

'Religion' in Thailand in the 19th Century

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The 19th century can be considered central to processes of 'religion-making' in Siam (today's Thailand): over the course of the century, a religio-secular episteme emerged that included the establishment of the traditional Buddhist term *sasana* as the standard translation of 'religion' on the basis of modern "distinctions of religion",¹ and relegated certain elements of the Buddhist tradition (e.g. cosmography, law) to other societal spheres now seen as distinct from *sasana*/religion.² This process enabled the politicisation and regulation of 'religion(s)' in the context of the newly emerging Thai state towards the end of the 'long 19th century.'

'Religion-making' in Siam

Sasana as 'Religion'

There seems to be no standardised translation of 'secular' in current online Thai dictionaries: the entries offered vary widely from traditional Buddhist terms such as *lokiya* (see below) to rather awkward constructions such as *mai kiao kap rueang sasana* (literally: not concerning matters of religion).³ By contrast, 'religion' is consistently

The 'secular' in Thai dictionaries

- 1 Cf. for these theoretical concepts Markus Drefler, "Modes of Religionization: A Constructivist Approach to Secularity" (HCAS "Multiple Secularities" Working Paper 7, 2019) and Adrian Hermann, "Distinctions of Religion. The Search for Equivalents of 'Religion' and the Challenge of Theorizing a 'Global Discourse of Religion,'" in *Making Religion. Theory and Practice in the Discursive Study of Religion*, ed. Frans Wijsen and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
- 2 Earlier developments in regard to processes of the 'religionisation' of the Buddhist tradition and trends that later contributed to the establishment of 'secular' societal spheres differentiated from 'religion' are likely to have already occurred earlier, in particular in connection with the presence of Catholic missionaries in the Kingdom since 1554, but are beyond the scope of this article. Huge lacunae exist in scholarship on Siam regarding the Catholic missionary project and their influence on religion-making in Siam before 1800.
- 3 See, for instance, the entries for "secular" at www.thai-language.com/dict, dict.longdo.com/search/secular (accessed 23/04/2019). The transcription of Thai in this article follows the Royal Thai General System. For a more detailed investiga-

translated as *sasana*, a term codified in the current Royal Thai Dictionary (2011) as “the central teachings that human beings believe in, chiefly demonstrating the origin and end of the world.”⁴

Sasana as ‘religion’

The establishment of *sasana* as the normalised term for ‘religion’ (including its somewhat Protestant connotations of an inner belief in particular teachings) is the product of a historical process that has taken place in Siam since at least the early 19th century. Although it probably has considerably changed in usage and meaning over the course of Buddhist history, *sasana* as it was deployed in early texts of the Theravada tradition contrasts considerably with modern Thai usages of ‘religion’ and ‘Buddhism’:⁵ it frequently designated an “established set of teachings” and “systematic injunctions”, and alluded to “a system of training” distinctive of the Theravadian world;⁶ moreover, *sasana* often referred to “the life of the Buddha’s teachings after he is gone” and is seen as suffering from constant decline unless it is actively supported and protected, by the ruling Buddhist sovereign in particular.⁷ Consequently, it constituted a key element in the traditional Buddhist system of kingship: one of Rama I’s epithets in late 18th-century Siam, for instance, described him as the “supreme supporter” of the *sasana* (*akkhasasanupathamphok*), and various decrees issued under his rule had the sovereign endorse the *sasana* both in terms of teachings and practice. Its meaning in both cases seems limited to the Buddhist tradition.⁸ In contrast to this understanding, it appears that particularly over the course of the 19th century, a modern usage of the term in Thai became entrenched. This new understanding abstracts from and narrows this tradition, constituting *sasana* as the “hypothetical equivalent” to ‘religion’⁹ and a

Sasana and the Buddhist system of kingship

tion of secularity in Thailand cf. now Tomas Larson, “Secularisation, Secularism, and the Thai State,” in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, ed. Pavin Chachavalongpong (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

- 4 www.royin.go.th/dictionary/ (accessed 23/04/2019). The Royal Thai Dictionary is the official and prescriptive dictionary of the Thai language today.
- 5 John R. Carter, “A History of Early Buddhism,” *Religious Studies* 13, no. 3 (1977): 266.
- 6 Carter, “A History of Early Buddhism,” 266.
- 7 Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism. The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014), 1.
- 8 Yoneo Ishii, “Thai Muslims and the Royal Patronage of Religion,” *Law & Society Review* 28, no. 3 (1994): 455.
- 9 Liu, Lydia. *Translingual Practice. Literature, National Culture, and Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 19.

separate field of discourse and practice “available for consideration from the outside”,¹⁰ an outside that is thus simultaneously constituted as ‘secular’.

19th-Century Christian Missionary Activity and Buddhist Reform

Two connected developments in the first half of the 19th century can be seen as the fertile ground on which later processes of ‘religionisation’ in the development of the Thai state between the middle of the 19th and the early 20th century are based: the reformist undertakings of the Siamese elite towards the Buddhist tradition, which was intertwined with the increasing presence of Western actors, particularly (Protestant) Christian missionaries.

As the leader of a small group of Buddhist intellectuals in the 1830s and 1840s, Mongkut, a monk who would later become King Rama IV, engaged closely with Western knowledge (such as medical knowledge) and technical inventions (such as printing presses), many of which were brought to Siam by missionaries. Early on he stood in close contact with the Catholic bishop Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix (1805–1862) as well as with the Protestant missionaries Jesse Caswell (1809–1848) and Dan Beach Bradley (1804–1873).¹¹

Catholic and Protestant Missions in 19th-Century Siam

Mongkut also founded the *Thammayut Nikaya*, a modernist Buddhist reform order that became a model of similar reform movements in the region.¹² The *Thammayut* has been described as advocating a “rational interpretation of Buddhist teachings” understood to be the authentic doctrine of the Buddha himself.¹³ It attempted to redefine “virtually all aspects of religious life” on the basis of the *Tripitaka* scriptures and declared “non-Buddhist spirit worship and the veneration of Hindu deities as inconsistent with the ancient

Thammayut Nikaya: a Buddhist reform order

10 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 68.

11 For details cf. Sven Trakulhun, “Moderne Buddhisten: protestantische Mission und Wissenstransfer in Siam (1830–1871),” in *Globalgeschichten: Bestandsaufnahme und Perspektiven*, ed. Boris Barth et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2014).

12 Cf. Craig Reynolds, *The Buddhist Monkhood in Nineteenth Century Thailand* (PhD Thesis, Department of History, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 1972); Barend J. Terwiel, “Mu’ang Thai and the World. Changing Perspectives during the Third Reign,” paper presented at the seminar on “Asia: A Sense of Place” (Australian National University, Canberra, 1986).

13 Thongchai Winichakul, “Buddhist Apologetics and a Genealogy of Comparative Religion in Siam,” *Numen* 62, no. 1 (2015): 78.

scriptures.”¹⁴ This reworking of the Buddhist tradition also implied a new relationship between the Buddhist ‘religion’ and modern ‘scientific’ interpretations of the world (see below).

Siam’s Unequal Treaties and ‘Religion’

Siam still figures in national historiographical narratives as the only country in South-east Asia that was ‘never colonised,’ but scholarship has by now established Siam’s wide-ranging inclusion in the European imperial project in economic, legal, cultural, and political terms.¹⁵ One of the most important legal documents in this context is the 1855 Bowring Treaty, which constitutes the first in a whole series of ‘unequal treaties’ that Siam concluded with mostly European powers during the second half of the 19th century, and was designed to open the country to Western trade.¹⁶ Officially called a treaty of “friendship and commerce”, it was – unlike its prototypes concluded in China and Japan – not forced upon the Siamese; rather, the king and his officials invited treaty negotiations to support an economic opening already well under way.¹⁷ Nevertheless, in international legal terms, the unequal treaties made Siam’s sovereignty dependent on European powers, because extraterritoriality regulations exempted specified foreigners from Siamese jurisdiction and thereby paved the way for European interference into Siam’s internal policies.¹⁸

The treaties’ impact on the Buddhist tradition in the kingdom has mostly been overlooked, however. Importantly, all of these

14 Sven Trakulhun, “Chaophraya Thiphakorawong: A Book on Various Things (Thailand, 1867),” in *Religious Dynamics Under the Impact of Imperialism and Colonialism. A Sourcebook*, ed. Björn Bentlage et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 66.

15 Cf. Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson, eds., *The Ambiguous Allure of the West. Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

16 Until 1870, Siam concluded similar treaties with fourteen additional countries, including the United States, France, Denmark, Prussia, Sweden and Norway, Belgium, Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Spain. Cf. Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 41.

17 Cf. the discussion in Loos, *Subject Siam*, 41, fn. 38; Barend J. Terwiel, “The Bowring Treaty: Imperialism and the Indigenous Perspective,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 79, no. 2 (1991); Shane Strate, *The Lost Territories. Thailand’s History of National Humiliation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015), 28.

18 M. Barry Hooker, “The ‘Europeanization’ of Siam’s Law 1855–1908,” in *Laws of Southeast Asia. Volume II: European Laws in South-East Asia*, ed. M. Barry Hooker (Singapore: Butterworth, 1988), 532.

agreements also contained articles specifying matters of 'religion' that secured the privileged status of Christian missionaries who, in fact, themselves often took part in the treaty consultations. As part of the negotiations, John Bowring, for instance, obliged the Siamese authorities to allow the free intercourse of the missionaries that accompanied him, and the final treaty document reads:

Treaty articles on matters of 'religion'

All British subjects visiting or residing in Siam shall be allowed the free exercise of the Christian religion, and liberty to build churches in such localities as shall be consented to by the Siamese authorities.¹⁹

Even more explicit in this regard, one of the subsequent agreements that Siam concluded with France in 1856 contained detailed entitlements for French missionaries, allowing them to preach and teach, travel freely throughout the kingdom, and build churches, schools, and hospitals if the authorities consented.²⁰ The treaties' significance here is threefold: they obliged Siam to accord with standards of 'civilisation' defined by Western powers and eventually sparked a process of modernisation that included a complete overhaul of the legal system; they contributed to a codification of *sasana* as the standard translation for 'religion'; and they further entrenched a separate 'religious' sphere of missionary activity.

Entitlements for Christian missionaries

The article contained in the Bowring Treaty is also telling in another regard: the Thai translation deploys the term *sasana* to translate 'religion' together with the verb 'to hold' (*tue*), abstracting from traditional usages (see above) and deploying a rather Protestant understanding that centres around the notion of 'beliefs' held by an individual. In fact, only three years after signing the treaty, King Mongkut issued a declaration on 'religious freedom' in Siam that indicated how this conceptual shift became politically relevant: Mongkut therein coupled *sasana* as the abstract and universal translation of 'religion' with the notion of 'belief' (*kan thue*), assuming that people of all races and languages 'have' a 'religion'. Moreover, he defined different 'religious beliefs' of his commoners as a private issue to regulate certain public practices – especially those that supposedly disturbed the public order.²¹

Sasana and the notion of 'belief'

19 John Bowring, *The Kingdom and People of Siam. With a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, vol. 2 (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1857), 258–59, 218.

20 *British and Foreign State Papers*, XLVII: 995.

21 Thanks to Anthony Irwin for pointing out this declaration. For a more detailed

The *Kitchanukit* and the Distinction of Two Pathways

Despite the lack of success in terms of conversion, the Christian missionary presence sparked a range of controversies that were increasingly held publicly through various books and periodicals printed on presses that the missionaries had established in Siam.²²

Kitchanukit as an important text

The most important Siamese text published in the course of these debates is the *Nangsue Sadaeng Kitchanukit* (“A Book Explaining Various Things”). The *Kitchanukit* was authored by Chaophraya Thiphakorawong, a royal official close to King Mongkut. When missionary printing presses refused to print the book because of its negative remarks on Christianity, Thiphakorawong assembled his own lithographic press and published a first edition of 200 copies in October 1867.²³ The *Kitchanukit*, as its title indicates, indeed covers a huge variety of topics, including geography, medicine, and different ways of calculating time, and thus constitutes one of the most important texts to reconstruct epistemic and conceptual changes in 19th-century Siam.²⁴ Most important for our purposes, the *Kitchanukit* documents the culmination of changes in the understanding of the (Buddhist) ‘religion’.²⁵

translation and interpretation, cf. Ruth Streicher, “The Operation of a Secular Grammar Imperial Siam: Rereading the ‘Book Explaining Various Things,’” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (forthcoming).

- 22 In 1844, the Catholic bishop Pallegoix published a catechism that aimed at rebutting the Buddhist tradition and defending the Christian God (Thongchai, “Buddhist Apologetics,” 81). Around the same time, the Protestant missionary John T. Jones (1802–1851) produced a book titled *The Golden Balance*, in which he challenged Buddhist cosmology; cf. Sven Trakulhun, “Among a People of Unclean Lips: Eliza and John Taylor in Siam (1833–1851),” *Asiatische Studien* 67, no. 4 (2013). Debates also took place in the *Bangkok Recorder* (1844–1845, and starting again from 1865), a bi-weekly published by the Protestant missionary Bradley.
- 23 Phirothirarach Somjai, *The Historical Writings of Chao Phraya Thiphakorawong* (PhD Thesis, Department of History, Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, IL, 1983). A partial contemporary English translation of the *Kitchanukit* is available in Henry Alabaster, *The Wheel of the Law. Buddhism Illustrated from Siamese Sources* (London: Trübner & Co., 1871).
- 24 See especially: Craig J. Reynolds, “Buddhist Cosmography in Thai History, with Special Reference to Nineteenth-Century Culture Change,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (1976); Tony Day and Craig J. Reynolds, “Cosmologies, Truth Regimes, and the State in Southeast Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2000).
- 25 Cf. Thongchai, “Buddhist Apologetics;” Trakulhun, “Chaophraya Thiphakorawong;” Streicher, “Rereading;” Ruth Streicher, “Scripting a Secular ‘Buddhist Canon’: King Chulalongkorn and the Siamese Tripitaka Edition of 1893,” *Modern Asian Studies* (forthcoming); Adrian Hermann, *Unterscheidungen der Religion. Analysen zum globalen Religionsdiskurs und dem Problem der Differenzierung von*

Thus, the text is particularly informative in the different ways in which it deploys the notion of the *sasana*. The foreword already programmatically announces a conceptual split that grounds the whole architecture of the book: problems should be solved “in the pathway of the world [*kan lok*], and in the pathway of religion [*kan sasana*].”²⁶ *Sasana* has now become part of a key conceptual split between ‘religion’ and the ‘world.’ The *Kitchanukit* embraces this split and related binaries of knowledge/belief and modernity/tradition, especially when dismissing the three-worlds cosmography (see below).

*Sasana in the
Kitchanukit*

Conceptual split
between *kan lok* and
kan sasana

In the context of the Theravada tradition, this split has to be related to the conceptual distinction between two notions that appear in Pali Buddhist texts as *lokiya* and *lokuttara*. These two terms have been widely interpreted as expressing a binary between this-worldly, secular or mundane vs. other-worldly, religious or sacred, and have been applied to differentiate the world-renouncing path of the monk from the this-worldly path of the laypeople.²⁷ Critics of this interpretation have highlighted, however, that *loka*, the noun on which the adjective *lokiya* is based, “means ‘this world’ but also includes other realms of existence in the whirl of *samsara*”,²⁸ the endless cycle of Buddhist rebirth, such as different heavens and hells. *Lokiya* might thus rather be translated as a “customary mode” of traditional practice that contrasts with a mode of existence that has already gone beyond (*uttara*) this cycle – *lokuttara*.²⁹ Crucially, both modes operate *within* the Buddhist tradition and depend on

Lokiya and lokuttara

‘Religion’ in buddhistischen Kontexten des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 323–61.

26 Chaophraya Thiphakorawong, *Sadaeng Kitchanukit* (Bangkok [1872] 1971), 1–2.

27 E.g. Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer. A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit. Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007).

28 John R. Carter, “Traditional Definitions of the Term ‘Dhamma,’” *Philosophy East and West* 26, no. 3 (1976): 336, fn. 7.

29 John R. Carter suggests distinguishing the “customary mode” (*lokiya*) from a “transcendental mode” (*lokuttara*) – the latter term, however, carries strong Christian connotations. Cf. John R. Carter, “The Notion of ‘Refuge’ (*Sarana*) in the Theravada Buddhist Tradition.” In *Studies in Pali and Buddhism. A Memorial Volume in Honor of Bhikkhu Jagdish Kashyap*, ed. A.K. Narain (New Delhi: B.R., 1979).

each other. It is only after a conceptual transformation, which is the result of the modern processes of “religionisation” just described, that the *lokiya/lokuttara* distinction comes to be equated with the modern secular split that disconnects ‘Buddhism’ from a secular ‘world’.

A new epistemological register

The *Kitchanukit* further accentuates this important conceptual shift that characterises the modern religio-secular episteme in late 19th-century Siam: it replaces the traditional terminology of the *lokiya/lokuttara* distinction with notions of the ‘world’ (*lok*) and ‘religion’ (*sasana*), and deploys this distinction in a new epistemological register by announcing that ‘problems’ have to be ‘solved’ in either of both pathways.

New descriptions of religious plurality

It is this secularising move that not only preconditions the objectified notion of a ‘Buddhist religion’ that the *Kitchanukit* reifies, but also permits its comparability to other religions, which forms one of the main concerns of the book.³⁰ Thus it deploys the term *sasana* in combination with geographical or religious categories to describe the different religions of the world, such as *sasana isuan narai* (literally: “the religion of Shiva and Vishnu”) for ‘Hinduism’, thereby mapping different *sasanas* onto different places of the globe, including “Hindustan”, “Arabstan,” and “Europe”.³¹ And it compares these ‘religions’ according to their beliefs: besides Christianity, most importantly, Islam figures centrally, highlighting its local significance. After all, one of Siam’s vassal states was a Muslim sultanate called Patani, and efforts to incorporate Patani into the modern Siamese state had already begun by the end of the 19th century. In fact, Thipakorawong had interviewed a local *imam* from Patani for another book on the biography of Prophet Mohammed, and probably used his insights for the *Kitchanukit*.³² Both the transformation of traditional cosmography and new state regulations on the Siamese “Buddhist Order” demonstrate the material effects of this new religio-secular episteme.

Islam in the *Kitchanukit*

30 Cf. Thongchai, “Buddhist Apologetics.”

31 Thiphakorawong, *Sadaeng Kitchanukit*, 128, 143–44.

32 Cf. Streicher, “Rereading.”

Thai-Buddhist Cosmo-Geography and the *Kitchanukit*

The *Kitchanukit* also represents an early culminating point of transformations in regard to the Buddhist elite's attitudes towards traditional notions of cosmo-geographical space.³³ Until the middle of the 19th century, spatial notions in Siam were dominated by the Mount Meru cosmology, in which the world-system is imagined as a flat disk and Meru is considered to be the centre of the world.³⁴ After 1830, this view was challenged not only by Christian missionaries, but increasingly by the Siamese political and monastic elites themselves. John T. Jones writes about Mongkut in 1836:

[H]e has an eighteen inch celestial globe [...]. He seems tolerably well to understand the Copernican system of astronomy as to its most important facts, and to believe it.³⁵

Jones also expected that this interest in Western knowledge “must affect his religious beliefs”. Christian missionaries were convinced that modern maps were presenting an objective representation of the Earth's surface and could therefore be used to delegitimise other, competing depictions and notions of space.

In the *Kitchanukit*, the *kan lok* and *kan sasana* distinction is put into practice in regard to the assumption that scientific astronomy and its model of the Earth as a sphere is superior knowledge. As an argument for this conviction, Thiphakorawong presents the discovery of the New World by Columbus, as well as a number of other observable phenomena.³⁶ Conceding the scientific untenability of Mount Meru, however, does not mean that all Buddhist stories connected to this cosmology are rejected:

Buddhist notions of cosmo-geographical space

The impact of Western astronomy

The Earth as a sphere

33 Cf. for details Adrian Hermann, “Spatial Media of Secularity. Buddhist Cosmo-Geographic Space in the 19th Century,” in *Companion to the Study of Secularity*, ed. HCAS “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities” (Leipzig University, 2019), www.multiple-secularities.de/publications/companion/css_hermann_spatialmedia.pdf, as well as the detailed argument presented in Adrian Hermann, “‘True facts of the world’: Media of Scientific Space and the Transformations of Cosmo- Geography in Nineteenth-Century Buddhist-Christian Encounters,” in *Asian Religions, Technology and Science*, ed. István Keul (Routledge: London).

34 Cf. Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology. Philosophy and Origins* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing, 1997).

35 John T. Jones, “Extracts from the Journal of Mr. Jones,” *The Baptist Missionary Magazine* 16, no. 10 (1836): 233.

36 Cf. Winichakul Thongchai, *Siam Mapped. A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 41.

I have explained about this matter of Meru, and the other mountains, as an old tradition. But with respect to the Lord preaching on Davadungsa as an act of grace to his mother, I believe it to be true, and that one of the many stars or planets is the Davadungsa world.³⁷

Hybrid knowledge in the *Kitchanukit*

In an instance of hybrid knowledge formation, the traditional story of the Buddha preaching to his mother in the Davadungsa heaven is relocated as having taken place on one of the many planets of the new 'scientific' cosmo-geographical space. As in many other Buddhist contexts, the encounter between the new scientific knowledge and traditional ideas was used to purge the 'true doctrine of the Buddha' from later accretions and to claim a full compatibility of this modern Buddhism with science, which became a central strategy of Buddhist modernism in the 19th century. It was the new religio-secular episteme constituted by the reimagining of the *lok/sasana* distinction and adjacent processes of religion-making over the course of the 19th century that made it possible to create this modern Buddhism and to distinguish it from the traditional notions of space.

A new religio-secular episteme

The Emergence of the Thai State

The modern Thai state

This discursive shift in the 19th century was deeply entangled with the political transformation of the Siamese kingdom into a modern state: these new geographical ideas of space (materialised in the visual representation of the map) constituted the basis for a new kind of polity that based its legitimacy on a bounded territorial space. After all, the traditional Buddhist cosmology of Mount Meru had directly mirrored the traditional system of Buddhist kingship where vassal states were structured around a centre that represented the universal monarch and where sovereignty was defined by loyalty of vassals rather than territorial boundaries. The *lok/sasana* split enabled the ruling elite to step outside this tradition so that, as Benedict Anderson has remarked, "it became possible to 'use' Buddhism for political purposes in a more drastic and cold-blooded way."³⁸

37 Translation from the *Kitchanukit* in: Alabaster, *The Wheel of the Law*, 17.

38 Benedict Anderson, "Studies of the Thai State. The State of Thai Studies," in *The Study of Thailand. Analyses of Knowledge, Approaches, and Prospects in Anthropology, Art History, Economics, History, and Political Science*, ed. Eliezer B. Ayal (Ohio: University Center for International Studies, Southeast Asia Program, 1978).

The suppression of rebellions in the North-east of Siam in the 1890s represents an early example of the politicisation of *sasana*: as a reaction to the enforced centralisation policies of the royal government that disempowered many local ruling elites, people in the northern and north-eastern parts of the country started to resist by following local ‘holy men’ that they saw as future incarnations of the Buddha. The royal government reacted not only by using armed force but also by dismissing the popular *jataka* stories (stories of the Buddha’s birth) as incompatible with modern Buddhism.³⁹

In legal terms, the most important decree that politicised *sasana* was the “Buddhist Order Administration Act” of 1902, which explained in the preamble:

Whereas the amendment of the law and the reformation of the administrative system of the State have brought about manifold developments and outstanding progress to the country, it is obvious that the religious affairs of the Buddhist Order are also of no less importance to the development and prosperity both of Buddhism and of the country in that, systematically administered, they will serve to attract more people to the study and practice of Buddhism under the guidance of Bhikkhus [Buddhist monks], thereby leading them to the right mode of living in accordance with the Buddha’s instruction.⁴⁰

Note not only the split between ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ in this decree, but also the hierarchy implied: “religious affairs” are to serve the “progress of the State” with a view to managing the “right mode of living” of the Buddhist population. ‘Buddhism’, in this sense, can now be mobilised by state forces to secure the progress of the country.

Conclusion

A variety of processes of “religio-secularisation” can be observed in Thailand over the course of the 19th century. Not only is the Buddhist tradition reconfigured as modern Buddhism, but this goes hand in hand with the emergence of an understanding of Christianity and of Islam (as well as other traditions) as comparable ‘religions’.⁴¹ At the

39 Patrick Jory, “Thai and Western Buddhist Scholarship in the Age of Colonialism: King Chulalongkorn Redefines the Jatakas,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 3 (2002).

40 Quoted in Yoneo Ishii, “Church and State in Thailand,” *Asian Survey* 8, no. 10 (1968), 865–66.

41 Cf. Thongchai, “Buddhist Apologetics,” 88–97 for some broad strokes of the continuation of this development of ‘comparative religion’ throughout the 20th century.

Politicisation of *sasana*

The “Buddhist Order Administration Act” of 1902

A split between ‘religion’ and ‘politics’

“Religio-secularisation” in 19th-Century Thailand

same time, distinctions between *sasana* – the term established as the standard translation of 'religion' – and a 'secular' world (*lok*), as well as between elements of the Buddhist tradition and 'scientific' knowledge (particularly in regard to cosmo-geography) become important for the Thai elite and the developing state. Nevertheless, other Thai Buddhist traditions continue to develop beyond and in entanglement with the official discourse of 'sasana/religion' promoted by the state over the course of the 20th century.⁴²

42 Cf. Peter A. Jackson, "Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods and Magic Monks. Thailand's Boom Time Religions of Prosperity," *South East Asia Research* 7, no. 3 (1999); Justin T. McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk. Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

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