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Doctrinal and social interaction of Buddhism
and Christianity in contemporary Thailand as reflected
at Samsen-district in Bangkok.

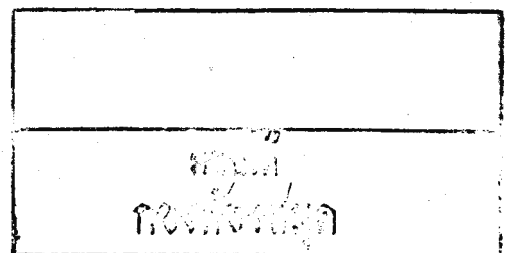
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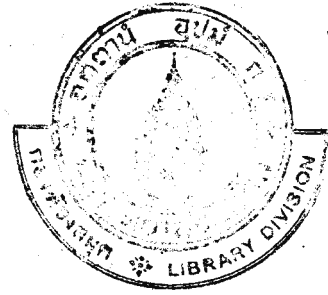


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P R E F A C E .

Being two of the world's great living religions, Buddhism and Christianity have permeated to the corners of the world in such a thorough way that practically half of the human race claim to be the followers of either religion. Geographically speaking, one can safely assume that Buddhism is widely prevailing in Asia (except in a few countries where Islam is the dominant religion), while Christianity is solidly entrenched in the European and American continent.

Since its arrival in Asia in the 16th century, Christianity has always been a minority religion, except in the Philippines where the majority of people are Roman Catholics. When Asia was undergoing its colonial period under Western powers, Christianity was naturally placed in a position of privilege. Even during the post independence era, Christians still played an important role in most Asian countries because of their ownership of better schools, better hospitals and better contacts with Western organizations. Even though their number is small, Christians often claim that their influence is considerable and they sometimes refer themselves as the 'creative minority'.

This thesis is an attempt to investigate and to study any interactions that may have existed, or may exist between this self-perceived 'creative minority' and the majority of the population, as far as doctrines and social contacts are concerned. Besides, as the setting is Thailand, not any other Asian country, it is deemed

necessary to trace the unique historical background and cultural impact of the two religions upon the Thai nation as a whole.

Because of the fact that this attempt to make a study of interaction is comparable to a first endeavour to explore uncharted areas, great caution is naturally exercised especially in dealing with doctrinal interpretation. As a rule, only quotations from the scriptures and interpretations of scholars will be cited as points of discussion. As for particular elements in the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity in Thailand, attention will be paid to the Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lectures, in which the scholars of both religions have expressed their views on various aspects of the doctrine and social practices.

Taking for granted that the various topics discussed by the participants of the Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lectures had been primarily selected to deal with salient doctrinal points of both religions, the researcher has taken the liberty to focus his analysis on that particular documentary material only. In other words, the scope of the section on doctrinal interaction is not intended to go beyond what was delivered during the Memorial Lectures. By saying this, it does not mean that the researcher is not aware of the existence of other numerous works on the relationship of Buddhism and Christianity, such as between Zen Buddhism and Catholicism, but as those books are not directly related to the religious interaction in Thailand, the researcher prefers to put them aside for other people to make a more detailed study.

As can be seen from the contents of each series, each participant of the Memorial Lectures has placed different emphasis on his treatment of his subject. Instances where doctrinal discussion is dominant is noticeable in the First Series by Dr. Malcolm Steward, the Second Series by Dr. Kenneth E. Wells, the Third Series by Dr. Lynn de Silva and the Fifth Series by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. On the other hand, the Fourth Series by Dr. Bruce Morgan, the Sixth Series by Dr. Puey Ungpakorn and the Ninth Series by Sulak Sivaraksa appear to pay more attention to the social, cultural and ethical aspects of religion. The Seventh Series by Porn Ratanasuwon discussed the doctrinal aspects and their implication on mental health, whereas the Eighth Series by Dr. Donald Swearer contains overlapping portions of both doctrinal and socio-cultural perspectives of the two religions. This classification of the Memorial Lectures will more or less make it clear that the area of potential interaction is not limited to the doctrinal level only; it covers socio-cultural dimension as well.

The structure of this thesis is divided into two main parts. The first part, the Documentary part, will deal with the historical and doctrinal background of each religion, followed by an analysis of all the nine Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lectures, and conclude with a brief description of social interaction initiated by the Thai Catholics. The latter will discuss the role and activities of the Catholic Council of Thailand for Development (CCTD), and other movements in which the Thai Catholics play a considerable part, such as the Coordinating Group for Religion in Society, (CGRS), and the Thai Inter-religious Commission for Development (TICD).

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The second part of this thesis, the Field-work part, will analyze research conducted in the Catholic community adjacent to St. Francis Xavier Church in Samsen area in Bangkok. The research was carried out by distributing a set of questionnaire to the Catholic respondents in that area, as well as to the Buddhist population who lived nearby or were closely related to the Catholic school in the area whose name is St. Gabriel School. The main purpose of the research was to investigate the respondents' level of understanding toward their own religion and also other religions; whether understanding other religion's doctrines may lead to a doctrinal interaction. Both religions' respondents were also asked how they regarded each other socially, or in other words, the social distance between the two groups was measured. This particular problem is interesting to analyze because of the changing attitudes toward non-Christians adopted by the Catholics since the Second Vatican Council in 1962.

It goes without saying that this research-study is also aimed at improving the existing mutual understanding between Buddhists and Christians in Thailand in the sense that each religious-group understands that there are both similarities and discrepancies between the two religions, and also that each religion teaches its adherents "to realise the Ultimate Good with its own methods". In the view of the author, a person who is able to attain this level of understanding will be freed from the desire to launch a doctrinal dispute, or even worse yet, to try to convert others to his own faith. Instead, such a person can be expected to be a vanguard for increasing cooperation between the followers of both religions.