

NOT HERE TO STEAL SHEEP:

A Reading of the History and Politics of Catholicism in Thailand

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Abstract

This article investigates how Catholicism has had to evolve and adapt in order to sustain itself in Thailand. As Siam/Thailand developed through economic, political and cultural interactions with Western powers, Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular served as a site on which Thai national identity was forged in response to these interactions. Christianity was an 'other' against which Thai Buddhist identity coalesced yet the appeal of first Catholic and later Protestant missionary education was very strong. This article combines interpretive historical method and analysis of contemporary shifts that reflect a more assertive Thai Catholic Church. In so doing, the article offers a new reading of the place of Catholicism as a minority religion that is both aware of the risks of overtly challenging Buddhist nationalism and also confident of its place within the Thai cultural imaginary and the global Catholic networks across Asia.

Keywords

Buddhist nationalism, Catholic Church in Thailand, Catholicism as minority religion, Catholicism in Asia, foreignness in Thai history, Religion and Politics in Southeast Asia

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

The tone conveyed by the new cardinal Michael Kriengsak of Bangkok might be called cautiously celebratory on the announcement of his appointment early in 2015. Emphases in interviews with Archbishop Michael Kriengsak were on working to strengthen the faith of Catholics in small groups and “witnessing life,” non-threatening phrases designed to allay concerns non-Catholics may have had about the evangelizing and conversion goals of the Church in Thailand.¹ As reported by Gagliarducci in the *Catholic News Agency*: living in Thailand, where Christians are a very small minority, Cardinal Kriengsak’s priorities have included interreligious dialogue, evangelization, and Catholic education. “The Catholic Church in Thailand tries to build bridges, we try to educate people, to form strengthened Catholics able to go against the waves,” Kriengsak explained in press statements.

Affatato in *The Vatican Insider* reported that “When Thai newspapers published the news about his [Kriengsak’s] nomination as cardinal, they included images of him standing next to a renowned Buddhist monk, almost as if to seal the pact of solidarity between the two faiths.” “First we witness to the Christian life with our lives, and it is after this that we can announce the Gospel. Everything will come, but first of all there is the need for a testimony of life in small groups of Christian families” (Gagliarducci). In the words of a journalist covering this news: Thailand has always been religiously tolerant, and “...the Catholic Church seeks not to steal sheep through aggressive evangelization but to encourage a spiritual life rather than secularism” (Schwankert). This evocative phrase about stealing sheep speaks directly to anxieties about the Thai Catholic Church that appear in narratives about the first sustained encounters between European Catholics and the Siamese elites from nearly four centuries ago. Residual anxieties about the place of Catholicism in Thailand surfaced at different times in Thai history, sometimes expressing itself as outright hostility as was the case in the 1940s in Northeastern Thailand when priests were killed and churches burned in the name of defending the Thai nation against foreign influence (Strate).

If the naming of Kriengsak as a cardinal aroused concerns about the Church’s ambitions for large-scale conversion efforts, those concerns did not gather much force. The contrast between Kriengsak’s appointment and that of the first Thai cardinal’s (Michael Michai Kitbunchu) in 1983 is very striking. At that time a violent internal war had just been brought to close, which also helped put to rest the threat of communism in Thailand. Thailand was more securely restored to its place as a bulwark against unstable and anti-Western regimes of Burma and Indochina. Pope John Paul II would visit Thailand in 1986, an event that is commemorated in photographs of him at the palace with the Royal Family. In addition, the directions

that the Catholic Church was moving in throughout this period encompassed many different types of work: maintaining the prestigious school network in cities around the country and working in development and humanitarian assistance. Yet, throughout the 1980s, the Catholic Church in Thailand was still regarded with suspicion by some Buddhist nationalist owing to the fear that large-scale conversion was the goal of the Catholic Church and that conversion of this type would be a direct threat to the nation.

HISTORICAL AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC FRAMES FOR UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY CATHOLICISM IN THAILAND

The publication of a book offers a window on the complicated and sometimes outright antagonistic relationship between Catholicism and the majority religion of Buddhism. In 1983, a high-ranking Buddhist monk wrote a book titled *A Plot to Undermine Buddhism* stating that it was “necessary to make known to the world this plot, in which Buddhist teachings have been distorted according to the plan to absorb it into Catholicism” (Phra Sobhon- Ganabhorn 1). The greater part of this book is devoted to ‘unmasking’ the goals of large-scale conversion to Catholicism. This conversion was to be accomplished by evangelization through dialogue. Endorsed by Church reforms in the 1960s when dialogue was the chosen vehicle for inter-acting with non-Catholics. Anodyne though the term “dialogue” may sound to many, when it first came into use almost 50 years ago, the idea that Catholics would welcome, let alone initiate, exchanges with other religions on equal footing was a very new one. When the Catholic Church’s endorsement of dialogue alongside other more culturally sensitive evangelization techniques became known to Buddhist leaders in Thailand, interfaith dialogue was seen as a thinly disguised plan to bring about more wide-scale conversions of Thais than had ever been possible in the past. To some in Thailand this adoption of interfaith dialogue was regarded as merely a more indirect effort to continue conversion efforts using different techniques. As the global Catholic Church adopted less aggressive strategies of evangelization in favour of more collaborative and culturally sensitive approaches, members of the dominant religious group – Thai Buddhists – saw that these more subtle techniques could prove attractive. The intense suspicion that the author of the *A Plot to Undermine Buddhism* exhibited is something I sought to understand in assessing how differently the Catholic Church of Thailand in 2015 appeared in contrast to that of the early 1980s. Some questions informed this exploration into *Plot* and they helped to frame this essay. Key among them is: how did the Thai Catholic Church come to be thought of as such a threat when the number of Catholics amounted to roughly one half of one percent of Thais? From

a very close reading of the book *A Plot* it became apparent that the suspicions were directed not only at the threat of conversion in contemporary Thailand (of the 1970s and 1980s) but were rooted in the history of the Catholic Church. Though the number of Thai Catholics has remained small relative to the overall population, at certain junctures in history Buddhist monks and Thai nationalist leaders alike treated the Church with wariness or outright hostility. Catholic evangelization techniques could be very arrogant and aggressive. As will be discussed below, there were Catholic religious tracts written in the 19th century that denigrated Buddhism and extolled the virtues and 'truth' of Catholicism over all other religions.

Catholicism's association with European powers' expansionist aims in the country (and in the region of Southeast Asia more widely), coupled with the publication of works extolling Catholicism's superiority over Buddhism have meant that up until the 1940s Catholicism remained a potent symbol of western arrogance and intervention." (Strate 60) The historian Shane Strate examines the public anti-Catholic campaigns that were launched under the leadership of Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram during World War II. (In World War II Thailand was allied with the Axis powers and therefore in conflict with French Indochina.) Strate argues that "Among the government's targets, the Catholic Church received special attention due to its history of confrontation with the Thai state dating back to the reign of King Chulalongkorn. (Strate 60)

Phibun's campaign against Catholicism represented an attempt to avenge past national humiliation and destroy all symbols of the old colonial order in Southeast Asia. (Strate 60) These campaigns served as means by which the Thai government could exploit its "history of victimhood", in this the loss of territory to the French along Thailand's borders with Cambodia and Laos, in order to redefine national identity. According to Strate Thai leadership "articulated new boundaries of identification in which the values 'Catholic' and 'Thai' became mutually exclusive". (Strate 62)

Mark Jeurgensmeyer has written that "Because both religion and secular nationalism are ideologies of order, they are potential rivals. Either can claim to be the guarantor of orderliness within a society; either can claim to be the ultimate authority for social order" (266). This essay explicates how in the last quarter of the 20th century Thai Catholics have sought to reposition themselves within the Thai nation-state with an awareness of the past conflicts and hostilities. The contingent nature of their status in Thailand has led lay Catholic intellectuals and (Thai) Church leaders alike to write and preach their way into the royalist-nationalist historical imaginary that frames the acceptable at present.

FOREIGN, FARANG AND THE DOMESTICATION OF CATHOLIC FOREIGNNESS

Thailand's first encounter with Western influences can already be found in the early 16th century international community in Ayutthaya (Kitiarsa 62). The perception of Westerners was not uniform, however. Pattana notes that Westerners were regarded seen as both "wicked and dangerous," as well as "models of a materially more advanced civilization" (Kitiarsa 63). *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*, a masterful collection of essays on Thai history, culture and identity, captures the mixed and complicated ways that Thais relate to the complement of forces known as "the West." These sentiments did not remain unchanged across time: when most of the former regional powers had been defeated by foreign colonial powers at the beginning of the 19th century, Siam regarded the West as a threat and turned to a strategic approach that focused on learning and understanding from it (Kitiarsa 65).

Foreignness is by no means a negative attribute alone especially given the ways in which people in Thailand are able to craft identities and inner-lives wherein ideas and aesthetics which emanate from spaces beyond national and regional boundaries are cultivated. This is one manifestation of what I term a "domesticated foreignness" whereby there are images, ideas, and structures embedded in the physical and cultural landscape that mark Christianity in Thailand. Many of these images and culture markers come from the history of European relations with Siam/Thailand that began in significant ways in the 17th century. There are iconic images of Catholic missionaries from the time of King Narai the Great: one in particular of priests/emissaries being granted an audience by the king, for example, that is reproduced in popular histories, tourism brochures, textbooks and websites. In the ancient capital of Ayutthaya, a city 40 kilometers to the north of Bangkok, the remains of settlements of Portuguese and Dutch serve as visual reminders of the Europeans, and their churches, that once were there nearly 400 years ago.

The stories that accompany these visual and physical remains are ones in which the Thai elites and commoners did *not* convert to Christianity and the country was able to avoid full colonization. Thai history tells and retells the story of the successful way monarchs of the 17th century welcomed Europeans without succumbing to conquest. Christians in general, and Catholic missionaries in particular, became linked with the colonialism Thailand escaped.

Owing to the fact that Catholic churchmen in the 17th century and again in the 19th century (when Protestant missionaries also made their influence felt in

Siam) interacted regularly with the court, records of their work and lives became important to the impressions forged elsewhere about the country, as well as to subsequent generations of historians of Thailand. In addition, they were visually inscribed in mural paintings in temples in Bangkok and elsewhere. For example, Europeans were depicted in traditional Siamese decorative art, in woodcuts, as guardians at the doors and windows of monasteries and as *kinnari* or animals in the mythical forest. Some were depicted as the guardian angels, or deities at the above the entry of the monastery ceremonial hall. From these representations made in the Ayutthaya period, it is possible to see that the Siamese viewed Europeans as fellow humans from distant places with different expertise. The superiority of Europeans was not clearly recognized until well into the early Bangkok period (Aphornsuvan 404).

The assemblage of meanings that constitute *farang*, an extraordinarily important concept in Thailand, wear a Christian guise at times. In “An Ambiguous Intimacy: *Farang* as Siamese Occidentalism,” Pattana Kitiarsa traces the historical construction of *farang* in Thai thought arguing that the influence of this notion in the process of identity making in Thailand has been profound. Initiated by the royal elites in the nineteenth century, the *farang* concept was repeated and continued by military dictators and bureaucrats through the twentieth century, and is now driven by middle-class consumers and the mass media. Beginning with the *farang* as “suspicious strangers” in the empire of Ayutthaya and shifting to *farang* as “Distant Others” in the early Bangkok period to the Imperialist *farang* in the reign of King Mongkut and finally, in the late nineteenth century, *farang* as agent of civilization and modernization, Pattana conceives *farang* as “an expression of Siamese/Thai Occidentalism, that is an historically and culturally constructed way of knowing, dealing with, criticizing, condemning, consuming and imagining the West as a powerful and suspicious Other” (67). For Thais, the West is the powerful “Other.” Though *farang* pertains to fair-skinned people like Europeans, Americans, and Australians, it is also the base of the word for French in Thai as well. Some scholars suggest that the terms for “French” and “Christian” were conflated up through the 19th century.

In this essay, I peel back some of the layers of this concept of foreignness and interrogate this claim of Christianity’s foreignness as both outdated and obscuring more than it reveals. For example, while the numbers of converts to Protestant Christianity and Catholicism were small historically, over the past few decades Protestantism has grown at rates that outpace the country’s population growth rate. And although Catholicism is not drawing as many converts, its adherents are nonetheless becoming surer of themselves as a minority and of their place in Thai society. In addition, the numbers of members of these churches may not speak sufficiently to the influence Christianity has had in the country both through its

education system and to the degree that technology, trade, science, medicine in the 17th and 19th and 20th centuries were in some measure mediated by the role that missionaries played. The “foreignness” has to be understood as long-since having been assimilated and accepted as an important presence on the Thai social and cultural landscape.

HISTORICAL CONTOURS AND FRAMEWORKS FOR VIEWING CHRISTIANITY IN

THAILAND

Apart from the sporadic appearance of some Dominican, Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries in the 16th and early 17th centuries, mission work in Thailand (at that time the kingdom of Siam) started with the arrival of the first members of the Foreign Missions Society of Paris (*Missions Etrangères*), only just founded then, and particularly with the arrival of Mgr. de la Motte there in 1662. European missionaries settled in Ayutthaya, the capital of the kingdom during the 16th, 17th and part of the 18th centuries. According to Pasuk and Baker, by the latter part of the Ayutthaya period “trade was the foundation of rule” and the rulers “entrusted the handling of much overseas trade to foreign merchants who were encouraged to take up permanent residence at the royal capital. The palace at Ayutthaya was circled by suburbs of Japanese, Chinese, Arabs, Persians, Dutch, French, Portuguese and British” (92).

This policy gave the kingdom access to trading markets and technologies and it was in this context that missionaries, along with their instruments of science like the telescope brought by French Jesuits to King Narai, were welcomed. The cosmopolitanism of Ayutthaya was not without its boundaries and the price for transgressing those religious boundaries could be high.

By the late 17th century, there was a flood of “...published accounts by the French missionaries and diplomats who had spent time in Siam in the 1680s” through which it is possible to see “...how Siam was viewed, interpreted and packaged for a mass audience in Europe” (Benson 156). Colonial powers were intent on trade and missionary priests served as vital go-betweens communicating between the court of Narai and the court of Louis XIV. King Narai welcomed Jesuits and their modern scientific instruments, but this interest was confused with a desire to convert to Catholicism – at least in the mind of courtiers and nobility worried about the influence of Catholics and foreigners. In a recent study, *Conversion and Conflict: Catholicism in Southeast Asia*, Tara Alberts noted that “French missionaries were particularly encouraged by the cordial relations established with Narai, and felt

sure that the favour shown to them would soon translate into a royal conversion” (60). The consequences of misjudging court politics were extreme and long-term for Europeans. Purcell writes: At the crucial moment, in 1688, the Roman Catholic priests chose to seek the King’s conversion by intensive tactics, but Phra Narai (the king) had no urge to save his soul. Fearing that the foreigners meant to subjugate their country, some Siam nobles formed a plot against both the French and their own King. They killed [his Greek and Catholic advisor] Phaulcon and three possible successors to the throne, but Phra Narai, being on his death-bed, was allowed to die naturally. The coup ended in the departure of the French and, the closing of the doors to foreign trade... Diplomatic relations were not reopened with European nations until the nineteenth century (86).

This event in Thai history, the coup that came at the end of Narai’s life, and the long-term consequences it had for relations between European and other foreign traders and government officials, is also a touchstone in the history writing about Christianity in Thailand. In the view of Runchana Pam Suksod-Barger, a historian of Protestantism in Thailand, “The French Catholics persistence in thinking they could convert King Narai resulted in ‘tension and persecution of Christian missionaries for nearly 200 years during which time Catholic missionaries were discouraged from coming to the country and trade with the West was limited” (68). The tale is a cautionary one for the Catholic Church in Thailand: from having pushed too hard and at the wrong time for the conversion of King Narai (1657-1688) Catholic missionaries were forced to leave (or limit their activity) for over one hundred years (Purcell 87). Those that did stay or attempt to enter the kingdom in the late 18th century were persecuted.

After the initial encounters with Catholicism in Siam/Thailand and the failed efforts at royal conversion European traders as well as missionaries were only able to return to the kingdom in the early 19th century. The king (Rama III) offered missionaries protection but with the understanding that the missionaries would not move beyond certain limited groups. Catholics were required to limit their evangelizing to minority populations but were able to make themselves useful in the decisive decades of the mid and late 19th century. In the words of an anthropologist of Thailand, Christian missionaries “enjoyed the status of tolerated, but not particularly welcome, guests” (Cohen 31).

To contextualize the Roman Catholic experience in Thailand, it is helpful to look at Protestant Christianity if only in general terms. The Protestant presence in Thailand dates from only 1828, when the German missionary Carl Gutzlaff and the Englishman Jacob Tomlin arrived in Bangkok. Though they stayed only briefly, they managed to arrange a translation of the entire Bible into Thai. Other Protestant missionaries soon followed, and more permanent works were begun

in the 1830s. In the nineteenth century, most of these missionaries came from the United States, though a few also came from Great Britain and elsewhere. The most enduring work of that period was by the Presbyterians, who by 1914 had nearly 8,000 members, mostly in Bangkok (both Thai and Chinese) and the north (mostly ethnic Thai). There was also a Chinese church in Bangkok that had been started by Baptists in the 1830s and had essentially become self-governing by the end of the century.² Zehner, in “Conversion to Christianity among the Thai and Sino-Thai of Modern Thailand” observes additional Protestant missions began work in the first half of the twentieth century, but the real efflorescence of Protestant work began after World War II, when 15 new missions entered the country in just 15 years, with the stream of new missions continuing apace for the next several years.

Zehner notes that growth in numbers of Protestant missions and conversions has been especially strong since the 1970s and the growth of Thailand’s Protestant churches has consistently been faster than the nation’s population growth (see Table 1).

Year	Protestant Membership	Average Annual Growth Rate (%/yr)	Growth Rate of Population (%/year)	Conversion Growth Rate
1941	10,700	NA	NA	NA
1950	15,534	4.1	2.6	NA
1960	24,539	4.7	3.0	1.7
1970	36,348	4.0	3.0	1.0
1973	42,808	5.6	4.0	1.6
1978	58,953	6.8	2.5	4.3
2006	325,000	5.4	1.2	4.2

Table 1: Average annual growth rate calculations for the period of postwar growth in Protestant Churches. (Zehner, “Conversion to Christianity in Modern Thailand” 411)³

BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN RHETORICS AND RELATIONS

From the earliest encounters between Catholic Europeans and Siamese in which faith or beliefs about religion were recorded the missionaries noted how little inclined to adopt Christianity people seemed to be. In the view of missionaries in the 17th century the gentle and affable ‘nature’ of the Siamese people rendered them little inclined to consider Catholicism: “The gentleness of their nature, the access

to and acquaintance with so many foreigners, the diplomatic condescension they are obliged to have for them, has committed them to this pernicious opinion that, with no hope of finding the truth, they will not trouble themselves at all with the search. This indifference is one of the greatest obstacles to their conversion” (De Bourges qtd. in Alberts 167).

But indifference was only one response: they asked as well why convert if we already honor Gods:

...when Christian Doctors propose our Holy Faith, and explain to them the reasons which prove its truth, they do not contradict, and admit that the Christian religion is good, they merely point out that it is foolish to reject the other religions, and since these aim to honour the Gods, that it must be supposed that the Gods will be content with them. (Alberts 167)

The elite’s lack of interest in converting to Catholicism was defining for how missionaries worked in the Ayutthaya kingdom: they continued to try to establish a base there to train potential priests and from which they could move into other parts of the region—namely what is present-day Vietnam. More recent scholarship argues for examining a complement of factors rather than singling out one in assessing why one group converts and another does not. Colonial support of missions, interest or acquiescence of local rulers, compatibility with local beliefs and the abilities of the missionaries each could be important depending on the circumstances and likely these factors need to be considered in combination. “In modern times, the concept of conversion has become a battlefield of academia” as scholars struggled to define its boundaries and characteristics and Southeast Asia is an ideal testing ground for “theories of what makes communities and individuals more likely to convert to a new religion” (Alberts 205).

In writings on the politics of Buddhism within Thai Studies, scholars single out the role that Buddhism played in legitimizing the political structures. As Peter Jackson succinctly states: “The importance of Buddhism in legitimating the traditional Thai political structures centered on the monarchy lay in the fact that it provided a theoretical linking of the natural or cosmic order with the social order” (52).

Buddhism did not and could not remain unchanged, however, especially in the face of pressure from colonial powers to the west, east and south of the kingdom from England and France. By the turn of the 19th century the British empire in India was consolidated and British missions visited Siam beginning in the 1820s. By the half of the 19th century French ambitions in Indochina became apparent. While Siam’s leaders were open to European trade, they were pressured to yield to the

power of these nations. The Thai aristocracy sought to intellectually assimilate the impact of European culture and this process demanded the Buddhism be reformed. Buddhism was reinterpreted to make it more consistent with Western science and learning (Jackson 44).

The monk who was to become King Mongkut initiated reforms to Buddhism which were “to a considerable extent, a response to challenges by the intellectual influences from the West, especially Christian missionaries and the serious debate between them and Buddhist intellectuals” (Winichakul 78). Thongchai elaborates on the significance of the reform movement (known as Thammayut) not only for the 19th century but for the very foundations of the nation’s intellectual and cultural development into the present: “Not only was the advocacy of this variety of rational Buddhism a successful epistemological response to the challenge of its day, but it was also one of the most enduringly significant contributions to the cultural and intellectual foundation of modern Siam until the present” (78). These debates took many different forms: sometimes openly in the pages of newspapers written and printed by the American Presbyterian missionary-doctor Dan Bradley, some in the form of catechetical tracts published by the Catholic Assumption Press which were refuted by Thai Buddhist monks and some in the form of communication about education of children at the court. There were many noteworthy aspects of these debates, particularly considering how the terms in which Buddhism and Christianity (or in some instances Catholicism very explicitly) were talked about colored the perception of each subsequently.

The confrontations between Buddhism and Christianity helped to engender and then fuel different manifestations of this theme of the superiority/inferiority. Christianity was the vehicle for many of the modern ideas Thai elites (and later the Sino-Thai middle class) found alluring (Harrison and Jackson) but the core elements of faith, let alone the institutional allegiance to religious centers outside of Siam, were to be avoided. The inner chambers of Christianity were off-limits and only the outer forms could be or should be adapted. King Mongkut himself wrote a letter to Mrs. Anna H. Leonowens, asking her to teach English at the palace, he said: Madam: We are in good pleasure and satisfaction in heart that you are in willingness to undertake the education of our beloved royal children. And we hope that in doing your education on us and on our children... *you will so your best endeavor for knowledge of English language, science and literature, and not for conversion to Christianity; as the followers of Buddha are mostly aware of the powerfulness of truth and virtue, as well as of the followers of Christ, and are desirous to have facility of English language and literature, more than new religions* (qtd. in Landon 20; italics added).

According to Keith Watson, a missionary-turned-scholar, this theme that seems to have persisted long after the time of King Mongkut for although the Thais “are prepared to accept Western progress they have rejected the Christian ethic from which it has sprung” (28). This view colored (and continues to inform) the way many Thais perceive Catholic and Protestant Christian schooling: valued for what could be taken from it, worth fighting for a spot to attend because the priests, brothers and nuns were likely going to “teach better English.”

DEATH OF A BISHOP AS A REMINDER OF TENSIONS PAST AND SUSPICIONS THAT PERSIST

Christianity was integral to the formation of a Thai national and *Buddhist* identity which took shape by the early 20th century. In ways similar to the crypto-colonialism Herzfeld identifies whereby iterations of Siam/Thailand *not* having not being fully colonized are so frequent as to keep the “West” alive in the national imaginary, Christianity was an influence against which Thai Buddhism and Thai culture more generally measures itself.⁴ At key moments in the 19th century relations between Catholic clergy and the Thai kings and Buddhist intellectuals were openly in conflict, at other times the relations between the French Bishop Pallegoix and the court were cordial and even very warm. In this next section, I want to draw attention to the way these incidents in particular, and relations more generally between Catholics and Thais (the distinction between these is maintained throughout reviews on the book and in official discourse up until the early 1970s) are handled in a book published in the early 1980s by one of the first Thai Catholic social scientists Seri Phongphit.⁵ They all center around Pallegoix’s long and active time in Siam, the record of which is noted in *Katholik kap sangkhom thai* [*Catholics and Thai Society*], a widely cited book, discussed below.

Pallegoix’s arrival in Siam in 1830 coincided with the easing of strain that Catholics in Siam had experienced in the preceding decades. With the chaos that ensued from the fall of the capital Ayutthaya in 1767, the fortunes of the Catholic missionaries and communities as well as European emissaries and traders fell as well. In his *Short History of Thailand*, David Wyatt notes that at the close of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th century, the politics on the European continent kept Western governments focused on the Napoleonic wars. The situation of the Catholic missions is reported to have improved slightly in Siam with the 1811 founding of the Paris-based Oeuvres pour la Propagation de la Foi. A papal decree in 1827 granted the Apostolic Vicar of Siam jurisdiction over Singapore and other parts of Southeast Asia. Missionary work continued in Cambodia and Vietnam

until the French annexation of Indochina and by the middle of the 19th century there were ten schools for boys and girls and two convent schools for girls in Siam.

Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix came to Siam in 1830 and he learned Thai and Pali, with the latter language allowing him to become more knowledgeable about Buddhism and was able to publish English-Thai Dictionary, Latin-Thai, Thai-Latin French-English Dictionaries. He was also well versed in geography, science including chemistry and physics and astronomy. At this time Siam's relations with France also resumed, and in 1856 France's new ambassador came to Bangkok. Prior to that time Pallegoix had acted as a go-between: when Pallegoix went back to France, he took the then King Mongkut's letter to Emperor Napoleon III leading to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

His long relationship with King Mongkut (Rama IV) is often remarked upon for their closeness, for the mutual learning and exchange of ideas that the two enjoyed over a period of 28 years, until the time of Pallegoix's death. The historian of 19th century intellectual and political history, Thongchai, writes of this friendship stating that it was "symbolic of the larger intellectual conditions of the time" (79). Two incidents occurred during the time in which Mongkut was still a monk. Though many historians of Thailand (Thais and others) have written on this king and drawn upon Pallegoix to do so, for the first time in the 1980s lay Catholic Thai academics were also beginning to attempt to write about Catholicism in more scholarly and dispassionate ways. Revealingly, the tone that infuses those writings is one of mediation: the writings of the suspect minority asking to be accepted. The following excerpt in the study by Dr. Seri Phongphit, *Catholics and Thai Society*, is exemplary of this attempt to offer a reading of Thai history that was more favourable to Buddhist-Catholic relations.

The story starts with a cholera outbreak in Bangkok. King Mongkut, seeing how many people were dying, requested the help of the American missionaries (who supplied medicines to battle the cholera) and of French Catholic priests. From the latter, King Mongkut asked for the donation of animals for the performance of a 'supernatural rite'. The Catholic priests were under the authority Bishop Pallegoix but in this instance they refused the king's request as conveyed to them by Pallegoix. The priests argued that contributing to such a ritual would violate their faith. Pallegoix had to then inform the king that the offering would not be forthcoming. Seri describes both the king's reaction and Pallegoix's decision to honor the king's request, even at potential cost to his standing among his fellow (French) priests and in the view of Church authorities in Rome:

The king was angry and ordered the Catholic priests arrested, and their churches and residences destroyed. All Catholics were ordered to denounce their faith. Bishop Pallegoix saw that the situation was going to deteriorate and this might repeat the

same history when Catholics were persecuted in the reign of King Taksin. He therefore decided to follow the king's wishes by presenting him with one peacock and two goats and two geese. The king then was not angry anymore and repealed all his orders. Yet some churches were already demolished and the French priests except Pallegoix were expelled from the kingdom. (150)

Seri's rendering of this incident does not paper over the refusal of French priests to honor the king's request; nor does he comment on the command that the converts to Catholicism renounce their faith. Rather he singles out Pallegoix for his actions, demonstrating the distance the bishop was willing to go to prevent a return to strained relations and worse between the Catholic Church and the king.

The second incident occurred when Pallegoix penned a book that talked openly about the superior nature of Catholicism over Buddhism. This book was called *Puxa Vixachana* [Queries and Answers] using Romanized Thai alphabet, and it was full of examples as it was meant as a handbook for lay Siamese teachers and priests and those who were interested in conversion to Catholicism. The catechism was not distributed widely beyond the very small Catholic circle but in time Thai Buddhists came to know about it and Buddhist thinkers such as Chaopraya Thipakorwong (Kham Bunnag) wrote a retort that was widely referenced long after its initial publication in 1867.

Thongchai notes of the book by Pallegoix; "The comparative teachings and the hierarchy between God and the Buddha clearly indicated that Catholicism was superior to Buddhism. It is not clear, however, for what particular purpose this book was written, whether for Thai readers in general or as a handbook for local priests. ..[A] different version of this book in 1958 caused a huge controversy and serious backlash to the Catholic Church in Siam, with repercussions lasting as late as the mid-1980s." (Thongchai 81) In 1958, the Catholic Mission in Thailand published *Puxa wisatchana* and the reaction to the reprint of the work by Bishop Pallegoix was, according to Thongchai "phenomenal by the standard of the day"

The police and the government became involved. Three priests who were called in for interrogation eventually confessed, though the actual charges remain unclear. The national supreme council of the *sangha* issued a letter to the dictator requesting a swift intervention, which was enacted with the deportation of foreign priests. A public gathering was called by the regime despite the fact that Thailand, at that time, was under martial law, which forbade public assemblies of more than five people. Nevertheless, several thousands filled up the main auditorium of Chulalongkorn University. The event was even broadcast live, a very rare occasion in those early years of television. (84)

Writing in the 1980s, the (Catholic Thai) Seri reflected on the often antagonistic relations between Thai Buddhists and Catholics: “[B]oth 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” (80). One important moment in 19th century history stood out for illustrating the amicable and even affectionate relations between King Mongkut and the senior figure of the Catholic Church in Thailand, Bishop Pallegoix. The death of Pallegoix and the funeral which acquired great meaning for Thai Catholics with the acts of generosity and respect shown by King Mongkut to the French bishop, who had been a personal friend. The King lent his royal barges to transport the body of the bishop along the river and another barge accompanied the body with musicians – under the king’s sponsorship. After Pallegoix was buried his ring was given to the king. Seri drew on a key reference in Thai history writing, *History of Universal Church and the Church of Thailand* for descriptions of this event, in particular the king’s response:

Respectfully Yours, I would like to reply to the letter sent to me yesterday in order to thank for my role in helping of the funeral of the late beloved Bishop who was my best friend and held cordial relations and sincerity with me for the past 28 years. Your messages in the letter made me feel very exulted as well as the gifts that accompanied the letter. For the ring which belonged to the last Bishop, once spotted I recognized right away that it was the one he had worn when he came to pay me a visit and used to let me see it. Some people told me that the Bishop used this ring in the great cerebation to bless all Catholics in their religious ceremony. I therefore received it with great elation your best wishes that you expressed towards me by sending the symbol of our close friendly relations who just passed away in such a manner. May the ring bring grace to me. I beg you to acknowledge/receive my sincere thanks for this gift. (Sarasas Office, 439)

Seri highlights this exchange in his writing and goes to great lengths to emphasize the warmth of the king’s response. While official histories of Thailand do not challenge the story in outline, they do not tend to go into such detail and go to pains to illustrate the depth of feeling expressed by this revered king on the death of a friend and fellow religious-intellectual of some thirty years. When another Catholic publication (produced by the Bishops Council of Thailand) recirculated this story, also in the early 1980s, the reaction against this vignette was very strong.

CATHOLIC PLOTS TO UNDERMINE THAI BUDDHISM: ONE LAST ROUND OF THE NARRATIVE?

In the book written by the Buddhist monk Phra Sobhon-Ganabhorn to uncover the Catholic Church's latest efforts at converting Thais, he offers an almost point-by-point refutation of an account of the funeral that was published (based upon older sources) in a 1982 edition of *Udomsant*, the major Catholic monthly magazine of Thailand. In the last section of Phra Sobhon-Ganabhorn book "Look Real Well and You Will See the Real Intention," he writes in reaction to the *Udomsant* article that there are some Roman Catholic Christians who, deep down, believe they belong to two kingdoms "...namely Thailand which is to them their physical kingdom, and the Vatican City, their spiritual one" (108). They are thus always ready to "distort and insult what [is] held in high reverence by others ..." (108). He takes issue with the descriptions of the funeral especially pertaining to symbols of mourning that would ordinarily be reserved for the death of a royal personage. For the king himself to have prepared himself in full mourning attire, with a head shaved in respect was too much to imagine.

What in particular was so offensive in the 1982 *Udomsant* article about the funeral of a French bishop, dead over 100 years? Here are the lines that drew the ire of the Buddhist monk: "The tide was down at that time. The procession arrived at the Grand Palace at 2:00 pm. 'His Majesty the King together with members of the Royal Family in mourning attire with shaven heads were in a boat at the bank of the river. When the boat carrying the coffin was passing them, they 'krab' for three times ('krab' is putting both hands together to the forehead and bending forward with the hands until they rest on the floor)'" (Bishops Council 15).

These demonstrations of respect that describe the king lowering his body to the floor of the boat, with shaven head, were not to be believed. The monk writes: "In former days, it is said when the King passed away, his people would have their heads shaved and wore their mourning attires. Is there any evidence in history of a Thai Buddhist king having his head shaved and a mourning attire on at the death of a Christian priest?" (110). In the final retort he asks: "What about those publicizing this report? As Thai nationals, didn't they have at all the Thai spirit of loyalty to the Royal Institute and the respect for the truths in history" (111)? The Catholics had taken liberties, however, in the view of the monk/author of the *Plot* and were themselves guilty of being disrespectful to the memory of their king. Those were strong words and the Thai Catholics who tried to defend the Church against these accusations were themselves the brunt of criticism. Seri left his position at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University and shifted his research to other areas.

Thongchai's new work on Buddhist-Christian apologetics and the formation of Thai-Buddhist national identity reminds readers of the almost cyclical nature of the contentious relations throughout Thai history. Debates on Christianity and

Buddhist beliefs flared up, resulting in imprisonment, public admonition (in Thai), and the deportation of leading Catholic priests in Siam.” Campaigns regarding the superiority of each religion ensued. The results were often legal interventions on the Buddhist side, resulting subsequently in a formal apology from the Catholic priests and the destruction of certain books.” (Winichakul 77) Though the last public conflict between Buddhist leaders and the Catholic Church occurred in the 1980s the shadow cast by this was very long. One Catholic academic at a public university who had gotten embroiled in the conflict some thirty years ago declined to even be interviewed for Winichakul’s research which was conducted very recently.

CONCLUSION

By critically evaluating the foreignness of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular in Thailand, this essay has argued that this institutional and ideational force in Thai history serves as a useful reminder of the country’s having “escaped” full colonization. From the seemingly promising but ultimately very ill-considered attempts at conversion of the king in the 17th century through the conflicts, persecutions and competitive relations of the 19th century, the Catholic Church has had an enduring but mixed presence in the annals of Thai history. By the 20th century, however, Thai national identity had coalesced very clearly around the idea that being Thai and Buddhist were inseparable. Yet, as this essay argued, the Catholic Church’s strategies for indigenization through inter-faith dialogue were looked upon as potentially quite threatening, suggesting that some older anxieties about *farang* and “non-Thai religions” still had a force to them.

Thai nationalism and national identity discourses draw strength from being able to locate an “other.” Sometimes the “other” is identified in nationalist rhetoric as being constituted by communities in the northern or southern borders of Thailand who are not Buddhist, whose languages and cultural roots are located in trans-border areas. Consequently, these groups are regarded as not fully Thai, even purportedly posing a threat to national security. Political dissent has also been contained in modern Thai history by vilifying writers and activists as being un-Thai and hence “other” as well. As this essay explicated Catholicism/Christianity has served as a source of other-ness that needed to be kept in check for fear that Buddhist Thais would be persuaded to abandon their beliefs and convert.

In an oft-cited article on “Christianity in Thailand” in 1993, Charles Keyes, a leading anthropologist of Thailand wrote that Christianity “never lost its

foreignness” in Thailand (277). This essay has demonstrated that the picture at present is more complicated. Thai Catholics today are ready to demonstrate their loyalty to mainstream narratives around morality. The newly appointed Cardinal discussed at the opening of this essay demonstrated this willingness in his widely quote statements to the press. The Thai Catholic Church will continue to walk a somewhat fine line – especially as it is fully in the hands of Thai leadership – between the need to demonstrate loyalty to the nation and the desire to continue to bear witness to their faith. But the animosities, persecutions and dislocations can be a thing of the past if the conditions are right.

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Notes

1. See Surachai (1990) for detailed information.
2. Zehner uses histories of the early years of Protestant missions by Prasit (1984), Smith (1982), Swanson (1984), and Wells (1958). Zehner also notes the lack of a recent comprehensive history of the Protestant missions.
3. Zehner has used membership figures as reported in Smith, *Siamese Gold* 213, 217, 265; Zehner, "Thai Protestants and Local Supernaturalism" 303-304; and Visser, *Conversion Growth* 102.
4. See Harrison et al for the use the term semicolonialism to describe the conditions in which territory was ceded, extra-territoriality rights were granted to Europeans and trade agreements developed to the advantage of the Western powers.
5. Dusadee Angsumethangkur's "Catholicism and Thailand: A Review Article" noted that Seri's study held the attention of many at a conference in which he first presented on it and the reviewer attributed this interest to the fact that there were "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" (8).

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