

This article is available on the Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia's website in five languages (English, Thai, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Bahasa).

A Christmas Mourning: Catholicism in Post-Bhumibol Thailand

Giuseppe Bolotta

At the Holy Mercy parish in Bangkok downtown, last Christmas was unlike any other Thai Catholics had celebrated.¹ Instead of the plethora of Christmas decorations that used to pop up everywhere, the church was covered with sober, black-and-white mourning bunting. The Christmas tree normally exposed at the front entrance of the church as a sparkling symbol of joy was moved into a hidden corner within the courtyard, not yet visible from outside. On Christmas Eve, people dressed in black arrived silently at the traditional midnight mass, strangely careful to balance expressions of happiness and sorrow. It was a Christmas in mourning.

The death of Thailand's beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), on 13 October 2016, plunged the Church's faithful – mostly royalist, Sino-Thai members of the urban middle-class – into a state of shock, sadness and bewilderment, so much so that many have raised serious doubts as to whether the celebration of Christ's birth held religious priority over the collective grieving of the nation for the divinized king's death. For Father Paul, the American missionary at the head of the parish, this was an extraordinarily sensitive question.

According to the priest, King Bhumibol was a benevolent patron of all religions, and 'only' a constitutional monarch. His name is included in Thai Catholic liturgy as a 'secular' element of the local culture (*watthanatham Thai*), just as heads of state are mentioned in prayers during Catholic masses in other countries. However, for the Holy Mercy's faithful, the King is far from simply being an illustrious representative of Thailand. Like most Thais, even Bangkok Catholics revered Rama IX with near religious devotion. His Majesty has long been discursively and visually represented as the nation's father (*pho*), supreme embodiment of the Dharma (either as *chakrawartin*, *dhammaraja*, or *bodhistawa*), incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu (*devaraja*), and – to retrace the contemporary importance of pre-modern conceptions of Indo-Buddhist kingship in Southeast Asia (Tambiah, 1976) – as a Buddhist king who cosmologically connects heavens and hearth, and righteously guides his realm from the vertex of a hierarchically organized socio-moral universe (see e.g. Jackson, 2010). For Thai Catholics at Holy Mercy's, King Bhumibol was indeed a much more respected spiritual guide than even Pope Francis, here the almost unknown Bishop of Rome.

Some of the Catholics I came to know in Bangkok created household altars at home, where they worshipped icons of Jesus and the Saints alongside the other numerous entities that inhabit the Indo-Buddhist pantheon in Thai popular religion (see e.g. Pattana, 2005): Chinese and Indian deities, Buddhist monks, and Thai kings, especially Bhumibol (Rama IX) and Chulalongkorn (Rama V). Away from the church, it was common for many to trade crucifixes, holy pictures and statues as magic charms analogous to Buddhist amulets – a practice

showing that even Catholic items and symbols have been absorbed into an amalgam of hybrid, decentralized supernatural beliefs, economies, and expressions resembling what some scholars have referred to as “marketized religiosity” or “commercialized religion” (Jackson, 1999; Suwanna, 1994; Pattana, 2005). More importantly, I often heard Thai Catholics presenting Jesus Christ and Rama IX as equal symbols of divine morality (*khunatham*), sacrifice (*siasala*), and charismatic power (*bun-barami*).

Father Paul, like most Western missionaries in Thailand, was aware that the Buddhist King held a sacred place in his parishioners' hearts, but he tended to turn a blind eye to beliefs and practices that the Catholic orthodoxy may interpret as idolatry, in order to avoid promoting 'cosmological competition' between the Christian God and the Thai monarchy. He perceived such undesired competition as an uphill struggle that might cause the Thai Church to lose its already exceedingly small number of followers,² and lead less mindful priests to walk the tightrope of Thailand's *lèse majesté* laws, without the care they required as among the strictest in the world.

Prior to the King's passing, it was beyond church walls – and away from the 'light' scrutiny of the American priest – where Thai Catholics sacralised the monarchy and practiced heterodox, 'indigenized' Catholicism. With the collective emotional response triggered by Rama IX's death, however, the religious (rather than cultural) centrality of the monarch became explicit in the devotional experience of Thai Catholics. Father Paul was therefore forced to confront the theological and political ambiguity of Thai Catholicism, and this too on Christmas, one of the most important days of the

Catholic liturgical calendar.

The King's portrait and the Church tabernacle

After Rama IX died, the military government declared a one-year period of official mourning during which citizens were expected to wear black, and entertainment venues to close or at least tone down – turning off the lights and music, shutting the doors, etc. Everyone should feel respectful and sad, the declaration mandated, and grieve for the passing of the King. A few already scheduled festivals were cancelled. It was unclear whether Christmas would be celebrated, until an official statement issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand (CBFC) finally invited Catholics to celebrate Christmas with caution and moderation in order to respect the sensitivities of Thai people at this time. The declaration also instructed priests on how to include prayers of mourning into traditional Christmas liturgy – a politically-correct note essentially echoing the military junta's indications: 'Yes, but not too much!'. Joy, in other words, had to be set in the midst of grief.

At the Holy Mercy church, the month preceding Christmas was characterized by a cosmological, liturgical, and political negotiation to create a coherent synthesis between the birth of Jesus and the death of King Bhumibol. Father Paul convened a pastoral council to seek advice from his Thai parishioners regarding how best to organize Christmas celebrations. Over the course of animated debates, the American missionary had to deal, not without embarrassment, with his parishioners' urgent demands to devote the appropriate ritual space within Christmas liturgy to the deceased

King. The priest agreed to have a giant monochromatic picture of the King displayed on the outward walls of the church, to remove the most colorful Christmas decorations from view, and to remember the King in his homily. However, he nervously disagreed to place a portrait of a young Rama IX, mysteriously illuminated by golden light, on the church altar before the tabernacle. The holiest ritual space for Catholics, the tabernacle is a fixed, locked cabinet in which the Eucharist is stored, believed to be the locus of Christ's and God's presence.

As anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa has observed, "altars in their symbolic and physical sense bring together deities from diverse backgrounds and origins; the altar is the sacred site where the religious hybridization of popular beliefs actually takes its concrete, collective form" (Pattana, 2005:484). The altar reflects precise cosmological configurations of the physical and spiritual universes. It marks sacred boundaries and requires specific patterns of ritualized conduct. Religious icons, statues of deities and other worship objects are hierarchically arranged on the altars of urban spirit shrines as well as in some Buddhist temple halls. The Buddha, followed closely by the King as *dhammaraja*, normally occupies the highest position in such hierarchies, and these two figures are regarded as supreme deities within Thai cosmology because both Buddhism and the monarchy are essential dimensions of modern Thai ethno-nationalism. The position of worship elements on the altar, therefore, reflects both cosmological and political dimensions.

In Christian canonical cosmology, God was responsible for the creation of the cosmos, which the arrival of his son Jesus changed

forever. Within Catholic mass liturgy the encounter with the son of God is represented by the Eucharistic elements of Christ's blood and body, which are stored in the tabernacle in the form of bread and wine (blessed sacraments). The altar and the tabernacle thus comprise the primary center of ritual convergence during Catholic mass. This is why Father Paul refused to place the King's painting in front of the tabernacle. As he told me later: "We couldn't put the King even before God!". Still, this demand by his parishioners was quite revealing both at the cosmological and at the political level. While the portrait eventually slipped into the background of the altar, the priest's decision was unable to disentangle the birth of Jesus Christ from the death of King Bhumibol. The dispute over the position of the King's portrait within the ritual scenario of the Holy Mercy church is not just an anecdotal detail but also a highly meaningful example of the theological and political tensions that have arisen within part of Thai Catholicism as a result of Rama IX's death.

'Thai-fication' of Catholicism

The sacred place of the King within the cosmology, liturgy and religiosity of Thai Catholicism is historically linked to the 'earthly' economic and political strategies that the Catholic Church has deployed to legitimize its presence in Thailand. From a confessional point of view, the Catholic Church represents a remarkably small religious community within a primarily Buddhist context. As a secular actor, however, the church acts as a pro-monarchical, semi-capitalist institution, running prestigious hospitals and private schools attended by upper-middle-class urban Buddhists. As a child, even King

Bhumibol – as do most members of the Thai political elite – attended a Catholic school: Mater Dei School in Bangkok, run by the Ursuline Sisters.

Catholic 'veneration' of the monarchy in Thailand is indeed the outcome of historical interactions between Catholic missionaries and the Thai monarchy. Elsewhere, I described this process as the "Thai-fication of Catholicism" (Bolotta, forthcoming), namely, the progressive indigenization, accommodation, and 'enculturation' of the Gospels according to the modern national culture of 'Thai-ness' (*qwham pen thai*) in its three dimensions: nation, Buddhism, and the monarchy. Especially during the reigns of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) and King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), collaborations between Thai monarchical elites and Catholic missionaries are widely documented, and spread across fields such as science, art, architecture, medicine, and printing techniques (Bressan 2005; Bressan and Smithies 2006). Another connection between the Catholic Church and Thai state, alluded to above, abounds in the field of education, and the modern Thai school system has even used as models those Catholic schools run by missionaries in particular (Wyatt, 1969; Watson, 1980).

The 'Thai-fication' of Catholicism became officially sanctioned for missionaries after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), marking a substantial shift in missionary efforts, from a conversion-based approach to acknowledging the necessity of 'enculturating' the Gospels according to local contexts. In Thailand, the 'local culture' to which Catholicism accommodated itself was strategically identified in the hegemonic state model of 'Thainess' (Bolotta, forthcoming). Both Buddhism and the monarchy, although officially described by the

Church as cultural rather than religious or political elements, became thus part of Thai Catholicism in several ways. In Catholic schools, for example, pictures of Jesus, Buddha, and the King often appear together. The Thai flag, a crucifix, and a picture of the King, similarly, are displayed over the blackboard in all classes.



The reaction of Thai Catholics to King Bhumibol's death has brought to light this political and theological ambiguity of Thai Catholicism, marking a point of no return for the local Church as it has set a precedent that Catholic clergy will not be able to ignore during the new reign. While the sacralization of King Bhumibol was institutionally integrated into Catholic religiosity, many priests seem to find it more difficult to go along with Christ-like representations of future monarchs.

While the future of Thai Catholicism under the new reign remains

unclear, what is certain is that King Bhumibol's death produced a cosmological crisis that is affecting the cultural and political order of Thai society. One significant factor here is the climate of political deadlock created by the combination of national mourning and military rule. This past Christmas, for both of these reasons, was one of mourning, and one cannot help but wonder what next Christmas will look like.

REFERENCES

Bolotta G. (Forthcoming), 'Development missionaries in the slums of Bangkok: From Thaification to de-Thaification of Catholicism', in Scheer, C., Fountain, P. and Feener, M. (eds), *The Mission of Development: Techno-Politics of Religion in Asia*. Leiden: Brill.

Bressan, L. (2005), *A meeting of Worlds: The interaction of Christian Missionaries and Thai Culture*. Bangkok: Assumption University Press.

Bressan, L. and Smithies, M. (2006), *Thai-Vatican Relations in the Twentieth Century*. Bangkok: Amarin.

Jackson, P.A. (1999), 'The enchanting spirit of Thai capitalism: The cult of Luang Phor Khoon and the post-modernization of Thai Buddhism'. *South East Asia Research* (SEAR), 7, 1: 5-60.

_____ (2010) 'Virtual Divinity: A 21st-Century Discourse of Thai Royal Influence' In Ivarsson, S. and Isager, L. (eds), *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand*, 29-60. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.

Pattana Kitiarsa (2005), 'Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand'. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 36, 3: 461-487.

Suwanna Satha-anand, (1994), *Ngoen kap satsana* [Money and religion]. Bangkok: Komon Keemthong Foundation.

Tambiah, S. J. (1976), *World Conqueror & World Renouncer. A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Watson, D.K. (1980), *Educational Development in Thailand*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.

Wyatt, D.K. (1969), *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Notes:

- 1 The *names used in this article are pseudonyms* and some of the places and other details reported have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of the informants.
- 2 Statistics in Bressan and Smithies (2006:1) count about 300,000 Catholics, 400 Thai priests, about 250 missionaries, mostly Western, 1,500 sisters, and 120 consecrated laymen. The structure of the Thai Catholic Church is divided into ten dioceses and 500 parishes distributed throughout the national territory.