THE IMPACT OF INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER IN THAILAND

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Historical Facts

It is historically inadequate to state that Thailand has been, throughout its history, tolerant and undiscriminating in religious matters. Royal decrees issued around the end of 17th century, a few decades after the foundation of the Mission in Siam, prohibited the preaching of Christian doctrine outside Ayudhya, the then capital of the country. The native Thai were not allowed to be converted. The Christians were minorities and immigrants from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, China, Japan, and Portugal. The decrees were lifted only about one hundred years ago. Conflicts and persecutions were recorded here and there. A few years before the foundation of Bangkok as the capital of the Kingdom two hundred years ago, all missionaries were sent out at the order of King Taksin. Churches were destroyed. The Christians, who numbered no more than one hundred, escaped into the countryside. There was literally no more Christian community or Church.

With the foundation of the new dynasty, Rama, the Kingdom was reopened to missionaries. During these last two centuries, at least five incidents have occasioned important Buddhist-Christian conflicts. The first happened during the reign of Rama III, when almost all missionaries were sent out of the country. The second and the third incidents took place during the reigns of Rama V and Rama VI respectively as a consequence of political conflicts between Thailand, and France. The fourth occurred 25 years ago following the printing of a book, *Questiones Disputatae*, written by Catholics. The last one started last year following a campaign by a Buddhist group against the "new strategy" of evangelization on the part of the Catholic Church.

Studying such events in their historical contexts, both Buddhists and Catholic have quite a lot to learn from their past. Both must accept responsibility for these conflicts.

Turning Points

Two events brought about radical changes in Buddhist-Christian relationships during the past two decades; Vatican Council II and the Sinclair Thompson

Memorial Lectures of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the former a Catholic event, the latter Buddhist (though symbolically, since Buddhadasa does not represent all Thai Buddhists). The changes were meaningful since they came forth from both Catholic and Buddhist "faith." With these events interreligious dialogue now was begun in earnest. Officially, a commission for interreligious relations, composed of Buddhists, Christians, Moslems, and Hindus, was created by the Department of Religion under the Ministry of Education. On the part of the Catholic Church, a few years after Vatican II, a commission was founded to deal with interreligious dialogue.

Unofficially and informally, the Buddhist-Christian collaboration was initiated about 15 years ago by a group of Catholic priests and laity and by lay Buddhist leaders. The organization of a Credit Union was the common interest. Consultations, workshops, and seminars were organized during those first years. Though a very small group, the circle was soon enlarged and the "dialogue" begun. With the foundation of the Catholic Council of Thailand for Development, the dialogue was fostered, since this new Episcopal Commission did not work only with the Catholic minority in the parishes, but also with Buddhist communities. Another form of informal collaboration was in the field of education. The effort to raise social awareness of concerned people led a group of Buddhists and Catholics (almost the same group as the Credit Union) to workshops and seminars. A month-long workshop organized by Jesuits was held in Kyoto in 1972, when ESAW was founded.

Coordinating Group for Religion and Society (CGRS)

The events of October 6, 1976 changed Thailand to a civil dictatorship. A number of students were killed at Thammasat University. Thousands were arrested, but soon after released. Eighteen were detained under heavy accusations. Various groups campaigning against such violations of freedom were formed, among them the Coordinating Group for Religion and Society, which consisted of Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant religious and lay leaders. Emphasis was put on human rights issues. The group is still active today, assisting oppressed people struggling for their rights both in cities and rural areas, this group works in close collaboration with the Association for Civil Liberty, another Non-Government Organization for Human Rights, the Justice and Peace Commission (Catholic Episcopal Commission) and Hot-Line for Thailand and Asia-Pacific.

Thai Interreligious Commission for Development (TICD)

During the last decade, there have been obvious changes in development activities. Hundreds of non-government organizations, both foreign and local, are engaged more and more in the development process of the country. Monks

themselves play an important role. Traditionally monks in Thailand were considered to be religious leaders in the strict sense. They were not to get involved in secular matters. But after the Second World War, things were changed. Some prominent monks also became social leaders. Social involvement by monks is generally accepted today. Both government and non-government organizations find that monks' contributions in social action today are indispensable, since monks seem to be the only persons fully respected by the people, especially in the rural communities.

The Buddhist hierarchical structure and its relationship to the State have complicated matters since the beginning of Thai history. There is till today no formal initiative taken or organization proposed concerning the role of Buddhism in social activities. Initiatives are all "private."

Since its foundation 11 years ago, the Catholic Council of Thailand for Development has also been trying to collaborate with Buddhist monks. Four years ago, for the purpose of interreligious collaboration, seminars for Buddhist, Christian and Muslim leaders were organized by CCTD. Though the result was satisfying, observations were made. Catholics as a minority group should not play the role of coordinating interreligious collaboration in social action itself. Discussions with different NGOs, especially those which base their activities on Buddhist principles, led to the foundation of a new organization: Thai Interreligious Commission for Development. This is the new forum for interreligious collaboration.

Since it came into existence 4 years ago, TICD has been trying to promote firstly mutual understanding among religions through collaboration in social actions and, secondly, the role of Buddhism in development. Seminars, workshops, and "exposures" have been arranged, where interreligious experiences were reflected. The Catholics, with their international network, channel international experiences, and resources, while the Buddhists, with their long experiences and cultural riches and resources offer models of development relevant to Thai society.

An example should be quoted here. In 1982 a seminar was organized for Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim leaders and social workers. The theme was "Lent." Each religion has its "Lent," the Buddhist for about 3 months, the Christians for 40 days, and the Muslims for 30 days. For 25 years the Catholic Lent Campaign has been well-known as means for raising, the awareness of Catholics in the First World about the injustice in the world structure and their responsibility for the poverty of the Third World. This Lenten Campaign has provided great support for development activities in the Third World. As for the Buddhists and Muslims, the spirit of sharing or what is often called "merit making" is never lacking. Part of their income is spent for religious purposes. Yet it is almost all in traditional form. The seminar enabled the participants to understand what "Lent" really means, traditionally and doctrinally, for each religion. Many Buddhist monks shared their experience of the "Lenten Campaign" in their communities. As a result of the seminar, campaigns were organized for educational and fund-raising purposes. Individuals,

groups, and organizations, especially Buddhist and Christian, took part in the campaigns.

TICD's policy since the beginning has been the coordination and promotion of models of development based on religions principles. It was never intended to be a "funding agency." Few projects supported by TICD are catalytic in purpose. Evaluations of social activities organized and run by monks show that it is not only economic development that can be called development. After 20 years of the promotion of development, emphasizing economic growth, a prominent monk now see his role changing from social worker to meditation master. He finds that what he failed to consider sufficiently during the past 20 years is the spiritual dimension of the development process. This is exactly what some other monks are experiencing. They have both "rice banks" and meditation centers in their communities.

TICD is the forum where intellectuals and activists in social action meet. The actual search is the application of "small is beautiful" model of development in Thai society. Civilization in simplicity is the spirit of Buddhism and all religions. How can we today renew this spirit and at the same time renew the role of the Sangha and monasteries both in cities and in the rural areas? To answer such questions, interreligious experiences are valuable. The Catholic Church structure and organizations in different fields in its long history and especially after the Vatican II has also contributed to this searching process.

Catholic Search for Contextual Theology for Development

The Catholic Council of Thailand for Development, through its own experiences of social activities in Buddhist communities and in close collaboration with TICD, is now searching for a contextual theology. Since the beginning, CCTD has been trying to apply the teachings of the Church concerning social problems. Yet it seems that what is called "application" is not very different from "imposition." Ready-made formulas and models for development have been "proposed" and "imposed." Many new problems and questions have been raised.

It is not true that CCTD has not analysed the Thai culture and Buddhism. Yet its analysis has been rather a "macro" one assuming that one analysis can be applied for any situation. Its own experiences and reflections, and also the international experiences of contextual theology, lead CCTD now to a new step.

A contextual theology cannot be the result of individual experiences and reflections. The subject has to be the "people." Here in Thailand it is the Thai people. Since 90% are Buddhist, we have to look for the "logic of the majority." The Catholic minority has to reflect its faith in this context, if it believes that the Spirit of God, His Grace and Revelation, is also to be found in this culture. The content of this reflection must be the experience of these people. This is the important role of interreligious collaboration, since the

Buddhists themselves are also in such a process. The Catholic conceptual framework and international experiences complement the Buddhist "content."

It is difficult to tell the outcome, since the search has only begun this year. A group of Catholic priests and Buddhist monks and social workers have met formally and informally to discuss the issue. One common understanding is that there can be no real development if the people themselves are not the "subject" —no more the "object." The people have to discover their own cultural identity, their potential, which must be the root and basis for integral development. The "top-up" theory has to be put into reality. Peoples' participation should not be their participation in "our" project and "our" decision, but in theirs. We are individuals and small groups who participate in the peoples' organization. They are the majority.

Interreligious Encounter and Conflict Today

Religion is a sensitive issue. Here in Thailand, religion generally means Buddhism, which has the status of a state religion. As such, it is linked to national security. This fact has also to be taken into account if we wish to understand the present conflict between a group of Buddhists and the Catholic Church in Thailand.

Different from all proceeding conflicts, the present one is not "official" and nation-wide, though its impact has developed up to that level. The Buddhist "militants" consist of some prominent Buddhist monks, military officers, state officials, and lay men. The group attracted the public-eye by holding several mass assemblies in October 1982 and by various publications. The campaign was against the new strategy of evangelization, using the key term "dialogue" to "absorb" Buddhism into Christianity. Evidences given are the documents of the Vatican Council, the Bulletins of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, some writings of Thai Catholic leaders and intellectuals concerning Buddhism and "inculturation," and finally the "behavior" and different activities of the Catholic Church itself. Details cannot to be mentioned here. This is only a personal reflection on the incident, those impact is still being felt today.

CGRS and TICD have treated the issue with a sense of urgency in their meetings and discussions. It should also be noted that at the beginning the incident had a negative influence on some of the members of the two groups. However, after discussions, things were again clear and common efforts were set in order to make the situation better so as not to interrupt interreligious collaboration. Group discussions and meetings have been organized in many places for interested people.

To be optimistic, the actual Buddhist—Christian conflict is a good opportunity for both Buddhists and Catholics to re-examine the whole situation: one's faith and its expressions. An important point often raised by the Buddhists is that, after Vatican II, Buddhism is not sincerely respected nor considered

"equal" to Christianity. The claim by some Catholics that Buddha is a "prophet" (while Jesus Christ is the Savior of the World), and that Buddhism is the preparation for the Gospel or is part of God's plan of Salvation are doctrines and attitudes in need of re-thinking. Furthermore the process of "absorbing" Buddhist elements into Christianity is taken as intervening and "breaking up'' the whole of Buddhism, thereby damaging its identity.

Be these arguments objective or not, the Catholics should consider them seriously. In fact, up to today, the question of "inculturation" is still being discussed. It seems that almost 20 years after the Vatican Council, no real conclusion has been reached. It is true that many applications have been made, especially in liturgy, celebrations, and the construction of churches. But is that what the Council means by "inculturation" and "absorbing cultural elements into Christian faith"? Do we have both experts of the Council (Theology) and Buddhism (Thai culture) in order to express our Christian view of Buddhism as it should be and in a way acceptable to the Buddhists? If not, do we opt for real collaboration with the Buddhists, study, discuss and reflect with them what the Council says on the issues concerning them? Are we Catholics privileged to "theologize" in the Thai context? Does not our faith in the Thai context have its real meaning if it is a living faith among the majority, which is Buddhist and which we consider to be the locus of God's revelation also?

We Catholics still have quite a lot to do, if we really wish to realize our own identity as Thai and Catholic at the same time. We need to appreciate Buddhism more, not only as a doctrine, but also as a Buddhist experiences in the daily life of the Thai. Besides, we should acknowledge the fact that Buddhism is only one element, though very important, in Thai culture. The assumption that being Thai, we Catholics do realize what Thai culture is, is scientifically untrue. Studying carefully the history of the Catholic Church in Thailand we see that Catholics have their history inside Thai history, their culture inside Thai culture. Catholics have been minorities and immigrants, forming their own communities, under the guidance and leadership of missionaries, mostly French. With the renewal of Vatican II we remember who we were, how we lived and what we did. Moreover, understanding a culture means discovering its historical development, changes, values, struggles, and aspirations also in its present stage. This is not only the task of the Thai Catholic, since the Buddhist also and "agnostic" intellectuals and many social workers have been trying, especially during these last two decades, to discover Thai identity. Catholics should take part in this searching process in a way that they themselves do not feel themselves, and are not considered by others to be, an independent or even isolated part of the whole. To be sincere, are we Catholics really liberated from our "superiority complex"? Both in our thinking and our expressions?