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**BUDDHISM FRAGMENTED**  
**THAI BUDDHISM AND POLITICAL ORDER SINCE THE 1970S**  
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In this paper I will argue that the relationship between religion and political order in Thailand changed fundamentally after the trauma of the political crisis of the mid-1970s. It is my thesis that in the aftermath of that crisis ‘religion’ (*satsana*), which had been controlled by the state since the time when Siam was begun to be transformed into the modern nation-state of Thailand, fragmented into a diverse number of forms reflective of and contributing to the pluralism of Thai society. This fragmentation of *satsana* has generated tensions and some open conflicts not only between the governing elites and followers of particular religions but also between different followings. While the fragmentation of religion in the post-1976 period has irrevocably, I believe, undermined the position of the established Buddhist church as the sole embodiment of *satsana* as a ‘pillar’ (*lak*) of the Thai nation, I also maintain that a new ‘civil religion’ – a ‘civil Buddhism’ – has emerged that still provides for most Thai the basis for moral reflections about and moral critiques of political action. Although this new civil religion provides space for followers of non-Buddhist religions, I will focus in this paper only on Buddhism because the overwhelming majority of Thai still identify as Buddhist.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Christian population, while very small – less than 1% of the total population (see Keyes 1996) – compared to the Muslim population – close to 4% (see Keyes 1997b) – has had a much longer history of positive adaptation to Buddhist-dominated Thai culture than have the Muslims. This is a consequence, in part, of the success both Catholics and Protestants had in setting up schools, beginning in the nineteenth century, that became among the educational institutions most favored by the elite. While there has in the relatively recent past been some significant opposition from high-ranking Buddhists to efforts of the Catholic church to ‘indigenize’ through adaptation of Thai Buddhist iconography and religious meanings for expression of Catholic ideas (see Pin Muthukan 1963, Sobhan-Ganabhorn 1984), the deeper and more lasting relationship of both Catholic and Protestant Christianity to Thai Buddhism has been one of mutual respect through dialogue (see Buddhadasa *Bhikkhu* 1968 and Seri Phonphit 1990) and accommodation through practice (Hughes 1984, 1985, Keyes 1993, Zehner 1996). Until the 1980s citizens of Thailand living in the far south, speaking Malay, and following Islam were markedly alienated from the Thai nation and many joined or supported militant separatist movements (McVey 1984; Surin Pitsuwan 1985; Che Man, Wan Kadir 1995). Beginning in the 1980s, however, Thai governments began to promote policies in response to conflicts that took place within Thai institutions (notably the school system) rather than in violent opposition outside of them that began to create a space for Malay-speaking Thai Muslims within Thai society (Uthai Dulyakasem. 1986, 1991; Chaiwat Satha-Anand 1994; also see Forbes 1982 and Scupin 1986 and 1988). The creation of this space was also facilitated by the fact that in the 1980s the king began to play a more publicly visible role as patron not only of Buddhism but also of Islam through such acts as the patronage he has provided for annual Quranic contests. Also in the 1980s Thai-speaking Muslims began to gain greater recognition in Thai politics when the Democrat Party gave particular attention to building constituencies among Thai Muslims. Surin Pitsuwan, a southern Thai Muslim whose

## Part I: Foundations of a Buddhist Political Order

### *Political Order and Civil Religion*

The predictions of Marx, Freud, and other late nineteenth and early twentieth century men who constructed secularized theories of human action notwithstanding, religion has neither disappeared nor been relegated entirely to a private sphere of action as the processes of modernity have spread throughout the world. On the contrary, it is now well recognized that the creation of the modern state has everywhere stimulated the development of religious reform, religious innovation, religious conflict, rather than bringing about the end of religion. Religion indeed continues to be relevant to political processes in all modern states.<sup>2</sup>

Fundamental to the emergence of new relationships between religion and politics is the linking of the modern state with national communities. “Ultimately, any particular national identity entails a leap of faith, acceptance of the fundamental givenness of premises about who belongs to the community sharing the same national heritage. It is in this sense that nationalism is in essence religious” (Keyes, Hardacre, and Kendall 1994). As Kapferer (1988:1) notes at the outset of his book on the nationalisms of Sri Lanka and Australia, “Nationalism makes the political religious and places the nation above politics.”

Because nationalism is inherently religious, no state can be neutral toward the preexisting religions found within its boundaries. Modern states have had to confront the pluralism of the religions adhered to by peoples living under their jurisdiction who are now expected to become citizens. And modern states have had to take account of the fact that all religions, and especially the dominant ones, offer people compelling understandings of their relationship to the past that may be in tension or even conflict with those asserted by a state as the national heritage of its citizenry. The building of modern nation-states has, thus, entailed everywhere the development by states of policies toward religions.

These policies, while sharing a family likeness, have proven to be quite diverse and have had quite different consequences for the peoples within the states in which they have been constructed and implemented. Some states have sought to subordinate all religions to state institutions. The politicization of religion has, however, had very different manifestations, ranging from the efforts of states such as the USSR and People’s Republic of China to marginalize all organized religion to those such as Iran seeking to impose a single established religion for all its citizens.<sup>3</sup> Other states, of which the United States appears to be the first

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scholarly work has contributed to shaping a Thai discourse about Islam in Thailand (1985, 1988), became a leader in the Democrat Party and worked successfully to create a place for Muslims within the Thai nation. His selection in the late 1990s to become foreign minister was indicative of the acceptance Thai Muslims have achieved.

<sup>2</sup>Much attention has been given to ‘fundamentalism’ and fundamentalist politics as a religious response to modernity (see Marty and Appleby 1991, 1993, 1995). Fundamentalism is not, however, the only response and not even all militant religious movements can be considered as fundamentalist (see Juergensmeyer 1993). In East and Southeast Asia, religious ‘resurgence’ is rarely fundamentalist and most often non-militant (Keyes, Kendall, and Hardacre 1994).

<sup>3</sup>Bryant (1995:149-51) has recently resurrected the concept of ‘political religion’, first proposed by Apter (1963, 1965) for African cases and subsequently elaborated on by Lane (1981) for the Soviet Union, for one of two basic types of modern political culture. I prefer ‘politicization of religion’ because the former term tends to lead to reification and fixing of what is a process.

example, have promoted policies that link the political order to a transcendent power while still allowing space for the practice of diverse religions or non-practice of religion among the citizenry.

To the extent that such efforts succeed, a ‘civil religion’ – or a religion that “relates a man’s role as citizen and his society’s place in space, time and history to the conditions of existence and meaning” (Coleman 1970) but is not identified with a particular religious organization – evolves. As the case of the United States demonstrates, a civil religion can never be permanently established because the composition of a citizenry changes through time owing to immigration, religious conversion, and secularization.

Although the concept of civil religion has a different genealogy to that of civil society – the former originating with Rousseau and the latter with the Scottish philosophers such as Ferguson – there is a close connection. If civil society is to be understood as a space in which strong, societally-based autonomous groups with diverse agendas are permitted by the rules and mores of political practice to exist independent of and sometimes even in opposition to the state (see Hall 1995), then civil religion can be said to contribute in a fundamental way to the legitimation of such rules and practices. The reverse is also true, as Bryant (1995:150) notes: “civil religion is celebrated where civil society is strong.”

The emergence of either a civil society or a civil religion is not an inevitable consequence of the process of modernity. Indeed, even where civil religion has emerged it is often deeply contested by proponents of a politicized religion. This is evident, for example, not only in a ‘secular’ India and Turkey where religious parties have recently won elections and taken control of governments, but even in the United States where the ‘Christian right’ has attempted, with some success, to impose certain religiously-based policies on the whole of the American citizenry.

I will argue in this paper that in Thailand Buddhism was politicized in the process of the creation of the modern nation-state and for many decades an establishment Buddhism legitimated the political order. The preeminence of establishment Buddhism even survived a number of crises that beset the Thai political order before the 1970s. The crisis that emerged in the 1970s, however, radically undermined, I maintain, the moral authority of the established sangha in the eyes of politically significant elements of the Thai populace. In the wake of this crisis, Buddhism in Thailand has fragmented into a number of distinctive Buddhisms, each claiming to embody moral authority. The series of conflicts between proponents of an older establishment Buddhism and the dissident Buddhisms that have emerged have resulted not in the triumph of a politicized Buddhism but in the shaping of a new understanding of *satsana*, ‘religion’ that accommodates a diversity of Buddhisms (and even non-Buddhist religions). This new understanding constitutes a ‘civil Buddhism,’ comparable to civil religions found elsewhere. Before we can pursue this argument, however, we need to begin first with a consideration of ideas about Buddhist moral authority and political order that are rooted in premodern understandings of Buddhism.

### *Buddhist Charisma and Secular Power*

Key to understanding the relationship between Buddhism and political order in Thailand is the quality of *mi bun* or *mi bun barami*, ‘having merit’ or ‘having merit and virtue,’ or what I

will also gloss as Buddhist ‘charisma’.<sup>4</sup> In its original sense in Western thought, ‘charisma’ means a ‘gift of grace’, that is, a special quality of an individual that is the consequence of the unique bestowal of divine favor. While the term has all but lost this association with the sacred in common usage since today it can mean anything from sex appeal to a magnetic personality, there is still utility in returning to the original meaning in a discussion of the relationship between religion and power. In Max Weber’s classic formulation, because ‘charisma’ derives from ultimate authority – that is, the sacred – it can be recognized as superior to the authority derived from established political structures. The most legitimate political authority, in Weber’s analysis, emanates from those structures, such as divine kingship, associated with a ‘charisma of office’. But even where such structures exist, charisma can also become manifest outside of them and can pose challenges to them.

Whether associated with an office or emergent outside of existing structures, charisma always depends on being a quality of a person that is recognized by others as indicating that person has a special relationship to the sacred. Peter Worsley’s reformulation of Weber’s ideas continues to provide a theoretical grounding for understanding charisma. A charismatic leader, he argued, “is able to magnetize [followers] because he evokes or plays upon some strand of intellectual or emotional predisposition, and because – more than this – he purports to offer the *realization* of certain values in action” (Worsley 1968:xii). In other words, the signs of charisma can only be recognized if those who witness them hold understandings that lead them to interpret these signs as being evidence of a charismatic quality. And such interpretation becomes socially significant only if it is linked to a desired course of action.

In premodern Siam, as in other neighboring Buddhist societies, the numerous religious rituals with their highly redundant messages provided for all but a few ‘strangers’ a deeply compelling worldview centered on the Buddhist conception of *kamma* (*kam*).<sup>5</sup> According to this worldview, every human being at birth acquires a vital essence (*khwan*) to which is attached a legacy of *kamma*, that is, the moral consequences of previous acts, carried by a *winyan* (Pali, *viññāna*), the ‘rebirth-linking-consciousness,’ that has become one’s *khwan*. This legacy constrains and conditions, but does not determine one’s actions in this life. If one lives beyond childhood, one will undertake intentionally-motivated actions that will generate new *kamma*, both positive and negative.

For some the legacy of positive *kamma* is much more pronounced than for others. Such individuals are said to ‘have merit’ or ‘have merit and virtue’ (*mi bun* or *mi bun barami*) and, thus, are capable of much more effective action than ordinary humans. In premodern times, the primary signs taken as indicative of a person’s having extraordinary merit were those associated with two offices, the Buddhist monkhood, or *sangha*, and the kingship. While most kings gained their offices through being born the son of a previous king and a high ranking royal mother,

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<sup>4</sup>Hanks’ (1962) paper on “Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order,” remains an insightful beginning for understanding the ‘traditional’ ideas on which a Buddhist order were predicated in Thailand. See my “The Power of Merit” (Keyes 1973) for a re-examination of these ideas and Tambiah’s (1976) *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* for a detailed examination of how they were put into practice in premodern Siam as well as modern Thailand. See my (1981a) “Charisma: From Social Life to Sacred Biography” for a more extended discussion of ‘charisma’ and my (1981b) “Death of Two Buddhist Saints in Thailand” for reflections on Buddhist charisma.

<sup>5</sup>The meanings were ‘redundantly’ established primarily through rituals in which the same message was restated through different symbolic means (see Tambiah 1970).

monks acquired theirs through intentional action. Any male could be ordained as a novice or a monk, and most men in premodern Siam did so. Not all monks were, however, recognized as charismatic.

Only a man who had subjected himself for an extended period to the ‘discipline’ (*vinaya*) of the monkhood and who had become an exemplar of the *dhamma*, the ‘way’ taught by the Buddha both in action in knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures, was recognized as having unusual merit. But almost no charismatic monk ever sought to make his charisma the basis for direct claims on power because to do so would have been a violation of the monk’s discipline. Rather, monks, especially charismatic monks, were recognized, again on the basis of Buddhist understandings, as being as ‘fields of merit’ for others, including royalty. That by supporting the sangha through gifts of the necessities (food, medicine, clothing, and shelter) and by sponsoring of the ordination of one’s sons, a lay person built up merit for a future life. One of the signs of the charisma of royalty was the ability of kings and their entourages to provide exceptional support to the sangha.

For premodern kings, their possession of Buddhist charisma usually translated directly into legitimate power. Such legitimacy could, however, be undermined if a king’s actions led to chaos rather than order. At a time of deep crisis, such as occurred following the Burmese defeat of the Siamese and destruction of the old capital of Ayutthaya in 1767, descent from a previous king was no longer sufficient to establish a claimant to the throne as having sufficient *bun barami* to be the ruler. Others claiming to be ‘men-with-merit’ (*phu mi bun*) emerged to compete for power. The successful claimant, such as Kings Taksin and Rama I, then moved to ensure their legitimacy by being conspicuous in their support of members of the sangha who by virtue of seniority and learning clearly embodied the charisma of office.

The relationship between sangha and monarchy was significantly re-configured in the middle of the nineteenth century when a princely monk who would later become King Mongkut, Rama IV, undertook a reform of Theravada Buddhism that was as radical in its way as was Martin Luther’s of Christianity.<sup>6</sup> These reforms emphasized that the essential doctrines of Buddhism were to be known from study of the scriptures and commentaries rather than derived from traditional practices. As a concomitant to this emphasis, a clear distinction came to be made between knowledge gained from the study of nature (*thammachat*) and that gained from the study of sacred texts (*thamma*, that is, *dhamma*). The reformist approach also stressed that ethical actions were more significant than ritual ones. Finally, those monks who followed the reforms also became conspicuous for their adherence to a stricter form of monastic discipline than traditional monks and for their practice of meditation. There are two points that are particularly important about these reforms for my argument about the relationship between Buddhism and power. First, Mongkut’s reforms led to Thai Buddhists, or, at least, Buddhist leaders, becoming consciously concerned about what constituted Buddhist orthodoxy in order to defend Buddhism against challenges posed by Westerners, both Christian and secular. Secondly, and following from this, only those monks who were demonstrably orthodox could be assumed to possess the *bun barami* that could legitimate the use of power.

In the last half of the nineteenth century, those monks who followed the reformist

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<sup>6</sup>For detailed discussions of the reforms instituted by Mongkut while in the monkhood, see especially Craig Reynolds (1973, 1976); also see Butt (1978) and Kirsch (1973).

approach coalesced into a new religious order, the Thammayut-nikai (Dhammayuti-nikaya), whose name signaled their adherence to a strict interpretation of the Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha. The order was officially recognized by King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) and was conspicuously favored by the court over against other monks who were de facto recognized as belonging to the Maha-nikai (Maha-nikaya), the large order. Although the Thammayut began with a royal prince and attracted members of the elite as members, it also attracted a significant following among rural monks, especially those living in the northeastern part of the country. The Thammayut order would prove to be the foundation of an established Buddhist church created in the process of the remaking of the Siamese empire into a modern nation-state.

### *Establishment Buddhism and Crises of Order before the 1970s*

At the end of the nineteenth century King Chulalongkorn and his associates self-consciously set out to transform an older political order (*rabop*) of an empire into a new one, that of the nation-state. In the process they unintentionally opened up a space for others to reflect on how power might be distributed and deployed within this new order. The expression of such reflections is different, it is important to stress, from politics. Politics is impelled by pragmatic, means-end motivations rather than moral ones even if sometimes given moral clothing. People can, as is said in Thailand, ‘play politics’ (*len kanmiiang*), only if there is acceptance among those playing such games as well as among those whose support they seek about the basic rules of the game. In modern twentieth century Thailand, although assumptions about such rules have continued to be based on Buddhist ideas about *bun barami* they have at particular moments been deeply contested. Such contestation is manifest in what I term a crisis of order.

The far-reaching administrative, fiscal, military, and religious institutional reforms instituted by King Chulalongkorn from 1893 through to the end of his reign in 1910 precipitated the first crisis of order in Siam in modern times. These reforms entailed the replacement of local lords and princes (*cao*) by *kharatchakan*, ‘servants of the [Siamese] king’. Large numbers of mainly rural peoples living in the northeastern and northern parts of the country joined millenarian movements centered on *phu mi bun*, that is men who were believed by their followers to possess greater merit than the king of Siam.<sup>7</sup> The overt resistance to the new order posed by these movements was relatively quickly put down because the Siamese government had control of far more potent military forces than did the followers of the movements. The crisis would have persisted, however, if respected local monks had not been co-opted by the Thai state to help persuade the populace to accept the new order as legitimate.

This cooptation was a consequence of the state’s success in integrating monks throughout the country into a unified sangha under a hierarchy culminating in a patriarch (*sangharaja*) appointed by the king and an ecclesiastical council, today called the *Maha Thera Samakhom*, made up of monks holding officially-conferred high ranks. This subordination or disciplining’ in both a Buddhist and Foucauldian sense<sup>8</sup> of monks throughout the country, including *khru*

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<sup>7</sup>The millenarian uprisings of the early twentieth century in northeastern and northern Thailand have been given much attention (see Murdoch 1974; Ishii 1975; Skrobanek 1976; Keyes 1977; Ramsay 1979; Tej Bunnag 1981; Chatthip Nartsupha 1984; Phonphen Hantrakun and Atcharapho Kamuphisamai 1984; Tanabe 1984; and Wilson 1997).

<sup>8</sup>While Foucault’s idea of ‘discipline’ (see Foucault 1977; Ranson 1997) is usually understood to entail the imposition of modes of acting by an external authority and the Buddhist idea of discipline understood as entailing

*acan*, that is monks recognized in their local areas as especially charismatic, was accomplished through a series of laws, the first of which was promulgated in 1902.<sup>9</sup> The implementation of this act was undertaken by a hierarchy dominated by the Thammayut Order. The order was headed by Prince Vajirañana half-brother to Chulalongkorn who under the next king would be appointed as patriarch.

The implementation of this act would have been far more difficult if by this time the Thammayut order had not already recruited a significant number of monks especially from the northeastern region. From the late nineteenth century on, the reformist ideas and practices of the Thammayut attracted many monks, including senior monks, in northeastern Thailand and stimulated the emergence of modern forest monasticism in that region. Prince Vajirañana made particular use of the Thammayut monks from northeastern Thailand by deploying them in key wats throughout the country to ensure that the laws were adhered to (see Keyes 1971). Thammayut monks were also given the responsibility for instituting a new a uniform curriculum for monastic education that had been devised by Prince Vajirañana based on reformist assumptions.

Monks in northern Thailand, unlike those in northeastern Thailand, were not drawn to the Thammayut order and leading monks, most notably *Khruba* Siwichai, resisted integration into the national sangha into the 1930s. Even after that time, a few northern monks continued to be recognized as charismatic even though they rejected the disciplining of the national hierarchy.

The resistance of the northern monks notwithstanding, by the 1930s a national sangha had been created and because high rank in the sangha hierarchy often was associated with attributes – seniority, impressive knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures, adherence to a strict form of the monastic discipline – that were taken by Buddhists throughout the country as marks of charisma, the unified sangha became an effective source for legitimation of the political order. Moreover, in the 1920s King Vajiravudh designated religion as one of the three ‘pillars’ (*lak*) of the Thai nation with the sangha being the embodiment of the religion. The other pillars were the monarchy and a national culture manifest primarily in a national language.

The establishment of a national religion closely associated with the monarchy became deeply problematic, however, when a new crisis of order emerged in the 1930s. In 1932, a group of civilian and military officials successfully compelled King Prajadhipok to accept that subordination of the monarchy to a constitution and to recognize that governing power would derive from the authority not of the king but of the constitution. Some royalists, led by Prince Bowaradej, challenged this change of political order, but the ‘promoters’ of the 1932 revolution were able to mobilize sufficient military force to suppress the Bowaradej rebellion. While the monarchy was not abolished, due to a succession of events, including the abdication of King Prajadhipok in 1935, Thailand was without an effective or even resident monarch until the 1950s when King Bhumibol, the present king, returned to Thailand from studies abroad.

The 1932 revolution ruptured the ancient symbiotic relationship between sangha and monarchy and made problematic the basis of legitimate authority in Thailand. The coup stimulated significant interest among monks, and the first ‘political monks’ in modern Thai

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actions subjected to an internalized authority, there are, in fact, significant similarities between the two ideas. Space does not permit an exploration of these similarities here.

<sup>9</sup> On the acts relating to the sangha, see Chot Thongprayun (1962) and The Mahamakuta Educational Council, The Buddhist University (1963).

history emerged at this time. These monks agitated for democratic reforms within the sangha and for allowing monks more active roles in society (Thompson 1941:638-43; Landon 1939:318-19). This agitation stimulated major debates in parliament, with the end result being laws culminating in a omnibus act in 1941 were passed that asserted the domination of the state over the sangha. Through these acts, the government “secured what had heretofore been a royal right--that of authorizing future *wat* [temple-monastery] building” and ultimate control over monastic property (Thompson 1941:639). Monks were forbidden to stand for election as MPs or to participate in elections “even to the extent of verbally supporting any candidates in the election” (Thompson 1941:643). Through these acts the institution of the sangha was clearly placed under the authority of a constitutionally-legitimated government. Buddhism as the established religion of the nation also became subject to the political will of the state.

Phibul Songgram, one of the chief promoters of the 1932 coup and the prime minister from 1938 to 1944 and again from 1948 to 1957 sought to legitimate himself as ‘leader’ (*phunam*) by substituting himself for the monarch as the chief patron of the sangha. In other words, he sought to appropriate for himself as the first significant non-royal head of a Thai government the charisma that had previously only been recognized as attaching to monarchs or would-be monarch. This effort was particularly evident in 1954-56 when he took charge of the celebrations of the 2500 year anniversary of the enlightenment of the Buddha. By that time, however, a new crisis of order was emerging.

The roots of the new crisis of order began in the 1950s when King Bhumibol Adulayadej, after returning to Thailand with his new queen, Sirikit, began to make the monarchy visible once again to the public through travels with the queen throughout the country. The great popular response to these travels revealed dramatically that an older vision of an order legitimated by the *bun barami* of a king had far from disappeared in the wake of the 1932 revolution. Phibul, who had little respect for the monarchy since spearheading its overthrow in 1932, failed to recognize the significance of the resurgence of the charisma of the monarchy. By denying the king any significant role in the celebrations of 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Buddha’s enlightenment, Phibul precipitated a contest between his charisma and that of the king.

The contest between the king and Phibul was decided in favor of the king in 1957 when Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat staged a successful coup against the government of Phibul. In contrast to Phibul, Sarit recognized that King Bhumibol had successfully reasserted the charisma of the monarchy through his and Queen Sirikit’s direct contacts with the populace in many parts of the country. Sarit sought legitimacy for his ‘revolution’ (*patiwat*) by linking it with the resurgent monarchy.

Sarit also spurned his predecessor’s effort to cultivate the established sangha. On the contrary, he sought to impose new political constraints on the sangha. This was particularly manifest in his highly publicized effort to have the high-ranking monk Phimonlatham *Bhikkhu*, whom he accused of communist sympathies, expelled from the order. The pretext of Phimonlatham’s supposed communist links notwithstanding, Sarit’s real reasons for seeking Phimonlatham’s expulsion was clearly because Sarit had become threatened by the fact that Phimonlatham represented an independent source of Buddhist charisma. *Phra* Phimonlatham was not only a high ranking monk but was seen by many as next in line to become patriarch. His charisma derived in great part from his promotion of popular meditation based on techniques he had learned in Burma. These techniques were not only unknown to the Thai Buddhist

establishment, but, particularly distressing to Sarit, they came from outside Thailand. If effective charisma could be derived from outside of the country, then effective critiques of his authoritarian rule could also be mounted from outside the order he sought to establish.

After the Phimonlatham case and promulgation of a new act in 1962 regulating the sangha, the established sangha proved compliant to the authority of the state. It remained so not only under the military dictatorship of Sarit but also that of Thanom Kittikachorn and Prapas Charusathien who perpetuated Sarit's military dictatorship after his death in 1963. The sangha became for these rulers less a source of charisma which they needed to assure legitimacy for their rule than an institution that could be manipulated for political reasons. The governments of Sarit and Thanom and Prapas coopted the established Sangha by creating programs in which monks were recruited for roles to help certain promote government policies. The most important of these programs was a moral rearmament-type effort, called *thammathut* (Pali, *dhammaduta*), 'dhammic ambassador,' linked to anti-communist and community development objectives in lowland rural areas. Another important program, called *thammacarik* (Pali, *dhammacarika*), 'wandering dhamma', aimed at converting tribal peoples to Buddhism (on these programs, see Keyes 1971, Somboon 1976, and Harmon 1978). Overt assertion of political control over the sangha between 1957 and 1973, while maintaining Buddhism as the established religion, also began to stimulate some in the growing middle class to begin questioning whether such a politically-controlled sangha could hold a monopoly on Buddhist charisma. This questioning would become intense in the 1970s.

## **Part II: The Demise of Establishment Buddhism and the Rise of a Buddhist Civil Religion**

### *The Crisis of the 1970s and Militant Buddhism*

During the 1970s Thailand was plunged into a profound political crisis that was bracketed by two key dates, *Sipsi Tula*, referring to the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1973 when a student led revolution succeeded, with the backing of the King, in overthrowing the military dictatorship of Thanom and Prapas, and *Hok Tula*, the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1976, when military and police forces were used with unprecedented brutality to end student protests and overthrow the democratically elected government. The events of the 1970s remain ones that have, at least until recently, been remembered more by silence than by consensual commemoration. But silences do not mean that the consequences of events are still not profoundly felt.<sup>10</sup> One of the silences about the 1970s that remains concerns the roles of the highest ranking monks in critical events in the period. Memories, albeit silent ones, of these roles still continue to contribute to deep doubts many have about whether the established sangha embodies the *bun barami* on which the moral legitimation for the political order can be based.

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<sup>10</sup>Trouillot (1995) in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* demonstrates how silences are not the same thing as forgetting and that the memory that has been silenced can still allow the past to profoundly influence the present. Efforts to break the silences regarding *Sipsi Tula* have in very recent years began to achieve some success with recent clearance finally forthcoming for the erection of a memorial to those who died confronting the military at the time. But the publication of an historical account of the events still remains embroiled in controversy (*The Nation* June 11, 12, and 14, 1999). The efforts in 1996 by former student activists and victims of the brutality of the period to break the silence about *Hok Tula* in 1996 have still failed to persuade even a democratically-elected government to allow a public memorial for those who were killed on October 6, 1976 in the suppression of protests by students and others. On the silencing of the events of October 6, 1976, see Thongchai Winichakul (in press).

In 1973 students organized protests against an order dominated by a military dictatorship, a protest that also appealed to many among a middle class who despite growing economic power lacked any role in shaping policy. Field Marshals Thanom and Prapas and their presumed heir, Narong who was Thanom's son and Prapas's son-in-law, sought to retain control of the polity. On October 14<sup>th</sup> the protests turned violent as thousands of demonstrators attacked and burned government buildings, including the lottery office, which, because lottery profits had been skimmed off for political purposes by the rulers, symbolized the corruption of the military dictatorship. Riot police sent to suppress the protests and more than a hundred students were killed. The protests still continued, and Thanom ordered the army to join in putting them down. General Krit Sivara, the army commander in chief who effectively controlled the armed forces, refused to send troops out against the students. Without this support, Thanom, Prapas, and Narong -- who, apparently, were ready to kill thousands of students if necessary -- could no longer maintain themselves in power.

The crisis did not end, however, with General Krit, like Sarit in 1957, capitalizing on student protests and forming a new military government. The students, for their part, were neither sufficiently organized nor provided with a secure enough base of power to determine the shape of a new government. Rather, the king brought the crisis to an end. Determined to avoid anarchy and further bloodshed, the king asked Thanom, Prapas, and Narong to leave the country and go into exile, and they had no choice but to accede to his request. The king then went on the radio to announce the departure of the triumvirate, to inform the country that there would be a return to constitutional government, and to ask students and others to return to their homes.

The three years following *Sipsi Tula* were arguably the most turbulent ones that Thailand has known since the 1930s. At first it appeared that a new democratic order would be created when the most liberal constitution Thailand would have until 1997 was drawn up by an assembly appointed by the king and including representatives of all sectors of the society. The elections that followed the promulgation of the constitution in 1974 proved, however, that there was a singular lack of consensus on the rule of how politics should be played in this new order. The governments formed after elections in 1975 and 1976 found themselves increasingly constrained by the extra-parliamentary exercise of power by military and paramilitary elements.

These elements continually pointed to a presumed threat to Thailand by communists. This threat was made credible to many in the country by the success of communist-led forces in taking over governments in neighboring Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos in 1975. Those said to be associated with the communist threat within Thailand included not only the relatively small number of people who had actually joined the Communist Party of Thailand operating from remote bases in the country in an armed struggle against the government. In addition, many others, including leaders of the student movement, of farmers and labor groups, and of the legal Socialist party, were branded as communists in propaganda put out by media controlled by the military. Because the democratically-elected governments were accused of being ineffectual in meeting the communist threat, new right-wing groups were formed to agitate for a return of military rule. The governments proved indeed very ineffectual in controlling these groups and the associated death squads who murdered many of the leaders of the movements accused of communist linkages.

In the midst of this turbulence, a highly respected senior monk, Kittivuddho *Bhikkhu*, emerged to provide Buddhist legitimation for the use of violence against the 'enemies' of

Thailand. The failure of the supreme sangha council, the Maha Thera Samakhom, to discipline Kittivuddho for his heterodox advocacy of a militant Buddhism appeared to provide establishment Buddhist sanction for an unprecedented Buddhist legitimation of political violence.<sup>11</sup>

Kittivuddho *Bhikkhu* (Kittisak Caroensathaphon), later to be given the rank and title of *Phra* Udaraganabhiraksa (Udonkhanaphirak), was 42 years old in 1976 and had been a monk for 21 years. He had risen in the established hierarchy and achieved a reputation as monk at the famous Mahanikai temple of Wat Mahathat for his promotion of Abhidhamma studies. In 1967 he founded Cittabhavana (Chitthaphawan) College, situated in the beach-resort area of Choburi Province, some 100 kilometers away from Bangkok-Thonburi.

By the 1970s, Cittabhavana had become an institution with considerable independence from the established sangha. At Cittabhavana, Kittivuddho both ordained and trained thousands novices and monks in a form of Buddhist activism. Since the roles he envisioned for monks and novices were very similar to those promoted through the establishment sangha's own Thammathut program, Cittabhavana was not seen as a threat to the establishment. In retrospect, however, it can be seen to have become quite separate from it since it took its authority from a charismatic monk rather than from the institutionalized sangha. It was, thus, a harbinger of other independent movements that were to emerge after the crisis of the 1970s about which more will be said below.

Following the Communist takeovers in 1975 of neighboring Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, Kittivuddho linked his social activist Buddhism to an explicitly anti-communist politics and he himself became a highly visible leader of the right-wing movement, Nawaphon. In early 1976, Kittivuddho was conspicuous at a demonstration organized by Nawaphon to demand a military-led government to meet the growing communist threat. This action seemed directly in violation of laws forbidding monks to become involved in overt political actions. In 1974 the Maha Thera Samakhom, the highest ranking body of the established sangha, had strongly reaffirmed the ban against monks participating in politics by backing sanctions against some monks who had participated in a demonstration in support protests made by some farmers. Referring to this precedent, liberal newspapers called on the Sangha Council also to discipline Kittivuddho. Despite the Sangharaja's mild condemnation of Kittivuddho, however, the Council took no action against him (Keyes 1978:151-52).

Kittivuddho was not only unrepentant for his involvement in this political action, but he began to advocate a militant Buddhist crusade to destroy the 'enemies of the nation and religion'. Beginning in mid-1976 in a series of interviews and sermons, some published and widely circulated, he advanced the proposition that "the killing of Communists is not demeritorious" (*kha khommunit mai bap*). On the contrary, he claimed the demerit from killing Communists is offset by the great merit that comes from preserving the nation, the religion, and the monarchy. "It is just like," he said, "when a fish is killed to make a stew to place in the alms bowl of a monk. Certainly, there is demerit in killing the fish, but we gain much greater merit from placing [the stew] in the alms bowl of the monk" (*Caturat* ['Square'], June 29, 1976). He offered scriptural support for his position.

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<sup>11</sup>My "Political Crisis and Militant Buddhism in Contemporary Thailand" (Keyes 1978) remains, I believe, the only sustained account to date in Western languages or Thai about Kittivuddho and militant Buddhism.

However compelling his rhetoric, his theological justifications for a Buddhist holy war were very much against the understandings of Buddhist doctrines promoted by the established sangha. To bolster his interpretations, he began to point to signs that could be interpreted as his being a monk of exceptional charisma, perhaps even a saint. In other words, he sought to set himself up as having moral authority superior to that of any other monk in the country.

The Maha Thera Samakhom was strongly pressured by the press, by a young monks' association, by student activists, and by other critics such as the well known social critic and Buddhist activist Sulak Sivaraksa to take action against Kittivuddho. The Maha Thera Samakhom, however, decided that no action could be taken, on the grounds that the evidence was either ambiguous or inconclusive.

This decision had the effect, I maintain, of convincing many that the Council had been too strongly subjected to political influence to be able to reach a conclusion that would have been more religiously appropriate in light of Kittivuddho's clear demonstration that he disregarded basic Buddhist tenets. In other words, the established sangha was shown to be subordinate to politics.

The undermining of the sangha's authority did not, moreover, end with the failure of the Maha Thera Samakhom to take action against Kittivuddho. It continued later in September 1976 when a Thammayut monk who subsequently became the Sangharaja together with other ranking monks were persuaded to allow the former dictator, Thanom Kittikachorn, to return from exile in order to be ordained as a monk at the famous royal temple of Wat Bowoniwet. Thanom's donning of the yellow robes of a member of the sangha was clearly designed to signify that he had turned his back on his former role as military dictator. Far from being an action that provided moral legitimation for reconciliation, however, it proved instead to be a goad for protests by students. These protests would end in a violent tragedy that would forever color memories of the role the established sangha had played in setting the stage for what has come to be known as *Hok Tula*, the 6<sup>th</sup> of October, 1976.

#### *Aftermath of Hok Tula: Towards of Religious Pluralism*

The excessive violence used on *Hok Tula*, October 6<sup>th</sup> 1976 to suppress student protests against the return of Thanom and to impose once again a military regime on the polity seemed, initially, to be directly in keeping with the militant Buddhism Kittivuddho had advocated. The new government, under Thanin Kraivichien, also seemed to be acting in accord with a similar ideology for in the immediate wake of *Hok Tula* it sought to purge the society of its enemies by arresting and imprisoning not only communists but any deemed to 'threaten society' (*phai sangkhom*). Yet, only a year later, the same military junta – led by General Kriangsak Chomanan and Admiral Sangad Chaloryu – that had headed the October 6<sup>th</sup> coup staged another coup, removed Thanin, and installed a government that would in short order move to grant amnesty to those previously stigmatized as enemies of society.

Another of the silences of the past is why the military leaders of the time acted the way they did. Had they not staged the 1977 coup, and subsequently declared an amnesty for those who had been previously marked as enemies of the nation and religion, Thailand in the late 1970s and 1980s could well have been plunged into a bloody civil war. The anticipation of a murderous civil war has not, however, deterred rulers in other societies from persisting in promoting a constricted nationalism legitimated by a political religion. The war that has gone on

since the mid-1980s in Sri Lanka between Sinhalese and Tamils has been framed to a significant extent by a militant Buddhism.

Although the historical details are yet to be uncovered it appears clear that those in the military who staged a second coup in 1977 unequivocally rejected militant Buddhism and, instead, embraced moves to create an order that would allow space for citizens holding divergent views about the relationship between the state, society, and religion. An inclusivist vision of the political order was expressed in part in a new constitution in 1978 and even more pointedly through Order No. 66/2523 issued in 1980 by the government of General Prem Tinsulanond, who succeeded Kriangsak as prime minister, that gave precedence to political over military solutions to problems that contribute to insurgency. Whether this vision was tied in any explicit way to Buddhist ideas (or to influence by the king) has yet to be shown.

While the openness has, as I will show shortly, allowed for the fragmentation of Buddhism, two non-establishment movements important in the late 1970s and early 1980s would not survive. The first of these, somewhat paradoxically, was militant Buddhism.

Militant Buddhism receded even more rapidly than it had emerged. Kittivuddho's own claim to charismatic authority was thrown into deep question in the late 1970s and 1980s when he became embroiled in a series of scandals involving the import of Volvo automobiles without the payment of proper taxes, a pyramid money scheme, and the mismanagement of monies in a college in northeastern Thailand that he had acquired. His patronage for the monk, *Phra Nikorn*, who became the center of a sexual scandal in the early 1990s, simply confirmed that Kittivuddho was far from the saint that he had once claimed to be with the result that his close and positive relationship since *Hok Tula* with the established sangha probably has only served to undermine the authority of the establishment.

Another religious movement that rose and fell in the immediate aftermath of *Hok Tula* was known by the name of its headquarters as *sammak pu sawan*, 'the Abode of the Heavenly Ancestors' or *hupha sawan*, 'Heavenly Valley' This movement pushed the limits of tolerance too far, at least in the immediate post 1976 period. Suchat Kosonkitiwong, the founder and head of this movement, a poorly educated Sino-Thai, began as a small-scale spirit medium. In the 1970s he began to started to attract a large following, including some high ranking military officers and officials, when he began to be recognized as the vehicle for powerful spirits of former times. Since some of these spirits were those of patriarchs of the Buddhist sangha in previous centuries, he gained at least tacit recognition by some as having access to, if not in fact being in possession of, exceptional *bun barami*. As his movement grew, he became more eclectic in the source of religious authority on which he drew. His center in Phetchaburi province was noted for its statues of Christ, Mahayana Buddhist saints, and Hindu deities as well as orthodox Theravadin images of the Buddha. It was not, however, his religious syncretism or his heterodox claim to be able to be a repository for Buddhist charisma without having subjected himself to the discipline of the sangha that led to his downfall. Rather, it was when he began styling himself a prince and offering unsolicited advice to the king. A symbolic claim that he was situated on the karmic hierarchy on a par with the King could not be tolerated. The government of General Prem Tinsulanond moved to restrict the activities of Suchat and his movement to the point where it effectively was suppressed (Yagi 1988, Jackson 1988b). While spirit cults have proliferated to an extraordinary degree in the 1980s and 1990s, none with any significant following has ever sought since to situate itself above Buddhism or the monarchy (see, in this connection Pattana

Kitiarsa 1999).

The real threat to state-dominated Buddhism came not from spirit cults, however, but from charismatic monks. In the 1980s four significant Buddhist movements have all succeeded in gaining, albeit through processes that have been very contentious, places that are clearly independent of the established sangha. The four movements – *socially engaged Buddhism*, *heterodox Buddhism (Santi Asoke)*, *Buddhist ecology*, and *evangelical Buddhism (Dhammakaya)* – do not include all monks and lay persons independent of the established sangha that some recognize as having *bun barami* relevant to political action, but the high visibility of these four demonstrates without question, that the Thai sangha has become irrevocably fragmented.

#### *Dhammic Socialism - Socially-Engaged Buddhism*

In the 1980s, a number of social activists translated the teachings of the highly respected theologian, moral philosopher, and exemplary mentor, Buddhadasa *Bhikkhu* (1905-1993), into social action programs (Bobilin 1988). Some of these activists were former students and others who had fled to the jungle after 1976 and had returned after 1980 following an amnesty. General Prem's decree 66/2523 which affirmed this amnesty also provided a basis for the founding of many new non-governmental organizations. Although NGOs, including many that have no Buddhist connections, have often been ignored or harassed by government agencies, they have continued to multiply and by the 1990s had become one of the dominant elements shaping a new civil society. Some activists who joined the many new NGOs established in the 1980s found Buddhadasa's teachings to be a more compelling basis for pursuing the goals of rectifying injustices and promoting 'development' in Thailand than a very alien form of communism.<sup>12</sup> The new non-establishment Buddhist activism can be loosely subsumed under the label of *Buddhist socialism*, a term *Than* ('the venerable') Buddhadasa himself created, or *socially engaged Buddhism*, a term coined by his followers.

Buddhadasa *Bhikkhu* (Phutthathat *Phikkhu*), who died in 1993 at the age of 88, inspired many to find a way to be in the world but still not of the world.<sup>13</sup> He provided an articulate defense of an ethic which would foster suppression of personal greed in favor of redistribution of wealth to alleviate suffering more generally. He "appears to have been strongly influenced by the rationalist aspects of the religious reforms of Prince Mongkut ..." (Jackson 1989:126), but set himself apart from the Buddhist establishment. For most of his life he lived in Chaiya in southern

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<sup>12</sup>Even a leading Catholic NGO activist, Seri Phonphit, found inspiration in the thought of Buddhadasa (see Seri Phonphit 1988). Seri, a Catholic, has dedicated his book to Buddhadasa.

<sup>13</sup>The names of Thai monks are often rather confusing. When a man is ordained, he assumes a new religious name. *Phutthathat*, meaning literally "servant of the Buddha," was assumed by a young man whose name at birth had been Ngyam when he entered the monkhood. Unlike other monks, he has preferred not to be known by a title associated with his rank in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. While the names of most monks in Thailand is prefaced by the Thai honorific, *phra*, meaning "venerable," his name is typically coupled with the word, *phikkhu* (Pali, *Bhikkhu*) meaning 'monk.' The writings in Thai, English, French and other languages of and about Buddhadasa are voluminous. For an appreciation of his life, see Panyananda *Bhikkhu* (1993), Swearer (1993) and Santikaro *Bhikkhu* (1993); for translations of some of his teachings, see Buddhadasa (1970, 1971, 1986 and 1989); for detailed analyses in French and English of his thought see Swearer (1970, 1979, 1990); Gabaude (1988) and Jackson (1988a); for recent discussion in English of his influence in the development of a socially engaged Buddhism, see Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and International Network of Engaged Buddhists (1990) and Suchira Payulpitack (1992).

Thailand, far from the center of both secular and ecclesiastical power. At Suan Mok ('Garden of Liberation') in Chaiya and at the satellite center at Wat Umong near Chiang Mai in the north, Buddhadasa developed, taught, and put into practice through meditation and his 'spiritual theaters' a theology which centers on the premise that "in *samsara* exists *Nibbana*".<sup>14</sup> This theology, which he acknowledged seemed contradictory, makes detachment from the passions a goal to seek even in the midst of intense activity in the world. In the 1960s and 1970s he began to develop a 'dhammic socialist' critique of the growing materialism in Thai society. Unlike the Buddhist socialism of the Burmese, Buddhadasa's dhammic socialism looks not to the state to control natural proclivities to greed, anger, and delusion but to the enlightened individual working together with other such individuals. He also clearly distinguished his Buddhist socialism from that of communism (see Buddhadasa 1989:173).

His spiritual theater at Suan Mok in Chaiya became a pilgrimage center for thousands. His death in 1993 after a prolonged illness prompted wide mourning in the country<sup>15</sup> and deprived people of the charisma that had been seen by so many as embodied in his living person. Yet, the remembered charisma of Buddhadasa still provides a very high standard for measuring the charisma of living monks. Whatever private feelings high ranking members of the sangha or of governments may have had about *Than* Buddhadasa, none in the sangha nor the government ever directly attacked him or challenged his charisma. He established a standard that those who espouse a rational and ethical approach to Buddhism employ when assessing the charisma of other monks.

Since Buddhadasa's death, the one monk who has in the eyes of many displayed charismatic qualities that measure well against the model of Buddhadasa is *Phra* Prayudh Payutto (also known by his succession of titles, *Phra* Rajavaramuni, *Phra* Debvedi, and *Phra* Dhammapitaka). *Than* Prayudh has shown through his writings, sermons and talks an extraordinary knowledge of Buddhist scriptures, commentaries and history and it is this knowledge that has been taken as the distinctive mark of his charisma. He first attracted significant attention among Buddhist intellectuals in Thailand with his systematic study of Buddhist ethics in *Buddhadhamma*, published in 1982<sup>16</sup>. He has subsequently used this knowledge for his attacks on materialism, especially that originating in America, a country he knows well since he once served in New York as a Buddhist missionary. In place of a consumer-driven ethic, he has mustered a strong Buddhist ethical argument in support of sustainable development and protection of the environment. He has also used Buddhist teachings to challenge the use of violence, to promote human rights, and to question the theology of some new Buddhist movements, including Santi Asoke and Dhammakaya as will be discussed below.

While *Than* Prayudh has achieved a significant following among the educated of Thailand, he has, at least until quite recently, been less well known among the general public than was Buddhadasa. But this now appears to be changing<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup>This is the title of one of his sermons (Buddhadasa 1970; also see 1989, ch. eight).

<sup>15</sup>His illness was prolonged even beyond that which he wished for because those providing medical care felt strong public pressures to maintain his life.

<sup>16</sup>For an English translation, see Prayudh (1995) and for a review in English, see Sulak Sivaraksa (1982). Many of *Than* Prayudh's writings have been translated into English (see Prayudh 1979, 1984, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1995). On the relationship between *Than* Prayudh and Buddhadasa, see Olson (1990).

<sup>17</sup>See, in this connection, the festschrift for *Than* Prayudh published in 1999 (Sulak Sivaraksa 1999).

For many years the most visible layperson engaged in translating Buddhadasa's dhammic Buddhism and Prayudh's Buddhist social ethics into an ideological basis for a socially engaged Buddhism was Sulak Sivaraksa, known as a prolific essayist and social critic.<sup>18</sup> Sulak has in recent years taken the lead in organizing, editing, and publishing festschrifts for both Buddhadasa and Prayudh that accentuate the relevance of their understanding of Buddhism for activist work in promoting human rights, equality for women, sustainable development, protection of the environment, and other social issues (see Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and International Network of Engaged Buddhists 1990 and Sulak Sivaraksa 1999). Since the 1980s Sulak has founded or fostered the creation of a number of NGOs, including the Thai Interreligious Commission for Development, the Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD), and the International Network of Socially Engaged Buddhists.

In an essay on "Buddhism and Development: Is Small Beautiful?" (Sulak Sivaraksa 1981), the title of which alludes to the book *Small is Beautiful* by E.F. Schumacher (1973), Sulak attests to the influence of Buddhadasa on his approach. Sulak (1981:57) argues that the premises of 'development' promoted by economists and politicians entail accentuating the very desires that Buddhism considers the major impediments to the attainment of Nibbana: "For economists see development in terms of increasing currency and things, thus fostering greed (*lobha*). Politicians see development in terms of increased power thus fostering ill-will (*dosa*). Both then work together, hand in glove, and measure the results in terms of quantity, thus fostering ignorance (*moha*), and completing the Buddhist triad of evils."

Sulak looked to *Sarvodaya*, a Buddhist-inspired movement in Sri Lanka, for a model of alternative perspective on development. This village level movement, he observes is derived from the Buddha's teaching of the Four Wheels. "As a cart moves steadily on four wheels, likewise human development should rest on the four *dhammas*, namely Sharing, Pleasant Speech, Constructive Action, and Equality" (Sulak 1981:77). 'Sharing' (*dana*) is understood as entailing not just the offerings given to monks, but as all giving -- of "goods, money, knowledge, time, labor" -- to others. "Pleasant Speech" is not limited as in traditional Buddhism to words from the teachings of the Buddha, but to all talk which is devoid of deceit. 'Constructive Action' is not only the rituals which have traditionally been deemed to generate 'merit' but all "working for each other's benefit." Finally, 'equality' should not be restricted only to those who have become members of the sangha, but should mean that no group will exploit another (Sulak 1981:77-78).

Sulak has been particularly visible publicly because of his criticisms not only of government policies but also of what he asserts are the misuses of moral authority by the established sangha and the royal family. In the 1990s he became embroiled in a prolonged controversy over criticisms of the royal family that led to his being charged with *lèse majesté*, although he was eventually acquitted of this charge (see Streckfuss 1996). While these challenges, along with his recent leadership in protests against the building of a gas pipeline between Burma and Thailand, have made him a sought after speaker by student and other groups, his outspokenness has also led many to see him as unduly controversial.

Dr. Prawase Wasi, a hematologist long affiliated with Siriraj hospital has, like Sulak, built an activist ethic on the Buddhist teachings of Buddhadasa and Prayudh. In the early 1980s

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<sup>18</sup>Sulak originated the term 'socially engaged Buddhists.'

he was the founder of the village doctor movement to train villagers to help themselves in health care. His personal involvement in this movement, one concerned in a very direct and concrete way with the alleviation of suffering of ordinary people living in the villages, led many to see him as an exemplar of Buddhist compassion. The award in 1982 to him of the Magasaysay Award for his work in the village doctor movement confirmed for many his moral stature.

Since the 1980s Dr. Prawase has drawn on his moral authority to speak out against those in the military, government and business who have in his eyes been corrupted by power or greed. He was prominent, but far less confrontational than others in the challenge to military rule in 1991-92. Even when he has been criticized, his moral authority is still acknowledged. An editorial in the *Bangkok Post* on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1998, which takes him to task for overstating the threat of foreign economic domination in the wake of the financial crisis that began in 1997, opens by saying: “The intentions of Dr Prawase Wasi are sincere. His words of wisdom and advice are often heeded and sought after. As Thailand’s economy grew in leaps and bounds, he warned of excesses. He urged reform, political and social. For many, he is the country’s conscience.”

While Dr. Prawase Wasi and Sulak Sivaraksa have been particularly visible among the urban educated public as leaders of a social activist movement based on the thought of Buddhadasa and Prayudh, there are at least dozens, probably hundreds, of less well known people who have linked this thought with what they have learned from working with villagers, slum dwellers, and minority peoples to design very concrete projects to help alleviate problems caused by too rapid economic growth, persistence of authoritarian patterns in the bureaucracy and even elected governments, marked corruption in agencies of the state, and especially in the police, failure of governments to regulate many practices of business interests or to institute safeguards for the livelihoods of powerless or marginalized peoples. It is through the work of these people and the NGOs with which they are associated that the moral authority of dhammic socialism has been directly manifest. While many officials and businessmen are very disdainful of the goals of such NGOs, the fact that they command significant moral authority has made them the Buddhist-based movement with the most effective challenge to those who assume that they retain legitimacy because of their association with established Buddhism.

### *Santi Asoke, Heterodoxy Triumphant*

On May 23, 1989 “a committee of senior Buddhist monks ... recommended that the ruling Buddhist supreme council order the founder of the unorthodox Santi Asoke religious centre, Phra Potirak, defrocked as a punishment for his alleged rebellion against the mainstream monastic order” (*The Nation*, May 24, 1989).<sup>19</sup> The committee invoked “Article 27 of the Buddhist Monk Act B.E. 2505” [1962] and recommended defrocking because he allegedly breached “the discipline set up during the days of the Lord Buddha, rebelling against the mainstream monastic order and degrading the disciplines [sic]” (*Bangkok Post*, May 27, 1989).

The defrocking of *Phra Phothirak*, the first time in modern Thai history that a monk had been found to have created a schism in the sangha, would seem to demonstrate that the state-backed sangha was clearly in control of Buddhism in the country. In fact, the defrocking

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<sup>19</sup>For a detailed account of Santi Asoke, see Heikkilä-Horn (1996). I have discussed the movement in some detail in Keyes (1993 and 1999). Also see Swearer (1991).

confirmed the opposite, namely that there was more than one Buddhism in Thailand, a position that the Thai state since early in the twentieth century had sought to prevent.

The new Buddhist sect, Santi Asoke [*santi asok*], whose name means ‘peace without sorrow,’ was founded by Phothirak in 1975. From the very beginning it was clear that the movement would foster practices that were not in accord with those of establishment Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> Santi Asoke was, like Cittabhawan College and Wat Dhammakaya, located in a center separate from any established wat. Those who become followers of the sect, whether layperson or ordained monk or novice, are expected to follow a strict regimen based in part on the precepts followed by novices and by lay disciples on Buddhist holy days, but with some innovations that has made the sect controversial. All followers, and not just those who are ordained, are expected to give up adornments, wear only simple clothing and live in simple surroundings. Lay people are expected to give up sexual relations after having produced a family. All followers are enjoined not only to eat only two meals a day, but also to become vegetarians. Santi Asoke’s vegetarianism became the subject of a heated debate in the 1980s with the very well respected Buddhadasa *Bhikkhu* and *Phra* Prayudh Payutto both defending nonvegetarianism as orthodox Theravada practice.<sup>21</sup>

Most threatening to the sangha hierarchy was Phothirak’s assumption of the authority to ordain monks and novices even though he had not been officially designated as having this right. This action, together what were taken as his purported claims to be a Buddhist saint were deemed to lead to a schism in the sangha which is one of the offenses for which a monk can be expelled from the order.

It took, however, a long time before any action was taken against Phothirak after charges were brought against him in 1981. The delay was connected to the fact that General Chamlong Srimuang, a former Young Turk in the military subsequently turned politician and for a period a very popular mayor of Bangkok, was a very prominent follower of Santi Asoke. During the 1980s Chamlong and Phothirak could be said to have enhanced the charisma of each other as both promoted agendas – the former political, the latter religious – that appeared based on an older premise that power should be held directly by those having merit and virtue. The appeal of Chamlong’s and Phothirak’s charisma proved, however, to have limited appeal.

During the late 1980s a situation was created in which it became possible for the sangha hierarchy to reach a decision to have Phothirak defrocked and to have authorities of the state enforce their order. Not only was he subjected to criticisms by establishment monks, but even more importantly by Buddhadasa and Prayudh. Chamlong became less able to provide support for Phothirak as he was faced with mounting opposition from politicians aligned with capitalistic interests as well as by military officers. In these circumstances, secular legal proceedings were begun against Phothirak.

On February 23, 1991 a military junta calling itself the National Peacekeeping Council (NPKC; in Thai *Khana raksa khwamsangopriaproi haeng chat*) seized power in Thailand from a

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<sup>20</sup>Phothirak’s basic ideas can be found in his *Ciiwit ni ii panha* (This Life Has Problems) (*Phra* Phothirak 1987 [1968]). Also see his *Satsana khü arai?* (What Is Religion) (*Phra* Phothirak 1991).

<sup>21</sup>Unlike many Mahayanists, very few Theravadin Buddhists have ever practiced vegetarianism. Theravadin theologians point to scriptural sources that the Buddha himself ate meat that was offered to him. Theravada Buddhism does prohibit monks from making a request that would lead to a layperson’s taking the life of an animal to prepare a meal for a monk. A few monks have also taken up vegetarianism as a personal (and optional) practice.

parliamentary government headed by General Chatichai Choonhuwan. The name indicated that the coup leaders were seeking to protect an order, implied in the term *riaproi*, which was appropriate to the Thai nation (*chat*). The coup leaders assumed they could draw on the moral authority of establishment Buddhism and the monarchy in instituting a new order, one that would have echoed that instituted by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in 1957.

The new military-backed government would, it appears, liked to have suppressed the Santi Asoke sect in the same way that Samnak Phu Sawan had been suppressed a decade earlier. Despite the fact that Photirak had been compelled to defrock, was subjected to many legal actions, and even was incarcerated for a period Santi Asoke survived and Photirak continues to be recognized by his followers as a person of exceptional *bun barami*. The survival of the sect was probably facilitated by being delinked from the political goals of Chamlong.

Chamlong's effort to create a politics of morality reached a climax in 1992 when he became the de facto leader of the movement that emerged to challenge the continued domination of Thai politics by the group in the military that had staged the 1991 coup. While this movement succeeded in its goal, Chamlong's own role proved to be ambiguous.

The effective leader of the 1991 coup, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, had managed the political process during the following year in order to have a constitution promulgated that ensured the continued dominance of the military. Following elections, held under the restricted constitution, Suchinda made a mockery of democratic processes by persuading a coalition of parties, led by one with military backing, to make him prime minister even though he had not himself stood for parliament and had previously announced that he would not become the prime minister. His assumption of the premiership was protested by tens of thousands of people, mainly from the middle class, who demonstrated on the streets in April and early May 1992.

Chamlong became the visible leader of the protests, first by staging a hunger strike and then by rallying people to turn out in large numbers to keep up the pressures. Chamlong was arrested, but his absence served only to intensify the protests. The military were then ordered to quell the protest by using force. Between May 17<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, dates remembered a 'Bloody May,' at least one hundred people were killed or disappeared and hundreds more were injured. The violence once again was shocked many, including, it appears, the king. On the advice of now senior statesman Prem Tinsulanond, the king summoned Suchinda and Chamlong appear before him. The two men were televised in a scene shown throughout the world crouched reverently before the king. Following this, Suchinda resigned and a caretaker government was installed that served until new elections, ones that were not controlled by the military, could be held.

While Suchinda's resignation seemed to mark a victory for Chamlong, the scene of him side by side with Suchinda kneeling before the king served to make him symbolically on a par with Suchinda. After Suchinda's resignation, Chamlong also came under wide criticism for contributing to the violence through the uncompromising role he played in the protests. His charisma had, for many, been irreparably damaged by Bloody May.

While Chamlong has continued to be a visible supporter of Santi Asoke, he has retreated from active politics. This has come about primarily because his own popularity and that of his political party, Phalang Tham (literally, 'Dhammic Power') declined markedly in the mid-1990s.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>In June 1996 Chamlong himself lost in a landslide in a new effort to return as governor of Bangkok. This defeat

Santi Asoke has not proven to be the alternative to the established sangha that perhaps Chamlong and Phothirak might have envisioned it becoming. It has also attracted only a relatively small following, almost all the members of which come from urban middle class backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> There is also some question about whether it can survive the death of its charismatic leader. The failure of political and legal efforts to destroy it demonstrates, nonetheless, that it is possible for a movement to achieve independence of the established sangha and still remain Buddhist. For at least the indefinite future, Santi Asoke is one of a number of contending sources of *bun barami* to which contemporary Thai can turn.

#### *From Forest Monasticism to Buddhist Ecology*

The question of control of the forest (*pa*) has generated since the late 1960s some of the most contentious political debates in Thailand. Moreover, while political violence has significantly subsided in urban Thailand since the May 1992 events, struggles over the small remaining forest lands in the country continue often to end with agencies of the state, sometimes in association with locally mobilized groups, imposing by force government dictates about forest land use.

In the premodern world of Siam *pa* was considered to be the ‘wild’ that lay outside the control of the polity, the *müiang* (Stott 1991). Even when the modernizing state from the late nineteenth century asserted its ultimate right over all the land within its territory, the fact that the *pa* was so large – accounting for nearly three quarters of the land area – ensured that little effort was made to actually impose controls over the forest.<sup>24</sup>

It was in the period between the beginnings of modernization and the economic boom that began after World War II that a modern forest monastic tradition began to emerge in Thailand. I recognize, with others, that the monk who withdraws to the wilderness where he follows an ascetic (*thudong* in Thai, *thudanga* in Pali) regimen and devotes himself to meditation has premodern antecedents. At the same time, it is unquestionably the case that forest monasticism as it is known in Thailand today has a genealogy that begins in the modernizing period of the reign of King Chulalongkorn and began to become significant only in the 1930s.<sup>25</sup> Most forest monks in Thailand today trace their lineage to the exemplary practice of *Acan Man* (Bhuridatto Thera), born in a northeastern Thai village in 1870 and, at the time of his death in 1949, acclaimed by his followers as a ‘saint’ who had entered into the ‘stream’ leading to Nibbana. His exceptional *bun barami* was believed to have been acquired while he lived in isolation deep in the forest where the threats of wild animals and forest-bred disease were extremely great (see Bua Yannasampanno 1971, 1976). The forest must needs be ‘wild’, that is, outside of the world ordered by humans, for monks following the tradition of Ajarn Man to gain the detachment that they seek. Much of Thailand’s forests actually remained ‘wild’ until after

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marked the end, for the time being at least, of a politics overtly linked to Buddhist ethical principles. See McCargo (1997, chapter 5) for a detailed analysis of the tensions that emerged when Chamlong agreed to broaden the Phalang Tham party to include many who did not share the Santi Asoke view of “virtuous politics.”

<sup>23</sup>Heikkilä-Horn (1996:55) estimated that in 1995 that “the Asoke sect has over 700 core members, 8000 active members, and some tens of thousands of sympathizers among the members of the Vegetarian Society of Thailand.”

<sup>24</sup>According to England (1996:60), as late as 1938 72% of the Thailand’s land area was in forests.

<sup>25</sup>On the forest monastic tradition, see Kornfield (1977), Keyes (1981b), Tambiah (1984), Taylor (1988, 1993a), and Kamala Tiyanich (1997).

Ajarn Man's death in 1949.

Beginning in the 1950s, Thailand's forests began rapidly to decline in size; between 1961 and 1985, lands formally classified as 'forest' decreased from 53% to 29% (England 1996:60, drawing on Hurst 1990:46) and the decline has continued until today less than 20% of the land is still forested. While this decline initially occurred because of rapid population expansion and a concomitant conversion of forests into fields for cultivation of rice and other crops, it was markedly intensified as commercial interests were given free rein by successive governments to cut teak and other tropical hardwoods for export and to create plantations of commercial trees (rubber, fruit, and, most recently, eucalyptus) and as large and medium dams were built to generate hydroelectric power for the expanding cities with their new industries.

As forests declined, governments in Thailand increased the authority of the state over remaining forest lands. From the late 1960s on this authority began to be challenged by growing numbers of peoples who faced marked difficulties in pursuing livelihoods if they were denied access to lands, now officially recognized under state control, even if they had long lived on these lands. State authority in the 1970s began to be further challenged by urban peoples who became concerned about environmental degradation. In the 1960s and 1970s members of a communist-led insurrection also mounted a challenge to the state's authority over forests by establishing bases within some forests from where attacks on forces of the state were launched. They were referred to as the 'forest army' (*thahan pa*).

In a context in which *pa* has been radically redefined from being wild and outside the authority of the state to being property which the state has the ultimate and absolute right to control, forest monasticism has taken on quite new meaning. Even the most world-rejecting of forest monks engage in political acts when they set up residence within a forested area, for implicitly they are claiming such an area as a domain belonging to the Buddha not the state.

Because the well-known disciples of Ajarn Man are recognized even by the established sangha as possessing exceptional charisma and because the forest lands where they have long established residences are relatively small, governments have rarely sought to assert eminent domain over the forest lands where their retreats are located. Further some forest-dwelling monks have relatively recently established retreats in other small forests in northeastern Thailand over which the state has not yet attempted to assert control. These forests are ones that in Thai-Lao culture are considered to be the domains of village ancestral spirits (*phi puta*).

In Ban Nong Tün, Masarakham province, central northeastern Thailand where I first carried out field work in 1962-64 and have returned often, I found that forest monks began to set up retreats in the forest belonging to the village spirit in the late 1980s (Keyes 1997a). Villagers accepted such monks in this forest because Buddhism has always been seen as superior to spirit-worship. Several monks have now used the Ban Nong Tün village spirit domain as a place for quiet meditation and more recently, as I discovered in a visit in June 1998, another monk has recently made the forest remaining around an old cremation ground (*pacha*) a place for his retreat.

Villagers who support forest monks -- and most support for such monks comes from villagers -- are well aware of their disadvantaged position relative to those who have acquired both wealth and power, especially in the recent boom decades. Allowing a forest monk to set up a residence in a domain of a village spirit can be said to be an implicit act of resistance to the

state's assertion of control over all forests.<sup>26</sup> For many villagers, however, resistance is not passive as they have rallied behind monks in directly challenging the authority of the state over forests.

In the mid-1980s a Buddhist ecology movement, involving a number of monks, emerged which has sought to promote a relationship to forests based on the premise that forests are a resource for communities that live among them rather than domains to be allocated for exploitation by commercial interests (see Chatsumarn Kabilsingh 1990; Sulak Sivaraksa 1990; Stott 1991; Taylor 1991 and 1996; Sponsel and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel 1995; and Darlington, n.d.). This movement has been most visibly identified by the practice of 'ordaining' trees – that is, placing of a monk's yellow robes around trees in order to mark them as belonging to a sacred realm that should be beyond human-made policies and laws.

Despite the fact that such highly symbolic actions have, through the media attention they have received, served to promote the idea that the use of forests is a moral concern, Thai governments have continued to assert the state's superior rights over all forests. In 1991 when a military-backed government was in power, force was used to suppress the efforts of a well respected forest monk, *Phra Prachak Kuttajitto*, who had founded a forest monastery in the Dong Yai forest located in southern Nakhon Rajasima (Khorat) and Buriram provinces in northeastern Thailand in support of long-standing claims by local villagers for the right to use lands in this recently designated forest reserve.<sup>27</sup> These villagers, backed by *Phra Prachak*, maintained that they were the true conservationists, seeking to preserve the forest against the rapaciousness of timber companies and other interests seeking to 'develop' forest reserves for commercial purposes. From the government point of view, however, both villagers and *Phra Prachak* and his clerical associates were deemed to have broken the law by encroaching on forest reserves.

The government overtly manipulated local sangha authorities to get them to back their insistence that *Phra Prachak* move his retreat. When he refused to comply, the state dropped all pretense that the issue could be construed in religious terms. Instead, armed police were sent in to destroy the retreat and to evict *Phra Prachak* and his followers by from the forest. *Phra Prachak*, deeply depressed by the situation, including the lack of support from the sangha, decided to leave the monkhood. As a layman, he found himself even more vulnerable to an arbitrary use of state authority when he was charged with gambling and became the object of a nation-wide manhunt. Clearly, some elements representing the state sought to make an example of *Prachak* to demonstrate that he lacked any moral authority to challenge the state's control of the forest.

The forest ecology movement has, on occasion, even been coopted by the state for its own purposes. In northern Thailand a forest ecology movement headed by *Phra Pongsak Techadhammo* also had a number of confrontations with state agencies. After *Phra Pongsak* "was forced to leave the monkhood after a scandal involving his relationship with a Buddhist nun" ("A Conspiracy of Hope" 1995:32),<sup>28</sup> the Thammanart Foundation he had founded came to

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<sup>26</sup>Such forest monasticism can have other political implications as well. The most recent monk to come to the forest of Ban Nong Tün was a former soldier who had supported the aborted Young Turk rebellion in 1981.

<sup>27</sup>The conflict in which *Phra Prachak* became embroiled involved villagers mainly in Pakham district, Buriram, and Soeng Sang district, Khorat. For other analyses of the case of *Phra Prachak*, see Taylor (1993b) and Jackson (1997:91-93) and Keyes (1999).

<sup>28</sup>On the role played by *Phra Pongsak*, see Suchira Payulpitack (1992).

be seen as a useful ally of the state in challenging the rights of minority upland peoples to live in forest reserves. In the 1980s the foundation was given the right to fence off a very large area on Doi Inthanon, Thailand's highest mountain and site of a national park, that had previously been used for swidden cultivation by Hmong tribal people and in 1998 the foundation supported efforts by state agencies to force these Hmong to move from villages that they had occupied for generations.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the efforts of the state to suppress or coopt the Buddhist ecology movement, the movement has succeeded, nonetheless, in generating a significant, and for many, compelling, moral discourse about conservation of the forests. Because this discourse is rooted in forest monasticism and because forest monks continue to be widely recognized – particularly by villagers – as possessing very high *bun barami*, it is a discourse that cannot be permanently subjected to the discipline of the state or the established sangha.<sup>30</sup>

### *Dhammakaya, Evangelical Buddhism*

The now highly controversial Buddhist movement, *Dhammakaya* (Thai, Thammakai), began to become visible in the 1980s.<sup>31</sup> The name of the movement, and the wat which serves as its headquarters, points to the central tenet of the movement, namely, that the dhammic “body” (*kaya*) of the Buddha can be found within the body of every person through meditation. By meditating on the seat of consciousness, located “two finger-breadths above the navel,”<sup>32</sup> an effort that is assisted by visualizing this place as a crystal sphere, one is supposed to discover the Buddha in oneself. Such meditation was not meant, as with forest monks, to be practiced in isolation from the world, but is supposed to make it possible, as in the teachings of other modernist monks such as Buddhadasa, to enable one to be in the world but not of the world. Having transformed oneself spiritually through practice of the *Dhammakaya* method, one is prepared to return to the world and act without the desires that lead to suffering.

The creation of this method now popularized by *Dhammakaya* is credited to Luang Pho (‘revered father’) Sot Chantasaro (*Phra* Mongkon Thepmuni), a monk better known as Luang Pho Wat Paknam Phasi Caroen after the monastery where he resided. After Luang Pho Wat Paknam died in 1959, his method was perpetuated by some of his followers, of whom a nun, *Ubasika* Chan Khonnokyoong (Chan Khonnokyoong), was key.

Chan, born in 1909 to a farmer's family in Nakhon Pathom's Nakhon Chaisi district, was illiterate but demonstrated a strong passion and a monumental ability to study and recite Buddhist teachings. Attracted by the tales of religious miracles and the blissful experience of *Dhammakaya* meditation, which allegedly allows the meditator a glimpse of what enlightenment is like, Chan left her home in 1937 to devote herself as a nun and disciple of Luang Phor Wat Paknam ... With her dedication to meditation and a unique gift to explain the intricacies of Buddhist

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<sup>29</sup>I learned about this conflict from colleagues who had been involved and from a visit to Doi Inthanon in December 1998.

<sup>30</sup>On this discourse, see Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (1990) and *Phra* Phaisan Visalo (1990).

<sup>31</sup>This expands much on what I previously wrote about the movement in Keyes (1992 and 1993).

<sup>32</sup>Rawi Bhawilai, “Buddhism in Thailand: Description and Analysis,” Paper presented to the International Conference on Thai Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, July, 1987, p. 4; quoted in Jackson (1990:201).

doctrines, Chan became a leading disciple of Luang Phor Wat Paknam and helped to further propagate his meditation method after the monk died in 1959. (*The Nation*, December 1, 1998)

One of those who came to study meditation with *Ubasika* Chan was Chaiyaboon Suthiphol, a student from Kasetsart University. In 1969 at the age of 25, Chaiyaboon was ordained and took the clerical name of Dhammajayo (Thammachayo) (*The Nation*, December 1, 1998). He would subsequently found and become the leader of Dhammakaya. *Phra* Dhammajayo is today often seen by the followers of Dhammakaya as a person with exceptional *bun barami*, perhaps even a Buddhist saint. The well-known social commentator, Sanitsuda Ekachai, drawing on a study, “Religious Propensity of Urban Communities: A Case Study of Phra Dhammakaya Temple,” by Dr. Apinya Feungfusakul of Chiang Mai University, has written:

The biography of Phra Dhammachayo uses the traditional writing style of ancient seers to paint the picture of a sanctified leader. During her pregnancy, his mother is said to have had a dream that she was given a Buddha image which, after being rubbed, shone so brightly it lit up the town. It speaks of Phra Dhammachayo’s heroic childhood and his displays of supernatural powers to win non-believers. One story tells of his duel of supernatural powers with Padet Pongsawat, an older Kasetsart University student. After losing, Mr Padet turned into Phra Dhammachayo’s foremost supporter, and is now Phra Thattacheewo, deputy abbot of Phra Dhammakaya Temple. ... In addition to the biography, there are many tales portraying Phra Dhammachayo as a holy crusader and believers talk of light radiating from his body, his mind-reading powers and his visionary dreams. (Sanitsuda Ekachai 1998)

While *Phra* Dhammajayo has been the charismatic leader, *Phra* Dhattajivo (Thattachiwo) has been the organizational head. Together these two monks founded Wat Thammakai, located in Prathum Thani province, in 1975.

In the 1980s, Dhammakaya began to attract significant followings among the urban middle classes, and especially among the “conservative Thai equivalent of Western ‘yuppies’” (Jackson (1990:203). These ‘yuppies’ were both a product of the rapid growth in the Thai economy in the 1980s and reaction to the political activism that gave rise to the violence of the 1970s. Again to quote Sanitsuda Ekachai, drawing on Dr. Apinya Feungfusakul’s study:

[T]he Dhammakaya movement -- by integrating capitalism into its structure -- has become popular with contemporary urban Thais who equate efficiency, orderliness, cleanliness, elegance, grandeur, spectacle, competition, and material success with goodness. Dhammakaya, then, could be viewed as a capitalist version of Buddhism aimed at urban Thais who are used to comfort, convenience, and the instant gratification found in consumer society. (Sanitsuda Ekachai 1998)

The typical Dhammakaya follower is a lay person who combines spiritual retreat on the weekends with work or study in the everyday world during the rest of the week. For these people, Dhammakaya offers religious legitimation for inequalities in wealth since success in the world is held to be a reward for spiritual attainment. After practicing the meditation method taught by the monks who lead the movement, it is believed that “students will study better and people will be more successful in their businesses” (Nithinan Yorsaengrat as quoted in Jackson

1990:213).

The Dhammakaya movement adopted an aggressive evangelical program to extend its form of Buddhism, especially among middle class Thai. Its missionizing program is carried out by a cadre of monks and lay followers. Particular attention has been given to recruitment on the campuses of universities and colleges and by the late 1980s Dhammakaya followers had achieved dominance in the Buddhist clubs of almost all institutions of higher education.

Each hot season when universities are closed, Wat Dhammakaya sponsors for students the Thammathayot, heirs of the *dhamma*, program which entails both physical and spiritual exercises. Male participants in the program are ordained into the monkhood while female participants assume the roles of lay ascetics. The numbers involved increased rapidly in the 1980s, with sixty male students being ordained in 1979, the first year of the program, and over a 1,000 being ordained in 1986 (Jackson 1990:210). More recent mass ordinations have reached 100,000 (Sanitsuda Ekachai 1998). Like those ordained at Kittiwuttho's Cittaphawan College, men and women who have gone through the Thammathayot program at Dhammakaya have become a cadre of religious activists in the world. In the case of Dhammakaya, this cadre is restricted almost completely to university students. A very interesting comparison could be drawn between Dhammakaya students and Malay students who have become affiliated with *dakwah* (Islamic missionary) movements in Malaysia. Just as *dakwah* followers have gained control of student associations in Malaysia, so Dhammakaya followers now dominate most of the Buddhist associations on university campuses in Thailand. Here they advocate a more exclusivist Buddhism than do the nonstudent leaders of Dhammakaya (Jackson 1990:209-214).

For its evangelical activities – including distribution of glossy publications (see, for example, Wat Thammakai 1984), holding international conferences, and supporting monks traveling both within and outside the country, and for the maintenance of its architecturally striking and elaborate facilities, Dhammakaya depends on sizable donations from its followers. In the late 1980s the temple-monastery itself was estimated to have assets of about \$32 million (Suwanna Satha-Anand 1990). Particularly controversial has been the acquisition of lands for use by the movement. In the late 1980s some villagers, upset about the loss of their lands to both the main temple complex and a branch in northern Thailand, damaged a Buddha image belonging to the movement, threatened to set fire to the temple, and attacked Dhammakaya monks (Jackson 1990:215).

In the late 1980s some influential voices began to raise questions about whether Dhammakaya was offering a real religious message. The late Kukrit Pramoj, former prime minister and an influential commentator on the relationship between religion, politics and economics, questioned whether Dhammakaya was offering spirituality or “religious pleasure” comparable to that of recreation clubs and fishing parks.<sup>33</sup> The movement was also criticized for its dogmatic insistence on the superiority of its meditation system, for the intolerance shown by student followers of other perspectives on Buddhism, and for its apparent political aspirations (Jackson 1990:215).

Despite such criticisms, the movement prospered. To ensure that it could pursue its aggressive evangelism, members of the royal family were invited to preside over mass ordinations and support was also elicited from some high ranking monks on the Maha Thera

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<sup>33</sup>*Bangkok Post*, 20 July 1988; quoted in Suwanna Satha-Anand (1990:402).

Samakhom, the highest ecclesiastical body of the established sangha, and through “building connections with powerful figures in business and political circles.” *Phra Dhattajivo*, the second in command of Dhammakaya, is reported to have said that “We must build up our [barami] to create public acceptance. Then the politicians or anyone in power will automatically listen to us” (Sanitsuda Ekachai 1998).

By the late 1990s, however, this effort had proved inadequate and the *barami* of Dhammakaya, and especially of *Phra Dhammachayo*, was being questioned by the same powerful religious and political authorities the movement had sought to cultivate. One line of questioning has turned on whether Dhammakaya is heterodox. This questioning has been most compellingly advanced by Prayudh Payutto *Bhikkhu* (*Phra Dhammapitaka*), a theologian highly respected both within the sangha establishment and by the followers of Buddhadasa.

In the late 1980s *Than* Prayudh observed that orthodox Theravada Buddhism (by which is meant the authoritative exegesis of the scriptures by the fourth-century monk Buddhaghosa) sees the type of meditation practiced by Dhammakaya as inadequate for attainment of spiritual liberation because it can become an end in itself, producing a spiritual ‘high’ rather than true understanding of self and the world.<sup>34</sup> In 1999, *Than* Prayudh resumed his attack on the heterodoxy of Dhammakaya in his *Korani Thammakai*, ‘The Case of Dhammakaya’.<sup>35</sup> *Than* Prayudh demonstrates that the Dhammakaya claim that Nirvana is a permanent heaven is contrary to the understanding of Theravada Buddhism, although the idea is found in some Mahayanist sects. In Theravadin thought, Nirvana is not a place but is “a state free of defilement, and being non-self” (Sanitsuda Ekachai 1999). He also shows that the idea of the ‘body of the dhamma’ alluded to in the name Dhammakaya is also understood in a Mahayanist rather than a Theravadin way. For these, and other reasons, he argued that Dhammakaya should not be recognized as being within the Theravadin tradition.

*Than* Prayudh’s criticism carried considerable weight with high ranking monks in the sangha hierarchy. In March 1999 “the Sangha Supreme Council, at a meeting lasting more than three hours, ... endorsed a four-point instruction by a senior monk calling for the controversial Dhammakaya Temple to strictly follow the Buddha’s teachings” (*The Nation*, March 23, 1999). The Sangha authorities backed away, however, from imposing more than an admonition that Dhammakaya must adhere to the correct teachings. The Council has also declined to determine whether *Phra Dhammachayo* has made a false claim of being a Buddhist saint in asserting that he is a reincarnation of the “Original Dhammakaya” (Sanitsuda Ekachai 1998) or for being able to enter Nibbana.

Rather, a more mundane matter has proved to be the focus of efforts to curb the influence and claims of Dhammakaya. It concerns the accumulation of personal wealth by *Phra Dhammachayo* through the donations that many followers have given. The abbot has, in particular, acquired title to a large amount of land, totaling in 1999 1749 rai. An investigation into these land holdings was begun in late 1998. It is charged that he has illegally acquired some of these lands, in particular falsifying documents to indicate that the holdings had been donations when they had actually been purchased with monies appropriated from trust funds.

Dhammakaya followers rallied behind *Dhammachayo* and the movement once again

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<sup>34</sup>*Phra* Prayudh’s critique is discussed in Jackson (1990:202-204).

<sup>35</sup>I here draw on an English summary of *Than Prayudh*’s pamphlet by Sanitsuda Ekachai (1999).

sought to insulate itself from criticism by linking itself with the monarchy. In January 1999 Wat Dhammakaya sponsored a mass ordination of novices and announced that this was done to honor the king in the year of his 6<sup>th</sup> cycle, that is, his 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday. Live television coverage of the event generated considerable controversy because of the on-going investigation of the movement. Crown Prince HRH Vajiralongkorn took the highly unusual step of informing Deputy Education Minister Arkom Engchuan, who has spearheaded an investigation of Dhammakaya, through his secretaries that he had “‘no connection with the temple whatsoever’, and wanted the deputy minister to continue to steadfastly investigate so as to establish the truth surrounding the temple’s activities and to compile a report for him” (Sirikul Bunnag. 1999).

In late April 1999 the Sangharaja, the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai Buddhist Sangha, publically stated that *Phra* Dhammachayo had violated the disciplinary code to which all monks must subject themselves by accumulating personal wealth in the form of land which had been donated to him. The Religious Affairs Department of the Ministry of Education has also raised questions about whether some of this land was illegally acquired through false offers of spiritual benefits. *Phra* Dhammachayo, faced with both ecclesiastical and legal investigations has steadfastly resisted giving up title to the land, although he has sometimes indicated he might do so. As of mid June 1999, the situation was still unresolved.

The conflict has clearly led to an increasing separation of Dhammakaya from the established sangha. Given that thousands of peoples still find Dhammakaya’s message very appealing and *Phra* Dhammachayo the embodiment of exceptional *bun barami*, it is likely that whatever the outcome of the conflict Dhammakaya will continue to remain one of the more significant non-establishment forms of Buddhism in Thailand today.

### *Civil Religion in Contemporary Thailand*

The proliferation of religious movements that have successfully challenged on the basis of competing charismatic authority the hegemonic domination of a state-controlled established religion does not indicate, I argue, that there is no longer a consensus in Thai society about the religious basis of authority. When Thai today point to *satsana* as a pillar of the Thai nation, they often use this term in much the same way *God* is evoked in the United States.

In the United States it has been possible since at least the post-World War I period for a Protestant minister, or a Catholic priest, or a Jewish rabbi to offer prayers at the beginning or end of a political event – for example, the opening of a session of Congress or a state legislature, the convening of a convention of a political party, the funeral of a former president or other ranking official – in which the ‘God’ whose blessing is sought is not the God of a particular religion. No Christian or Jewish God was decreed by any government to be the American God. Rather, as American society became more pluralistic following the immigration of large numbers of people from eastern and southern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, the God referred to in the charters of the American political order – the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights – came to be understood in practice as a deity that subsumed the God of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish faiths. This understanding did not emerge without contestation, even conflict, and even today there continues to be a significant sector of the population who wish to see America declared a ‘Christian’ nation. Nonetheless, an American civil religion evolved and one can anticipate that it could eventually come to include those who are Muslim or

Buddhist or Hindu who have come to constitute significant percentages of American society.<sup>36</sup>

Thailand is, and will remain for the foreseeable future, a Buddhist society. But Thai society is no longer one in which what Buddhism means can be determined by the state. The events of the 1970s and the memory of these events, even in silence, fundamentally undermined the dominance of an establishment Buddhism which had been shaped by a series of crises involving religion and power since the end of the nineteenth century when the country was first launched on the process of the creation of a modern nation-state. Those who took power in 1976 could have chosen to follow the lead of Kittivuddho, a monk of regarded by some as having exceptional *bun barami*, and instituted a highly politicized form of militant Buddhism. If they had chosen to do so, they would have launched Thailand on a path of conflict comparable to what took place in Sri Lanka where the elite embraced a militant Buddhism. Instead, the military group that reasserted their control over power in 1977 turned away from seeking legitimation in a politicized religion and instituted policies that have, although perhaps not intentionally, allowed diverse and competing religious and societal elements to emerge in Thailand.

While this pluralization has led to the fragmentation of Buddhism by permitting diverse, sometimes contending, movements to exist alongside establishment Buddhism, most Thai still hold, probably unconsciously, to the assumption that moral authority is manifested in those having 'merit and virtue'. What the fragmentation of Buddhism has brought about in the last two decades is an irrevocable rupture with the premise that had held until the 1970s that *bun barami* of monkhood was exclusively associated with the established sangha. In the new economy of charisma – the market analogy is purposefully chosen – people in Thailand can and do look to many different sources for moral authority. What is particularly noteworthy about the emergence of the non-establishment movements of socially engaged Buddhism, Santi Asoke, Buddhist ecology, and Dhammakaya is that these movements can and do co-exist with a now much diminished establishment Buddhism within an overarching understanding that *satsana*, religion, is still a pillar of Thai society. *Satsana* has increasingly become, however, like God in American civil religion – a referent, albeit differently understood, to an ultimate reality on which the moral order of society depends. This Thai civil Buddhism, as perhaps it might be termed, contributes to and is reflective of the growing civil character of Thai society.

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<sup>36</sup>Discussion of civil religion in America has been strongly shaped by a thirty-year old essay by Robert Bellah (1967), "Civil Religion in America". Also see Richey and Jones (1974) and, for recent view, Bryant (1995).

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