*sinlatham, cariyatham*), is itself a doctrine (*laklatthi*) and also a kind of new religion invented by modern Western society. Such universal ethics has no power to reach into depths of learner’s minds. Basically ethics must have the role to bring up or promote a good person, so it is hard to separate ethics from religion. Actually the Thai word of “*cariyatham* (ethics)” is formulated from Western concept of ethics around 30 years ago. [Phrathahmmapidok 2001: pp.64-65, 68].

The unclear relationship between religion, morals, and ethics is also seen in states other than Thailand. For instance, in modern Japan until the end of WWII, a subject called “*Shushin*”—moral training including myth in Shintoism and Confucianism—was taught as a “non-religious” subject in public schools. In present-day Japan, in certain parts of moral and ethical education, an animistic view or New Age spirituality is used implicitly [Iwata 2007, Yumiyama 2010].

What moral and ethical education is taught in the world now? How are the word “morals” and “ethics” related to the concept of religion? The import and assimilation of moral and ethical concepts based on modern Western society to the non-Western societies has caused confusion about the concepts of local traditional morals, ethics, and religion in the latter societies. This confusion may be larger than the case brought by “religion”.

5. Religious Activities by the Government

It was reported that about 37% of all modern states in the world have established religious systems [Kuru 2009]. Many of these countries give their established religions privileges such as tax breaks and a preferential position in public education. Thailand is one of these countries.

However, the Thai government has promoted not only moral, ethical, and religious education in public education, but also religious, especially Buddhist, activities.¹⁰ For example, missionary monks had been sent to areas inhabited by ethnic minorities, such as those in the deep mountains, in order to assimilate the ethnic minorities into Thai culture and thereby prevent communization. Other activities include utilization of Buddhist ideals for reconstructing Thai local communities and family ties, moral instruction projects to prevent young people from drug use, and a project that supports monks providing care to HIV carriers and AIDS patients. Another project involves awarding grants to Buddhism-related tourist spots. This tendency may have increased around the 1960s when governmental control over the Thai Sangha was strengthened through the amendments to the 1962 Sangha Act.

These public administrative activities are difficult to separate from religious activities, but each government office enforces their projects toward secular goals. In this sense, it is impossible to deny that the government utilizes the Buddhist

Sangha and Buddhist belief for governmental, secular purposes. However, that does not mean that the activities of the Thai Sangha lie within the boundaries of governmental purpose, because each temple and monk can also perform religious activities based on their own purposes. Rather, it can be argued that the government and Buddhist monks have different goals for their religious activities, but at times share the same part of the road. Furthermore, some government religious policies have been framed with the idea that of groups outside the main government and are not necessary of the “top-down” style [Yano 2009].

What status is given to these kinds of religious activities and projects led by the government in modern society? It is undeniable that state power utilizes Buddhism in government projects having a secular purpose. However, this is different from using Buddhism for the purpose of mere expression of nationalism or justification of political decisions. These religious phenomena unnoticed because we are inclined to think that religion as a belief or practice is based on its religious groups and individuals.

6. Concluding Remarks

We focused on three mutually related topics of religious phenomena in Thailand’s public sphere: monarchy as religious phenomenon, Buddhism as non-Western morals and ethics, and religious activities led by the government. This is not a privatized religion but a religion practiced in social and public dimensions. The public dimensions are connected with the monarchy, which stands on the border of religion and politics. Furthermore, Buddhism in the public sphere is not just a tool for national integration, but also a resource for the governmental cultural administration to use in dealing with the actual problems in society.

These religious phenomena are institutionalized in contemporary Thai society but are rarely mentioned in religious or Buddhist studies. Part of the reason for this

may be the Western stereotypes or ideals for religion and Buddhism held by researchers. Further research will be needed with regard to this point.

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¹ This paper is a revised form of a presentation on “Religious Administration and Activities of the Thai Government: The concept of religion and the relationship between state and religion” given in IAHR (The International Association for the History of Religions) 20th World Congress, on August 20, 2010, at the University of Toronto, Canada.

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² The following rough summary of the state-religion relationship in Thailand is based on the works of Tambiah, S.J. [Tambiah 1976] and Ishii, Y. [Ishii 1986].

³ Namely: charity, high moral character, self-sacrifice, honesty, kindness, austerity, non-anger, non-violence, patience, and non-deviation from

righteousness.

- ⁴ In addition to this, there were non-Buddhists, too. For example, Brahmans who performed court rituals or Muslims who mainly dwelled in the southern part of the kingdom.
- ⁵ It may be difficult to imagine a fully secularized monarch.
- ⁶ The system of religious plurality protected by a monarch might already have been in existence during the age of King Asoka in ancient India.
- ⁷ In this type of nationalism, the monarch naturalizes him/herself as one of the members of the nation, and his/her polyglot domains are reformed as a nation [Anderson 1991:83-111].
- ⁸ We have two remarkable persons as examples of the relationship between religion and monarchy in modern society: the Dalai Lama and the Pope. Dalai Lama XIV is the present spiritual and political chief of the Tibetan government-in-exile and is also seen as a reincarnate of the former Dalai Lama. Furthermore, Dalai Lama V, who reunified the Tibetan country in the 17th century, was considered a reincarnate of King Songtsän Gampo of the 7th century (who founded the Tibetan kingdom) and well as incarnation of a Bodhisattva of compassion, the so called Avalokiteśvara. In this sense, even the present Dalai Lama may be partially considered as being worshipped as a monarch.

With regard to the Pope, he is also the spiritual and political chief of the Vatican. Although it is not possible to equate the Popes in the modern Vatican with the medieval Popes who exceeded the power of secular monarchs, it is notable that the independent Vatican state has a system in which the religious and political authorities are unified. Metaphorically, we may say that the Pope is similar to a monarch.

Furthermore, the sociologist José Casanova discussed “public religion” and the “deprivatization” of religion, and emphasized that the modern Catholic

Church plays a major role in the field of civil society, and not in that of the politics [Casanova 1994]. But how can we connect the activities of civil society worldwide with the system of unification of religious and political authority in the Vatican?

⁹ Or students could simply select to be exempted from Buddhist education.

¹⁰ It may be necessary to compare this with the State Shintoism of prewar Japan.