Religious Activities of Administrative Agencies and the Relation between Religion and the State in Modern Thailand

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Abstract

This paper concerns the religious activities of administrative agencies in Thai Government. It attempts to show the relation between religion and state in Thailand from a different perspective. Various studies on Thai Buddhism have been conducted to explore this relation. These have focused on, among others, the relationship between Sangha and monarchy, movements of political monks, and use of Sangha by the state. However, these studies stress the Buddhist categories of monks and laity. Sometimes this set of concepts is merged with a modern Westernized secularized concept of religious organization and state or religion and politics. This may lead to reduced concern for religious activities undertaken by the Thai government itself.

Contemporary Thailand is not a very secularized society and does not strictly follow the principle of separation of state and religious organizations. There are cases where administrative agencies carry out religious activities, such as the promulgation of Buddhist moral education in public schools by the Ministry of Education and welfare work related to Buddhism by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. This paper thus offers a trial approach to analyze these phenomena and to construct some concepts applicable to the case of other countries.

Keywords: Religion and the State, Administrative Agencies, Official Religion

Introduction

The Relation between Religion and the State in Modern Thailand

According to statistics of the Thai government in 2014, 94.6% of the Thai population is Buddhist, 4.2% is Muslim, and 1.1% is Christian (National Statistical Office, Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT), 2016, p. i), although these numbers are only based on the official and nominal category of religion. Thai is a so-called Buddhist country, or perhaps better stated, a culturally Buddhist-oriented country. Buddhism in Thailand does not always maintain a distance from secular matters but rather has a close relation to the life of ordinary people. Furthermore, Buddhism and Buddhist monks have a relationship with the state various ways.

The relation between Buddhism and the state has been one of the main topics of academic studies on Thai Buddhism. And the most frequently discussed topic is the history and relationship between the Buddhist sangha and the king or the state. For instance, David Wyatt conducted historical research on the large-scale transformation in the Thai education system from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of twentieth century (Wyatt, 1969). He described the process by which the government utilized Buddhist sangha and temples to establish the national and modern elementary education system, although later, the system was changed into an educational institution managed by lay teachers. Moreover, he mentioned the first Sangha Act, established in 1902, which integrated all the monks and temples into a large national organization.

There are also other studies focused more on the relation between Buddhism and the king or the state. They have described the historical changes in the Thai Buddhist sangha and analyzed the relation between the sangha

and the king or the state (Ishii, 1975; Tambiah, 1976; 1984). Arguments have also been made about the activities of administrative agencies in the 1960s, which mobilized the sangha around the policies of national integration, the prevention communism, and community development (Keyes, 1971; Suksamran, 1982; 1993). The Dhammatuta program, run by the Department of Religious Affairs, through which monks support moral improvement and socioeconomic development of the villages in Northeast Thailand, and the Dhammajarik program, overseen by the Department of Public Welfare, in which monks visit ethnic minority people living in the hills to convert them to Buddhism, are examples. At that time, many scholars criticized the government's intervention in sangha and the sangha's involvement in government policies. Other studies have examined the rise of political monks in the 1970s (Suksamran, 1982; Jackson, 1989).

Methods and Materials

It seems that above these arguments are mostly based on the dichotomous framework of the sangha and the state, or religion and politics. Therefore, these studies sometimes criticize state intervention in the Thai sangha, yet few have focused on points like, to what extent or what kind of religious projects of administrative agencies have been spread and what kind of religious views may be found behind the government intervention.

Why is this subject considered in terms of this kind of dichotomous framework? One reason could have to do with the conceptual overlap between the Thai traditional dichotomy of monks and laities or the Buddhist church (Phutthaanachak) and kingdom (Rachaanachak), and the modern Western dichotomy of religious groups and the state, or the religious and the secular. But we should be careful about that view because in the context of Buddhism, the laity can be understood as part of a Buddhist congregation. The laity or the kingdom does not always mean the secular or the nonreligious in a Western sense.

This paper concerns these topics, specifically the religious activities or projects of administrative agencies in Thailand. Materials about the projects are based on government reports and information of government websites. I also analyze the relation between religion and the state in Thailand from a different theoretical perspective. All these analyses are based on a method of qualitative research in the field of Humanities.

Results and Discussion

Religious Activities of Administrative Agencies

Besides religious projects in the 1960s such as the Dhammatuta program and the Dhammajarik program, there are many other religious projects of administrative agencies in Thailand. These have been carried out up to the present time. Excluding the financial support given to monks and temples by the government, large projects are related to the moral education of lay students. For example, in 1958 the Department of Religious Affairs and Buddhist universities started a project called Sunday Buddhist School or the Center for Sunday Buddhist Education, which was aimed at preventing the moral degeneration of youth (Murata, 2007).

In addition to running the Center for Sunday Buddhist Education project, the Thai government promotes religious or moral education in public schools. Religious study is a required subject from the elementary to the high school level. Most students learn about Buddhism, but Muslim students, if there are enough of them, can learn about Islam in a separate class. They study morals, religious knowledge, and belief two hours a week. It may

be said that Thai Buddhist students nowadays spend more time learning Buddhism in school than at the temple (Yano, 2017).

The contents of the textbooks used in schools are based on a so-called visual map, which is a kind of educational guideline issued by the government. This guideline is produced by government officials and some monks and specialists in this field through the initiative of the government. Textbooks on Buddhism deal with the history of Buddha and teachings on the sacred text, the practice of Buddhist morality in everyday life, the religious activity of kings in Thai history, and respect for the royal family. It might be described as a state-oriented official teaching of Buddhism (Yano, 2017).

The Buddhist-style School Project (Khrongkan Rongrian Withi Phut) is another interesting program carried out by the Ministry of Education. This project was started in 2002 by the Bureau of Educational Innovation Development, and it can be described as a kind of applied study of Buddhism or Buddhist holistic education. It is not instruction that places importance on the gaining knowledge of Buddhism itself but rather stresses the practical use of Buddhist teaching to learn about general subjects in school and to promote social ties among schools, temples, and families or communities. In 2006, about 63% of schools from elementary school to high school in Thailand took part in this project (Yano, 2017). The project is still going on today.

Almost in the same period as the Buddhist-style School Project, the Department of Religious Affairs in 2003 began another program that involved sending monks to teach morals in schools. The teaching of Buddhism in public schools is usually conducted by lay teachers. But some lay teachers do not know Buddhist teachings well and they are not always effective moral models. Furthermore, a new social role is needed for monks who graduate from two Buddhist universities: Mahamakut Buddhist University and Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University. (This project is called Phra Dhammavittayakorn or teacher monk). These circumstances led to the introduction of the project. About 20,000 monks were sent into schools in 2008, though not all classes are covered by the project. The project's budget and management were transferred in 2008 to the Ministry of Education and Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University under the authority of the Ministry of Education (Yano, 2017).

Other than projects related to instruction on Buddhism in schools, some departments and offices in the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security deal with related projects. For example, in 2011 the Department of Social Development and Welfare in this ministry became a cosponsor of the ordination ritual of hill people at Benchamabophit temple in Bangkok. And on the website of the department, they called for participation in the ritual (Department of Social Development and Welfare, 2011). This shows that conversion activity related to the hill people has continued, and that the government has played a role in this. Earlier, in 2009, the Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development in the ministry conducted a "project for the moral family to build a stable Thai society (Khrongkan Khropkhrua Khunnatham Nam Sangkhomthai Khemkheng)." This is a project for learning morality in the family and Buddhist teachings at religious centers. It was reported that 4,951 families participated in the project in four prefectures (Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development, 2010, pp. 50-51).

As mentioned above, administrative agencies carry out various religious activities. Some are large-scale and long-term projects, and others are small and short-term projects. We might say that these government actions, especially educational ones, generate an official Buddhist culture. Further, the formation of the Thai Buddhist sangha organization itself can be interpreted as a huge project for constructing the modern education system and as the largest intervention in the sangha by the government.

Reconsideration of the Dichotomy between Religious Groups and the State

These projects may be said to represent state intervention in religion, especially in Buddhism. But it can also be said that the state propagates a state-oriented Buddhism or that it manufactures its own form of Buddhism. This is a phenomenon that occurs between religion and politics, or a phenomenon that does not fit into the dichotomy of religious groups and the state.

Naturally, some studies did not presuppose the dichotomy. A typical example might be in the category of research on the king, who has both sacred and political authority. It is clear that the king has an extraordinary position under the regime of modern Thailand. The position of the king is not easily classified as falling under religion or politics. However, even here, unlike the king, the government is generally a secular organization, though it does engage in religious activities.

Studies of political monks in the 1970s (Suksamran, 1982; Jackson, 1989) and of Santi Asok, the Buddhist sect, which was established in 1975 and whose members formed a political party for a morally purified politics (McCargo, 1992; 1997), did not assume any such dichotomy. However, both of these were exceptional religious movements that took place outside the government.

"Civic Religion," by Frank Reynolds (Reynolds, 1977), was another exceptional study; however, it focused more on the general situation and criticized the dichotomy more directly. Reynolds said,

> *It has become increasingly evident that the older procedure of making a clear distinction*
> *between specifically religious communities and religion on the one hand,*
> *and the state and politics on the other, then analyzing the interaction between the two,*
> *is no longer sufficient.* (Reynolds, 1977, p. 267)

Dealing with this problem, based on Robert Bellah's idea of "civil religion" in the United States, Reynolds constructs the idea of "civic religion" to describe the whole phenomenon of the religious idea and sentiment and symbols that are associated with the modern Thai national community.

Reynolds's idea of civic religion in Thailand can be summarized in four points as follows: (1) There is continuity in civic religion in Thailand between the religious forms of the premodern and the modern period. (2) There is a broad complexity of various religious forms. (3) Civic religion is seen not only on the levels of symbols and action but also on the level of communities. (4) The difference between the American context and the Thai context may lead to different approaches between civil religion and civic religion (Reynolds, 1977, pp. 281–282).

The idea of civic religion is aimed at overcoming the dichotomy between religious groups and the state. This notion has been employed by other scholars. However, it has several problems. For example, the idea of civic religion, especially in Charles F. Keyes and Donald K. Swearer's arguments concerning it, obscures the hegemonic and ethno-nationalistic aspect of Thai Buddhism (McCargo, 2009, pp. 12–13). I think the idea of civic religion may be useful in understanding intuitively the religious and political system and culture of modern Thailand as a whole. However, this is too broad a concept. It is not so analytical, and is not easy to apply to phenomena in other countries. In addition, even in discussions related to civic religion, the various religious activities of administrative agencies have not been examined sufficiently.

We require a more analytical concept to describe phenomena that overlap in the dichotomy. Moreover, it needs to be more applicable to other countries. Therefore, it is better to start by constructing concepts that are not based on the separation of religious groups and the state in modern Western societies, and are not founded on the Western

meaning of the secular and the religious. The following is an attempt to do this based on the case of modern Thailand.

Three Types of Official Religion in Thailand

To characterize the religion and politics as a whole in Thailand, we need to consider not only state and religious organizations but also the position of the king, which has its own religious aura. This paper, however, focuses only on the former relation. Furthermore, I use the new concept of "official religion" on a trial basis. In this case, the word is used to mean religious groups and religious activities within the purview of the state. The official religion system is one in which the state intervenes in religious groups and activities to establish, support, and regulate them. Therefore, an official religion system is completely different from a system in which there is a strict separation of state and religious groups, such as in France, the United States, and Japan. Stressing the state's initiative on and intervention in religion, the official religion system is also different from that of state-authorized religions, or a system of established religion, such as in Germany.

Below, I describe three types of official religion: the officially founded type, the officially approved type, and the officially managed type. Obviously, these concepts are based only on the Thai case and my own point of view. Thus, it may be possible to construct other types of official religion based on the system found in other countries. What I can say at least is, I believe that these three types are the main components of the system of official religion in Thailand.

1）Officially Founded Type

In the officially founded type, the state separates or integrates existing religious groups or networks within the state territory, and establishes rules to support and regulate this artificial religious organization. This approach differs from the dichotomy of autonomous religious groups and the state. The source of the dichotomy may originate from the autonomous Catholic Church and the empire, with feudal lords in medieval Europe. But, different from Christianity, it happens that there are no clear boundaries in the social relations in some religions. Such social relations comprise simply various complicated and unconscious networks. These networks are separated or integrated by the state. Figuratively speaking, the officially founded type of religion is like a distribution board through which electric current and information flow. Institutionalization of this type of religion is carried out through the construction of political hardware.

The Thai Buddhist sangha can be considered as a typical case of the officially founded type of religion. Before the formation of the modern Thai kingdom, there were no organizations that integrated all the monks and temples within the sphere of sovereignty of the king of Siam. Such an organized structure appeared as a result of the 1902 Sangha Act. This means that the national organization of the Thai sangha falls within the laws of the state. Furthermore, the integration of the Buddhist sangha within the territory of Thailand was intended not only to reform Buddhist teaching and organization in a more modern guise but also to form the basis of a national education system, which spread throughout the state.

At least in its early days, the sangha may have lacked a strong identity. Therefore, this religious organization had less autonomy to confront with state and had difficulty in its struggle against the state for freedom of religion. However, apart from officially founded organizations, various unauthorized networks and subgroups can also carry out their activities in practical ways.

The institutionalization of the officially founded type of religion also took place with regard to Islam in Thailand, Central Islamic Council of Thailand was established in 1949 (Ishii, 1975, pp. 358-361; Chitmuat,

2009, pp. 815–825). Moreover, we can also see this type of religion in the early twentieth century in Japan. In this era, the Japanese government separated Shinto and Buddhism from each other, and the organization of Shinto shrines and Shinto priests at the national level was carried out for the first time by the state (Shimazono, 2010, p. 60).

2) Officially Approved Type

In the officially approved type of religion the state authorizes existing religious groups in order to support and regulate. Of course, the officially founded type of religion is also authorized by the state, but the officially approved type presupposes existing autonomous religious groups.

In Thailand, some lay Buddhist groups and Islamic, Hindu and the Sikh groups are officially approved and receive government grants. Some groups that are Christian are also approved: a Catholic Church organization and four Protestant organizations. Regarding the state's authorization of religious groups, this practice has parallels with the system of state-authorized or established religion in Germany. However, in the case of Germany, there is less state intervention than in Thailand. Established religions in Germany possess more autonomy to undertake religious activities. Thus, even religious education is conducted in public schools, and religious groups have the authority to determine the content of textbooks and how they teach in classes. Furthermore, students and their parents have the right to decide to participate in a religious teaching class or not.

In addition, in Thailand, some religious groups are authorized such as cultural foundations. While many small religious groups are unauthorized, they can engage in their particular religious activities.

3) Officially Managed Type

The above-mentioned two types of official religion presuppose that there are substantive religious groups in a society. Different from these, the officially managed type of religion is not based on collective religious groups. In this type of religion, administrative projects related to religious propagation, ritual activities, and government performance of various of administrative duties come together. These are state activities in which the religious content is seen as administrative capital. The previously mentioned religious activities of administrative agencies in Thailand are typical examples.

The features of the officially managed type of religion are more flexible than the officially founded and approved types, which are based on organizations and institutes. In contrast, the officially managed type emphasizes content, which is like software to hardware, or like electric current and information flows on a distribution board. Therefore, administrative projects as part of the officially managed type of religion can be not only one-off activities but also continuous ones. And the field of the officially managed type of religion is not limited to officially founded or authorized religions. As administrative projects, an officially managed type of religion can perform its activities through a network of ministries and as part of the local branch of the ministry or the local administrative organ. It resembles application software that is loadable on various kinds of hardware.

Part of the state Shinto system before the end of the World War II in Japan could be characterized as belonging to this type of religion. This system included an organized network of Shinto shrines and government activities within an administrative network. The latter conducted moral education related to respect for and worship of the Japanese imperial family, instruction in Japanese mythology, and ritual activities, especially in public schools (Shimazono, 2010, pp. 56-95).

Conclusion and Suggestions

In this paper, I have attempted to show that the relation between religion and the state in Thailand is not limited to the Buddhist sangha and the king or the state, and is not confined the problem of the utilization of the Buddhist sangha for anticommunist initiatives and the integration of ethnic minorities by the state in the 1960s. Religious groups in Thailand, and religious teachings and related cultures, especially those of Buddhism, have been utilized as administrative capital by the state since the beginning of modernization or earlier. Thus, to understand this subject analytically and criticize it correctly, it is necessary to construct concepts based on this reality. This paper also offers a trial approach to this.

However, we also need to think about what kind of religious views may be found behind the government intervention. Regarding this question, it is necessary to discuss other topics: Thai-style democracy and the religious nature of the king, Social hierarchy or social order and Buddhism, the features of the concept of religion in Thailand, and the image of the separation between religious groups and state by the Thai people. Such an effort must be reserved for another occasion.

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