

# **SOCIOLOGY AND RELIGION IN THAILAND: A CRITIQUE**

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This note is divided into two parts. The first surveys the position of the Sangha (Buddhist Monkhood) in Thai society as it emerges from the relevant social science literature and the almost daily publications in the Thai newspapers about the Sangha and religion. The second suggests the theoretical approach that should be used for meaningful sociological study of Buddhism in Thailand.

As the comments here are of a very general nature, I did not think it necessary to refer to specific evidence in the literature. The sources that influenced my thinking are in the appended Selected Bibliography.

## **Survey of the Position of the Sangha in Thai Society**

Firstly, Hinayana Buddhism is the state religion of Thailand. Other religions, especially Islam in the South and the Chinese religious complex, are represented, but their followers make up less than 7 percent of the population. The ethnic Thai are, with the exception of a few Christians, all Buddhists. In popular thinking being a Thai is equated with being a Buddhist.

Secondly, all authors on Thailand agree on the importance of Buddhism in Thai social life and action. Yet a sociology of Thai Buddhism is conspicuous by its absence.

'Buddhism in Thailand is a peculiar structure of ideas and value attitudes which forms the ethical pattern of national behavior. Buddhism in this sense is a vital part of life. It is difficult to overestimate its importance, just as it is difficult, unfortunately, to analyse and measure its role' (*Wilson, 1960 p. 69*).

Thirdly, it is generally thought that Buddhism is the key to the Thai value-system. As a religion and a guiding ethic it enjoys great prestige. This prestige is shared by Buddhist institutions and

customs. The focal point of Thai Buddhism is in the Sangha. The Sangha is the living embodiment of Thai social ideals and values.

With a permanent membership of approximately 150,000 ordained priests ( monks ) and an additional 90,000 novices the Sangha is one of the most important national groupings in Thailand and certainly the most visible of them.

Fourthly, eighty-five percent of the population of Thailand lives in villages. The religious and social life of the villages centers around the wat ( temple ) and its resident Sangha. The wat with its Sangha holds a multitude of social functions for the village people; the monks are the spiritual leaders of the village community. All scholars who have written on Thai village life are definite in asserting that the Sangha has decisive influence on social action in the villages.

Fifthly, Thai political structure, especially at the highest levels, has an important religious dimension. Through its Department of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Education, which serves as office of Secretary-General of the Sangha, the religious organisation is closely supervised by the government. The close integration of religious and political institutions gives the Sangha at the higher structural levels a public or official nature.

The Sangha is a hierarchically organised body whose administrative structure closely parallels that of the civil government at all levels.

Sixthly, yet the Sangha enjoys remarkable autonomy and independence, as it is generously supported by and recruited from the entire Buddhist population. At the village level the worshippers are relatives of the monks, and monks and laity are linked together by ties of custom and reciprocal services.

Seventhly, though officially not of this world, the Sangha is traditionally deeply involved in lay-affairs: religious and secular activities can hardly be separated in communities that are integrated around their wats.

For the implementation of its policies and programs the government feels that it needs the cooperation of the Sangha. The priests are informally consulted on all matters of village life; their

cooperation is sought in Community Development and other modernisation activities; in some instances the priests are reported to give active guidance to such activities; the Sangha is to be associated with old and new symbols of nationalism; specially trained priests are sent from Bangkok to go on a kind of moral re-armament mission in those areas that are threatened by communist subversion (but also the Communists are known to have exploited the influence of the monkhood by propagating communism in the guise of genuine monks); in Bangkok, priests are specially trained to be stationed in the countryside to foster higher moral and educational standards throughout the monkhood; their traditional role in education is being revitalised as priests are encouraged to study for a teacher's certificate and will be enabled to teach in ordinary schools.

'The wat (Sangha) is politically and socially important in the new as well as in the old type of Thai village. No community program can succeed without its approval. Some sort of religious service accompanies the announcement of any new measure by the central government to gain for its decrees and programs the aura of the wat's (Sangha's) sanction' (*de Young, 1955 p. 148*).

In sum, religion has always been an integrated part of the Thai political system; at the village level it has always been an integrated part of life.

Nowadays the social involvement of the Sangha is acquiring new dimensions; the Sangha tends towards a new professionalism as its social role and position are more precisely defined; on the lower levels of the hierarchy its involvement in national programs is new.

### **The Sociological Approach to Religion in Thailand**

Until recently the study of Thai society has been characterised by a culture-and-personality approach, in which the terms 'Buddhism' and 'Buddhist values' have been profusely used to 'explain' social phenomena and the Thai social process. Strange as it may appear then, neither Thai Buddhism, nor its values, have yet been studied systematically.

These comments argue for a structural approach towards the study of Thai Buddhism and its values, while stressing the fallacy of

relating religion, or central values, too easily to social reality. It is expected that a structural approach will lead to a realistic appraisal of how and where religion operates in Thai society.

Especially in the search for factors conditioning economic development much attention has been paid to the role that the central value-system of a society may play in such development. Yet very little is known about the relationships between value-systems and social action in general or economic action specifically.

A central value-system of a society may be defined as the most generalised orientations toward human action prevalent in such a society, and it is often thought that religion may play a dominant role in shaping a value-system. The relationships between those most generalised orientations and concrete social action are subtle and hardly ever obvious. Weber made quite a strong case for the inter-relation of religious ideas and economic behavior; *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* has influenced many scholars in this line of thinking.

The way in which Weber related a macro-sociological phenomenon like a religious value-system with observable social behavior shows great scholarship. His argument included a host of variables, including structural aspects like the social organisation of Puritan Protestantism. He never stated that the Protestant Ethic was the *cause* of the Spirit of Capitalism; he merely defined a problem for further investigation. Besides this he had the great advantage of being intimately familiar with the spirit of capitalism and the protestant ethic that he studied and, with all the scholarly qualities of his reasoning one should realise that the way in which he reached his conclusions was a *post factum* procedure.

Since Weber wrote, much knowledge, theoretical as well as empirical, has accumulated on the issue of the relationship between religious ideas/values and social, mainly economic behavior, and the issue has become much more complicated and far less clear. Yet nobody would deny that beliefs, religious or other, influence social behavior and may sometimes have a compelling motivating power. But just when, where, how, under what conditions and to what extent,

is not known. And everytime the relationship is demonstrated, it is done *post factum*. The available material allows for barely more than the formulation of an hypothesis.

In spite of all this, in the case of Thailand many scholars seem to have accepted the hypothesis about the conditioning influence of religion on society as an ultimate and simple truth. Besides this, we should realise that none of these scholars is really familiar with the religion they write about. Anyway, Ayal states that Thai Buddhism stands in the way of economic development; Sutton and Mosel argue that Buddhism conditions Thai administrative behavior and procedure; according to Benedict, Thai personality is a reflection of Buddhist values; Wilson says that Buddhism is a natural barrier against Marxism; Embree and Hanks view Thai social structure as a reflection of Buddhist values; according to Kaufman, Buddhism makes the Thai passive and fatalistic. Of course, Buddhism is terribly important in Thailand, but by just labelling everything as 'Buddhist' no sociological knowledge is contributed.

In Bellah's view one of the chief functions of religion is to supply a context of meaning for the central values of the society, and that makes religion even more abstract than those central values. What remains is a greatest common denominator that enlightens very little. As Manning Nash has shown for Burma, and the same should hold for Thailand, Buddhism is a very hospitable religion and may accommodate a host of ideas and values that can all be said to be Buddhist.

It really offers no starting point, to say that Buddhism conditions everything; to being with we should know who and what conditions Buddhism in the specific context of Thai society.

If we want to know how religion operates in a society we have to know more than its formal beliefs and teachings, and more than its formal structure. If we then still want to argue in terms of values and value-systems, we have to look for those values not at the highest level of abstraction, but at the level of reality, in order to ascertain what the living meaning of a religion is in the personalities of the individuals that live with it, and the place that it has in their thoughts,

feelings and aspirations. Only then can be seen how, when and where religion influences life, what areas of life are influenced by other values, and how religious and other values influence each other.

In the village anthropology of Kaufman, Kingshill, Ingersoll, Phillips, Amyot, Moerman and Sharp, one finds that there are more than religious values alone conditioning Thai social behavior, but as these ethnographic studies have not been written with the abovementioned in mind, the evidence is scanty and haphazard. What is missing in this field, as in almost any field of the sociology of Thailand, is basic research and information.

The sociological study of social values or value-systems only makes sense in its social structural setting. Besides this, values do not have some strange sort of autonomy; on the contrary, they can be manipulated, reinforced or done away with, interpreted, reinterpreted, changed—and all values need to be sustained, sometimes by elusive yet very real mechanisms of social control, sometimes by overt organizations like a political party, a bureaucracy or a clergy.

Moreover, values need to be learned and so to be taught. In short, values have a social function and have to be made to work.

Strange as it may seem, then, the organizational and structural aspects of values have received very little systematic attention from those scholars commenting on the value-system in Thailand. Values have often become some strange and independently operating social principle, the *dous-ex-machina* of the social-scientific study of Thailand.

A structural approach to the study of Thai society and Thai values, i.e. an approach that takes its starting point in reality and that tries to find the structural principles and values that operate at the behavioral level, has scarcely been attempted for Thailand. Yet such an approach will prove to be the more promising one, as can already be illustrated by those very few studies that have been undertaken along these lines :

Evers, for example, has shown how urbanisation and bureaucratisation in Thailand mitigate the much praised though never measured social mobility. The latter, seen as a 'Buddhist value', is

the cornerstone in the analysis of the peculiar structure termed 'loose' that Thailand is said to exemplify; 'loose structure' again reflecting 'Buddhist values'. Evers rightly comments on the confusion of ideology and social reality. And it may rightly be asked, whose ideology? The ideology of the Thai, or of the foreigners that constructed their view of a Buddhist value-system?

That Thai society is not so devoid of structural principles as we are often led to believe has also been shown by Skinner (for Bangkok) and Amyot (for villages in the northeastern part of the country), while the relevant anthropological field studies also do not indicate any exceptionally high rate of status mobility.

The psychologist Boesch related the achievement-level of schoolchildren to the particular structure of authority prevalent in the Thai family and did not find any need to resort to 'Buddhist values' in the explanation of his findings, and, finally, Klausner, Moerman and Mulder, concentrating on the institutional organisation of Buddhism, found that Buddhism is very important in Thailand, but also that it certainly does not explain everything.

The Thai value-system will be as differentiated as any other national value-system. It serves no purpose to name it 'Buddhist', or even to prove that such a label holds. Buddhism certainly is a very important component of this system, just how important and in what situations, we do not know. Structurally its focus is clearly within the monkhood. The Sangha constitutes the organised guardian and symbolisation of Thai religion: it embodies Buddhism and to a large extent the living values of Thai society, which it teaches, preaches, disseminates, interprets and studies. Whether all those values can be classified as 'Buddhist' or otherwise is an affair of theologians, not of social scientists.

The Sangha is deeply rooted in the Thai people, it is also intimately connected with the Government, a duality expressed in the symbol of the King, as the head of state and the high protector of religion.

The Sangha most probably constitutes the most important and greatest institutional organisation in Thai society: it is visibly omnipresent in Thai life.

Theoretically this leads to interesting and important questions on the relationship of a religion with its institutional organisation. Religion certainly has considerable influence on form and content of the social process as a whole and on aspects thereof. Yet the question remains : what is socially more important, the influence of the organisation that embodies, sustains and reinforces religion or the influence of the religion itself ? Of course, they cannot be separated, but how far does any of the two enjoy autonomy, or don't they ? In social causation I am inclined to give more weight to the organisation that interprets and accommodates the religious values for everyday use than to the abstract teachings as such.

The importance of the Sangha for the development and preservation of Thai Buddhism is recorded in history (e.g. the missions from Ceylon to Thailand and vice versa) and among others acknowledged by Princess Poon Diskul in her 'Buddhism for the Young', wherein she writes that without the Sangha the Buddhist teaching could never have been preserved nor made known to us.

One wonders why this most important component of Buddhism has scarcely been studied. On the Buddha and His Dharma (Teaching) many books have been written. About the third component of Buddhism, viz. the Sangha, hardly a book has been published. And still, if we want to understand how Buddhism operates in society, what its influence is and how people live with it, we should study the Sangha first of all.

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