

Catholicism and Thailand

– A Review Article –

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Some years ago Dr. Seri Phongphit, whose name is well known to readers of these bulletins for his work in: the field of Buddhist-Christian relations in Thailand, prepared a lengthy study in: Thai on the history of relations between Catholicism amid Thailand. The Thai Interreligious Committee for Development has graciously provided us with a lengthy review of the book-length work. Against the backdrop of recent misunderstandings between: Christians and Buddhist in Thailand and amidst lingering suspicions that the “revolution” of the Second Vatican Council represents an: updating of tactics to convert the world to Catholicism, readers should find the insight Seri offers most welcome.

While there has been some editing here and there, the phrasings and viewpoint of the Buddhist author have been preserved as far as possible, even where this involved slight distortions, to give a sense of how Seri’s remarks (written: as a Catholic believer) were perceived.

In the preface, the author makes it clear that his aim is to study the relationship between Catholicism and Thailand, based on historical data from the Ayudthaya era up to the present time. The study was presented on December 24, 1982, at the Rattanakosin Bicentenary function organized by the Institute for Thai Case Studies of Thammasat University. Compared to presentations on other religions, this work seemed the most interesting. This is mainly because there are at present few studies on the subject, and also because the conflict between Buddhism and Catholicism that was going on at that time gave it an added sense of urgency.

The study starts off with data showing that the Catholic population forms no more than a small minority of 190,000 and that it has always been seen as a foreign religion imported from the countries of the West – amply demonstrated by the methods the Catholics used to spread their teachings. It was their belief that their only mission was to convert people so that they might get to heaven. The first group of Catholics were firmly convinced that other religions were not authentically religious and there could be no salvation outside of Christianity.

For this reason, the Pope, as the head of the Catholic religion, held sway over all the countries of Europe, establishing a “Christendom” powerful enough to launch two crusades. At the early stage, the sole policy or principle for spreading the teachings of Catholicism was to send missionaries abroad together with the forces in power at the time—namely, Spain and Portugal. Later on (1622) the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith was set up in the Vatican to separate the dissemination of Catholicism from worldly powers.

In 1658 The Propaganda Fidei issued a decree entitled “Monita” establishing six main principles for propagating Catholicism. They were:

1. Those selected as missionaries are to be persons of great knowledge, including a knowledge of science, capability, good health, and commitment.
2. The culture and traditions of local peoples are to be highly esteemed and adaptations were to be made.
3. There is to be no political involvement.
4. Missionaries are to endure hardships and persecution of all types.
5. Serious conflict is to be avoided.
6. Emphasis is to be put on education by establishing schools for the young generation free of charge, on teaching Latin, and on giving religious instruction in local languages.

Numerous missionaries established their methods and practices based on these general principles. Bishop Laneau, for example, who worked during the reign of King Narai the Great, persuaded the missionaries sent to Laos to dress in saffron robes like the Buddhist monks in order to earn the respect of the people. When Rome later objected, the plan was abandoned. Much later, however, the matter was reconsidered and the practice resumed, which has caused problems that persist right up to the present. In this regard, the author makes an interesting comment:

Bishop Laneau’s idea of inculturation according to the policy laid down by Propaganda Fidei was based on the observation that as Buddhist monks won high respect from the villagers, so would the missionaries if only they dressed up like the monks, and that this would facilitate religious instruction. His idea grew out of a failure—which he shared with other missionaries – to study Thai culture and Buddhism in depth and without prejudice. Adaptation was merely a strategy for propagating Catholicism, not a true respect for cultures... (p. 17)

This was totally different from the strategy and methods employed by the early apostles who studied Greek philosophy deeply and used philosophical thought to explain religious doctrines to the Greeks and to engage in debate and discussion—without converting Catholicism into Greek philosophy. The statement is worth considering.

The author eventually came to discuss Catholicism and Thai Society. His comments fall into three main areas: (1) *the pioneering period* during the Ayudthaya and Thonburi eras, (2) *the renaissance period* in the Rattanakosin period, and (3) *the*

period of conformity or adaptation: following Vatican II (the past two decades) in which all the principles and guidelines have been renewed.

The Pioneering Era

The pioneering era begins sometime around 1555 with the arrival of the Portuguese Dominican fathers from Malaka, the first wave of Catholic missionaries to reach Thailand (then Siam). Later they would be followed by many more missionaries. Until the reign of King Narai the Great, the arrival of the French missionaries was coupled with the effort of King Louis XIV to establish colonies in Asia. The French missionaries established the Missions Etrangères de Paris in 1660. The arrival of the first batch of the French missionaries happened by accident: a group on its way to China and Vietnam stopped over in Ayudthaya on hearing of the serious persecution in those countries. King Narai received the missionaries warmly because he wanted France as a good ally in order to strike a balance of power with the then powerful Dutch. Great freedom was therefore given them to propagate Catholic teachings. The missionaries were to a great extent involved in political affairs, and conflict broke out between the Jesuit missionaries and the M. E. P. fathers. Not many conversions were made, nor was the King converted as the rumors that were circulated led some to believe. With the heavy involvement of the missionaries in political affairs, there were several feudalists (high-ranking officials) who took a strong position of dissent and who, with the backing of both the people and the Buddhist clergy, overthrew the current dynasty and set up a new one (King Petraja of the Pluluang dynasty). As a result, all missionaries and foreigners were expelled. Catholicism was thus held in abeyance for nearly 100 years. Though a small revival was made after the fall of the Ayudthaya regime, when King Taksin of the Thonburi period sensed disturbances brewing again, the missionaries were expelled once more. Based on these historical events, the author concludes by singling out three main points for consideration.

First, religion and politics are inseparable, whether Thai or foreign. For the Westerners – which means mainly the French – the main emphasis was to seek political and economic benefits for their home country, and this remained true throughout the time when France and Thailand enjoyed amicable relationships, particularly during the reign of King Narai. The relationship had both its positive and its negative sides. The positive points included the fact that mission work had a strong backing, that the political power-base was solid, and that there were sufficient funds to construct schools, churches, and hospitals, as well as to cover the expenses of propagation of the faith outside the capital city. The king was fond of these men of high learning and ability and took advantage of them for the affairs of the court. They were used to represent the King in France (Father Tachard), to serve as personal physicians to the King (Father de Bese), and to tutor the King and other members of the royal household in mathematics and astronomy. As for the negative side of the political involvement of the missionaries, the missionaries and the local Christians were seen as siding with those

in power and harboring ambitions for political and economic power. Though this was not always the case, this explains why when political and economic control was transferred to other hands, the Christians found themselves in dangerous straits, as clearly evidenced from the time of the reign of King Pet-rajā up to the reign of King Taksin the Great.

In Thailand Buddhism and politics have always been closely linked. This is also true of the present time. The Thai people feel a sense of uniqueness because of Buddhism. To be Thai means to be Buddhist; foreign elements are for the foreigners or the non-Thai (which include Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, Japanese, and Portuguese). This was why even at the time that King Narai protected the missionaries and Christians and took good care of the foreigners, the rumor that he had been converted and baptized was sure to be seen as a sign of his having betrayed the country. The same charge was leveled against anyone, be they common folk or officials, who had been baptized. Those baptized became the allies of the foreigners and took up residence in the Christian colonies for the sake of convenience, having been alienated from their own friends. Moreover, Buddhism was used to mobilize the Thai people against Christianity and the missionaries who were accused of destroying Buddhism. This led the Buddhist monks and the people to support King Pet-rajā.

Secondly, the foreigners who came to Thailand at that time, be they missionaries, merchants, or military men, looked down upon local people and cultures, including Buddhism which was regarded as an inauthentic religion. No attempt was made at the time to study Thai culture and traditions in any depth. Any study that was done labored under the bias of working for the spread of Catholicism by demonstrating its superiority to Buddhist principles. Though some missionaries praised the way of life the Buddhist monks led, they did so in order to teach their own people to appreciate that way of life and even to improve on it. Several religious and political conflicts were caused by the fact that the foreigners were ignorant of Thai culture and Buddhism. Attempts at inculturation were then very superficial and aimed at more effectively spreading religious teachings. This was as much the case with the translation of the Bible into Pāli as with the donning of the yellow monk's robe.

Contempt for and ignorance of Thai culture and Buddhism resulted from a way of thinking and formation that Westerners had undergone in their home countries where such views were not treated critically. Catholic priests studied philosophy and theology, or other fields of specialization, for long years prior to ordination, but they did not study other living religions and cultures outside European countries. This was also true of the Thai people who did not study Western cultures and did not accept them, symbolized by the fact that when a Thai delegation during the reign of King Narai the Great was received in audience by the King of France, the delegates knelt down and crawled, as they would have in Thailand (Siam). In terms of scientific knowledge, the Thai were of course inferior to the Westerners. Living Buddhism was really a mixture of all sorts of beliefs, traditions, and even magic – all of which the Westerners lumped together as part of the same religion.

Thirdly, along with a lack of understanding of Thai culture and Buddhism, there was a lack of clarity regarding how decrees from Rome were to be interpreted. The missionaries were not in a position to decide by themselves; they were to refer cases to Rome for any activity related to inculturation, and in most instances, Rome objected (though in some cases activities were begun before a reply had come back). In any case, it looked as if the missionaries were taking Western culture and traditions as the basis for religious practices and the right method for propagating religious teachings. This resulted in patent conflicts with the Thai people that persisted up until 20 years ago. Conflicts between the missionaries in the field and the administrators in Europe were due mainly to the fact that those administrators residing in Rome were too far away from the real situation to understand it or make any effort to study other cultures. Even in the admonitions and decrees given by Rome, there was no clear explanation of what the essence of religious teachings was and how much was Western cultural expression; essence and surface were not separated. Another factor that confused Rome and gave them to think that certain religious practices were out of line was the inadequate information supplied them by the missionaries and the internal squabbles and accusations of missionary group against another. Furthermore, the order given to the missionaries to respect local cultures and not to follow the example of the contemporary colonizers who trampled local cultures underfoot, was not taken seriously by those who succeeded the administrators in Rome who had issued the order. Since the decree was merely an ordinary order, not a doctrine proclaimed by the Pope, it was regarded as a guideline. In addition, the example of the colonizers (Spain and Portugal) was not always apt, as situations differed from place to place. The missionaries sent to China or Thailand (Siam) were the pioneers, and they arrived in these countries even before the troops and the merchants; they did not follow soldiers, who had already subdued the enemy, to baptize them and set up Christian communities like those in their home countries. Finally, the order to respect local cultures was something of an anachronism for its age; everywhere foreign countries with incompatible cultures were regarded as inferior when measured against one's own culture which was good, proper, and authentic.

In the view of the Christians, the efforts of the missionaries to spread their religious teachings from the time of the reign of King Narai up to the Thonburi era did not meet with complete failure. Even though by the end of the period not a single missionary remained in Thailand, there was a small number of Christian scattered widely and a seminary which had become the center of training in Asia for more than a century. The Christians believed in the teaching of Jesus Christ and his apostles that states: "Unless the seed fall in the ground and die, it will not bear fruit." Jesus himself died on the cross and left few apostles and followers behind. This is the reason why the Christian historians are always optimistic when they refer to the efforts undertaken at the early stages of missionary propagation, and why they often do not seek to review their failures and weak points in order to improve. But there are many other factors that need to be taken into

consideration, including the attitudes and the practices of the missionaries as well as the political, social, and economic conditions of each period.

The Renaissance Period

The second part of Dr. Seri's study deals with the period of renaissance dating from the early Rattanakosin era. The civil unrest at that time turned the attention away from Christianity. King Rama I undertook a policy of establishing good relationships with the countries of the West, particularly in matters related to trade. He sent envoys to Macao, the center for trade with Portugal and France, up until 1808. During that period Thailand was at war with Burma, Vietnam, and Cambodia. As a result, the Christian Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Chinese set up their own communities in Bangkok—known as Cambodian or Vietnamese ghettos. Relations with Thai authorities were good, as the author notes:

During the first three reigns of the Chakri dynasty, we find what may be called a renaissance in Christianity after the collapse that took place towards the end of the reign of King Taksin. The revival was well underway, free of the constraints from authority that had plagued it previously. In the early Rattanakosin period, political and economic reasons prompted Thailand to draw closer to the countries of the West. The other reason that the authorities did not persecute the missionaries and Christians was that they were almost all foreigners. The fact that *these* people were Christian was not detrimental to the nation. Quite the contrary – it was seen as an advantage to have them living in their own autonomous communities under the direction and guidance of the Catholic priests, and not plotting any civil disturbances. Some of the Christians were slaves from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Had these people been practising their own original religion, Buddhism, instead of Christianity, and freely mixed with the Thais, they could be manipulated into creating civil unrest. As for the Thai people themselves, they were still prohibited from joining Christianity. True religious freedom came only with reign of King Rama IV.

During the rules of King Rama III and Rama IV, Thailand established ties with still more Western countries. Protestant missionaries like Dr. Ladley and Dr. Casvent served the Thai people particularly in education and health. For the Catholics, Fr. John the Baptist, who later became Bishop Pallergoix, was a close friend of King Rama IV. He contributed greatly to the growth of Catholicism through reestablishing good relations with Buddhism after the minor conflict that had occurred towards the end of King Rama III's rule. During the period when Catholicism and Protestantism were growing, Buddhist thinkers such as Chaopraya Thipakorwong (Chang Bunng) pointed out some weakness in the Christian teachings (just as the Catholics did in their "question-and-answer" catechisms). On this point, the author comments:

both parties pointed out one another's weaknesses in order to win out over the other, and interpretations were made from their respective viewpoints

without any real understanding of the other—at least without any understanding that was not shallow and slanted” (p. 80).

When Bishop Pallergoix died in 1862, King Rama IV arranged his funeral in grand and solemn manner, a further sign of good relations. Subsequently Catholicism spread to other cities around Bangkok and to the northeast. Under Bishop Ve (1875–1909), medical and educational services were organized and good relations maintained with the authorities:

Relations between Catholicism and Thailand in the early Rattanakosin period were good, except for the troubles around the end of the reign of King Rama III which obliged all the French missionaries to leave the country. In any case, their absence was short-lived. Later on, in the year 112 of the Rattanakosin era, a conflict with France broke out when France took some Thai lands, provoking a hatred among the Thai people of the French and with them the Christians. When the authorities did not yield, the friction slowly faded away. Severe conflict broke out again in 1940–1941 over Indochina. In the early stages of World War II, Thailand took sides with Germany, thinking it a good opportunity to get back the lands that had been expropriated by France and Great Britain. Severe fighting erupted and all French missionaries were expelled on the grounds that they were spies and that the French were hated enemies of Thailand. Field Marshal P. Phiboolsongkram, the Prime Minister of Thailand at the time, with the strong support of the nationalists, was given a platform from which to preach the nationalists’ cause and provoke among the people a hatred of the French and everything French. Heavy attacks were therefore also aimed at the Roman Catholic Church.

When the Indochinese war ended, Thailand, as one of the victors, managed to get back parts of its territory on the left side of Mekhong River. But this lasted only for a short time during World War II. After Thailand and the allies had been defeated, the territory was restored to France.

For a while conflict seemed to disappear under wave after wave of political instability. But when Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat seized the power in a coup d’etat in 1957, tensions between Catholicism and Buddhism surfaced once again. This time the quarrel was occasioned largely by a catechism of “questions-and-answers” published by the Catholic Church for the purpose of evangelization in churches and schools. This book was different from the work written by Bishop Pallergoix, but the contents of the two were similar: the weak points of Buddhism were taken up in order to prove the superiority of Catholic teaching. The book was believed to have been written by one Catholic and later presented to the French priest in charge of Catholic publications, who cut out some of the stronger statements and published it with Assumption Press for national distribution. A strong reaction came from the Buddhists who saw it as a sign of contempt for Buddhism and an attempt to destroy their tradition.

As a result, the Assumption Press was closed and three priests were interrogated and ordered to collect copies from all over the country. Colonel Pin Mutukant, then Director General of the Bureau of Religious Affairs, published a

refutation entitled *In Reply to the Priest*. He expressed profound affliction for contempt shown towards Buddhism by the Catholic Church, in spite of the fact that Thailand continued to support Catholicism, including the repair and construction of some churches with taxes collected principally from Thai Buddhists.

What prevented the conflict from flaring up into a major incident was the effort made by Catholic leaders and government authorities (headed by Field Marshal Sarit) to come to an understanding. In addition, a number of high-ranking officials who were the alumni of Catholic schools, particularly the Assumption schools, helped to defuse the situation.

Once the dust had settled and agreement had been reached, Catholicism came to enjoy more and more acceptance in Thai society. This was mainly due to the valuable services rendered by the Catholics, particularly in the field of education and medical services, as well as in various forms of social works. Catholic schools were held in high esteem and were popular among the people, especially those in the middle and upper classes. And with good reason, for their ancestors had attended those schools and the quality of education, both academic and moral, was high. Furthermore, Thailand underwent rapid modernization. This meant that many people went abroad for study, particularly in Europe and the United States, where they would make Christian friends. All in all, the general public no longer sees Christianity as something foreign. The Catholics themselves, who used to be foreigners (Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Portuguese) have adapted to Thai society and become real Thais, leaving the ghettos to mix with other Thais who practise Buddhism and other religions. They work in different walks of life and in all sectors of society. The only exception is the Vietnamese group who arrived from north Vietnam after World War II and settled down mainly in the northeast of Thailand. Part of this group consists of Catholics.

The Period after Vatican: II

The final section of Dr. Seri's study deals with the period following the Second Vatican Council. The material treated here is very interesting and largely unknown to the general public. The author refers in passing to the First Vatican Council convened in Rome from 1869–1870 to reconsider certain doctrines such as the infallibility of the Pope, and to arm the Church to face the challenges of (1) the spirit of materialism emerging in Europe, (2) the industrial revolution and spread of capitalism which were destroying the traditional agrarian way of life, and (3) philosophical nihilism. The Church issued several encyclicals, such as *Rerum: Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) to provide guidelines for solving labor problems, to attack both capitalism and marxist socialism as contrary to religious doctrine, and to motivate all Christians to take part in social action through a "third way." Social action groups sprung up. The recognition dawned on the Catholic world that social development undertaken under oppressive socio-economic structures is not a solution, and that the faith and commitment of Catholic believers must extend beyond the walls of the Church and out

into everyday life.

After two world wars, the Church read the signs of the time and realized that renewal was urgently needed. The Second Vatican Council was convened for this purpose from 1962 to 1965. The results of the lengthy sessions included four dogmatic constitutions, nine decrees, and three declarations dealing with liturgy, the Church, the orthodox Church, ecumenism, the hierarchy, religious life, priestly formation, Catholic education, relations with non-Christians, revelation, the lay apostolate, religious freedom, the missions, priestly life and duties, and the Church in the modern world,

The important points relevant to us are the concept of the Church and the meaning of relations with non-Christian religions that emerged from the Council. In addition to adapting teachings to local situations – particularly the use of the vernacular and forms of inculturation of the liturgy—the Church also changed her attitudes. The belief that there is “no salvation outside the Church,” meaning that salvation can be found only in the Christian churches, no longer exists. The Church now admits that other religions have their own ways, that all religions should coexist in mutual peace and respect, and that other religions should not simply be dismissed as inauthentic. The propagation of faith must continue in order to help people believe that God is the Alpha and the Omega. But the underlying philosophy has been brought more in line with emphasis on the existential values of the human, self-identity, freedom, self-determination and vision, and the belief that Jesus Christ is the Truth. This teaching is difficult to understand and its interpretation varies from situation to situation and person to person. Even among Christians, there are conflicts over how to understand all of this.

The Church’s attitude towards other faiths has changed from a position of refusing to learn from them to accepting their validity and expressing a willingness to grow through mutual understanding. Three of the keywords involved here are dialogue, inculturation, and absorption. What these words mean in theory may require the help of scholars and experts; in practice their superficial understanding has led certain Buddhist groups to be skeptical and suspicious of the Church’s intentions, as leaflets circulated among the public make clear. Here is the summary of the explanations offered by the author.

Dialogue means sharing knowledge and understanding. This can take place at four levels: (1) among the people, (2) among those engaged in promoting social development, (3) in philosophical reflection, and (4) at the level of contemplation. Dialogue brings about acceptance, deeper understanding, and respect.

Inculturation means not only external adaptation, such as dress and rites, but a change of attitude towards others and oneself. It is the awareness and conviction of being one among others, sharing a common history. It is not only word, but action.

Absorption: does not stop at merely choosing what is of value from the other and making it one’s own, but involves a unity with the other in order to learn and improve oneself, so that what is learned can have strong roots in personal conviction.

tion and a respect for common culture. Absorption means acceptance of others, avoiding the extremes of contempt for other culture, blind syncretism of everything in a culture, or a simple relativizing of all values.

In adapting the teachings to the local cultures, the Church commits itself to (1) realizing the needs of the local people and basing her actions on the local situation rather than following the Bible strictly; and (2) using the vernacular and the culture that are familiar to the people, not an idiom and symbols strange to the people as in the past.

In applying these principles, the Church finds that the number of conversions is decreasing. There is no pressure of children in Catholic schools to become Catholic. Further, the Church is promoting social action in more humanitarian terms, against the protests of those who worried about the stability of the Church and of those whose oppressive practices are being threatened.

The Church's leaders have laid down a policy of establishing the local churches with their own local leaders; this is based on bitter experiences of the Church in the countries of Indochina. A local Major Seminary has been set up in Thailand, Saengtham College, in order to train the seminarians in the Thai context, which is judged preferable to sending seminarians abroad, particularly to Penang or Rome. The Catholic schools are less and less subsidized from abroad and aim more at instructing children in social concern and awareness, realizing that the present education system to a certain extent has shared in creating oppressors.

Although Vatican II has laid down good policies and principles, there are a number of problems and limitations pointed out by the author:

1. *A lack of clarity regarding the apostolate.* Due to an insufficient understanding of what the apostolate means today, three groups have constellated, each with its own interpretations. A first group aims merely at converting people, as had been done in the past. A second group does not stress conversion but seeks compromise on the grounds that all religions teach the same things. A third group tries to strike a middle course, stressing the need for religions to work together to create a just and peaceful society together, taking their common humanity as the starting point.

2. *Different concept of inculturation.* There are also different approaches to inculturation. One group acts with the idea superficially and quickly, but fails, while another approaches change gradually with care, humiliation, and commitment to the people.

3. *An unclear concept of the Church: 's social mission.* One group believes that the main duty of religion is to teach people to be good and to concern itself with personal salvation. Another group emphasizes creating just social structures and a good environment. These two lines of thinking and action are in constant conflict among themselves. The latter group often finds that communication with progressive non-Catholics is easier than communicating with Catholic conservatives (and conversely non-Catholic conservatives feel more at home with the Catholic conservatives).

The author clearly points out in conclusion that the principal and most immediate need is to change the attitudes and beliefs of Church leaders, to help them understand more fully that the progress and stability of the Church depend on the people, the masses who are still oppressed and manipulated:

The Church does not work *for* the poor but *with* the poor, learning from them their needs and their vision ... To retreat and close one's eyes to the existing problems is not a sign of progress but rather a sign that one has lost confidence and can only maintain a fictive status quo that has since ceased to exist. (p. 132)

Going through this study, the reader learns a great deal. Particularly informative are the historical data brought together in the first part and the policies and teachings of Vatican II in the later sections – all presented from a different perspective than that which the Buddhist is accustomed to hearing. For my part, I am convinced that if Buddhists deal with the Catholics with hearts and minds wide open, accepting the problems and thinking of the Catholics sincerely, and taking into account social well-being and justice, their attitudes will change and a spirit of working together for the sake of righteousness will come about. Catholics should also read this study in order to deepen their understanding of the role that their religion plays in Thai society. I agree with final conclusion of the author when he cites Father Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan priest who knows Buddhism deeply, to the effect that religion must be autonomous, searching for its foundation in the local condition and context (which is why the Buddhism of India has succeeded among the Thai people and benefits them so greatly), and that the important thing is that religion must assist in solving social problems and bettering social conditions. At this juncture, if Buddhists do not begin to adapt to the present situation, they might be overpowered by the *real* enemy, gluttony and wrath, as we see clearly in the case of Buddhists in Vietnam. In discussing problems and solutions under the guidance of religious teachings, we see the need for concerted action on the part of all religions of good will devoted to liberation. Only sincerity can give us such a common foundation.

Since Dr. Seri's study is a pioneering effort dealing with such difficult and important issues, the occasional lapse from strict chronological order and lack of clarity in exposition may be excused. What it does show is that the more deeply we study our past and present, the better equipped we are to create a future. In that sense, his work is useful not only in academic circles but also among all those committed to improving understanding between Buddhists and Catholics.

Currently there are a large number of Buddhists who have suffered and are now more eager to protect Buddhism from Catholicism, which they view as the enemy, than to establish good relationships. But action without reason, reflection, and true understanding of the background is very dangerous. The questions raised by Buddhadasa Bikkhu are timely: Should there be any conflict between morality and religion? Is not evil our real enemy? Are we discussing these problems with reason and love? Have we fulfilled our duty to improve ourselves? Is our treatment of other religious believers who make up a small minority righteous? These are

questions that need to be pondered well by Buddhists in order to correct our role and attitude. The historical lessons we have learned in our own country and from neighboring countries must be considered carefully and we must be open to the variety of opinions in order to find the best way for all parties concerned.