

FOOT NOTES

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HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN THAILAND

Kirti Bunchua

Introduction

Land: Thailand is situated between 5 and 21 degrees North Latitude, 97 and 106 degrees East longitude. It is bounded on the South by Malaysia and on the West and north by Burma, on the North-East and East by Laos and on the South-East by Kampuchea.

People: It has an area of 519077 Sq. Kms. and its population is about 48,846,927. The majority of the people i.e. 95.14 per cent follow Buddhism. Muslims constitute 4.2 per cent, Roman Catholics 0.4 per cent, Protestants 0.2 per cent, Hindus 0.1 per cent and others 0.14 per cent.

Preliminary Observations

Thailand is one of the few countries in Asia that escaped the European colonisation of the last two centuries. From this fact follow some remarkable consequences which should not be overlooked in studying the Thai history and in writing the Church History in Thailand.

1. The Thais are proud of their continuous independence throughout the time of Western colonisation. Thais have now become conscious of their national unity. Such unity was scarcely seen before, because of the multi-racial groups and the feudal form of government.

2. The Thais are in general convinced that Thailand could escape Western colonisation because of the intelligence and the administrative capability of the kings of the present dynasty. Royalty has gained the esteem of the people as a symbol of the unity and power for national survival.

3. The deeds of the kings form the hub and occupy most part of the Thai history up to the present. "Lese Majeste" is what the liberal Thai historians are very embarrassed about and have to be careful. The general rule willingly accepted by most Thai people is that the kings are not to be criticized in any way.

4. The Thai people are one, though they have descended from many races. Everybody is proud to profess that their ancestors are the Thai Minor Branch (Thai Noi), who immigrated from the South of China about one thousand years ago (though at present many do not agree with this belief). The reason for this pride also can be traced to the fact that they have enjoyed continuous national independence even during the European colonisation of Asia.

5. This feeling of pride is a national characteristic, which a historian of the Thai people in general and of the Church in Thailand in particular cannot afford to overlook as it forms part of the personality of a Thai.

We have, therefore, plenty of manuals on the history of Thailand. They are centered on the deeds of the kings and these materials are taken mostly from the national chronicles which form almost the only source of the history of Thailand. Only recently, the Thai historians have begun to appreciate the importance of the narrations of foreigners who visited Thailand as adventurers and travellers. The accounts of Christian Missionaries in Thailand, and even those of the other Asian peoples who had contact with Thailand, are considered as important sources. Even in using these sources the emphasis is on the relations of these adventurers with the kings or the kings' deeds and the environment. Only most recently, some historians of Thailand have begun to pay more attention than before to what happened to the ordinary people and to the use of oral traditions.

What is the Church History of Thailand?

In the spirit of the ecumenism advocated by the Vatican Council II, there should be only one Church history of Thailand, comprising the work of both the Catholic and the Protestant churches in Thailand as a whole. This Church is so young in comparison with the Church of India whose origin can be traced back up to the time of the Apostle Thomas.

The church history of Thailand should help us to understand the impact of Christianity on the Thai society dominated by Buddhist influence. In fact, Buddhism is not a kind of religion in the Western sense. It is a way of life and is an important aspect of Thai culture. Buddhist philosophy needs to be analysed and put into practice. The church history of Thailand should not be merely a *History of Conversions*, or a *history of the conquest of the infidels*, but it should be the *history of the Christian community* in its spiritual as well as mundane aspects.

Methodology

With the aforesaid perspective in mind for writing the church history, it is indispensable to take into account two factors: the historical events among the Christians and God's actions in history. For writing the church history in Thailand the missionary documents scattered in various places

are of immense use. For the history of the Catholic church, a great deal of source material is still hidden in such archives as the Central House of the Foreign Missionaries of Paris, the Dominican Center at Goa and Lisbon, the Franciscan Center at Macao and the Jesuit Center in Rome. These materials are helpful in writing the Church History of the first two centuries. For the 19th and 20th centuries the documents are scattered in the reports of various groups of Missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant. Besides, because of the continuous relationship between the Church and the kings and their governments during the last two centuries a large number of documents relating to this aspect are preserved in the government archives. Many other documents are in the form of diaries and notifications left by missionaries and local Christians. There are also old books about Christianity in Thailand which are preserved in private libraries. Moreover, oral traditions and oral narrations should not be neglected. All these documents are to be sought out and rearranged so that they can throw light on the church history of Thailand. Catholic and Protestant historians can share their views together to find a common interpretation of sources. What is written in history need not be definitive as it requires rewriting again and again as new sources are discovered. Church history can also give some insights and guidance for the future growth of the church.

Problem of integration of the Church History of the Third World

The church history of Thailand has apparently a unity of its own. All the other countries of the Third World have also their own characteristics and uniqueness, because of historical, cultural, linguistic and ethnological differences. How can they all be brought together in the form of the church history of the Third World?

I do hope that after a patient and devoted effort by men of good will from various countries and denominations it would be possible to integrate the church histories of the Third World countries. The most important factor is that we must try to know and understand one another. *Mutual understanding* is the basis on which we can work. Our common faith (the faith that brought us together here) and our common needs may serve as a good starting-point for our mutual understanding and keep us working together.

Periodisation

With a view to write a common church history of Thailand for both the Catholic and the Protestant churches I would like to suggest that this history should be divided into 3 great periods. The first one may be subdivided into 5 sub-periods as follows:

1. The period of the Catholic missionaries (1555-1828)
 - 1.1 Before King Narai the Great (1555-1656);
 - 1.2 During the reign of King Narai the Great (1656-1688);
 - 1.3 After King Narai the Great (1688-1767);
 - 1.4 During

the reign of King Taksin (1767-1782); 1.5 Ratanakosin sub-period before the coming of the Protestant missionaries (1782-1828)

2. The period of the Catholic and Protestant Missionaries (1828-1965)
3. The period of the Thai Church (1965 till today)

1. The Period of the Catholic Missionaries (1555-1828)

1.1 *Before King Narai the Great of Ayudhya* (1555-1656). Vasco da Gama, under the patronage of the King of Portugal, sailed to India in 1497. In 1510, Albuquerque captured Goa on the West coast and made it the capital of the Portuguese Empire in the East. In 1511 the same Albuquerque captured Malacca, the entrepot for trade between the Far East and South Asia. In 1515, he also occupied Ormuz, which dominated the entrance to the Persian Gulf. By doing so, he hoped to establish the Portuguese supremacy over the South Asian seas and acquire for his king a monopoly over the spice trade with Europe.

Albuquerque after capturing Malacca in 1511 had sent a delegation to Ayudhya, the then capital of Thailand. They were the first Portuguese to set their feet on the soil of Thailand. They were allowed to have an audience with His Majesty Ramadhibodi II of Thailand and were granted permission to carry on trade between the Portuguese and the kingdom of Thailand. By virtue of this contract, the Portuguese traders came to Ayudhya. Many of them set up permanent homes in Thailand and became the oldest Catholic community in the country.

The names of the first Portuguese who established their homes in Ayudhya are not known but it is a fact that there was a Portuguese community in Ayudhya. The first known Portuguese in Ayudhya were two missionaries who came in 1555. They were Father Jeronimo da Cruz and Father Sebastiao de Conto. Both belonged to the Dominican Order. They had an order from the Archbishop of Goa that they should look after the spiritual welfare of the Portuguese community in Ayudhya. This community was composed of the descendants of the former Portuguese settlers and the newcomers. They tried to learn and use the Thai language and as a result some Portuguese words have been absorbed in the Thai language and new Thai words were coined which came to be used by Europeans and Catholics.

1.2 *During the reign of King Narai the Great* (1656-1688). Bishop Pierre Lambert de la Motte arrived at Ayudhya on 22nd August 1662 with two French priests. They were the first missionaries of the newly established Paris Foreign Mission Society (Missions Etrangeres de Paris). China and Cochin-China were their destinations, but persecutions made it impossible for them to reach there. So they remained in Siam (the then name for Thailand) which thus became the first mission of the new Society and was erected as an Apostolic Vicariate in 1669. This mission, which had been nurtured for 300 years, celebrated its third centenary in 1969.

Initially there was no opposition from the local authorities in the country. On the contrary, the situation was favourable to the missionaries. This was the period of the long and prosperous reign of King Narai the Great (1657-1688), who wanted to rely on France and free himself from the influence of the Dutch power. In view of the important role played by Fr. Tachard, a Jesuit, embassies came to be exchanged between Ayudhya and France.

During the reign of King Narai the Great (around the middle of the 17th century) a group of about 60 Portuguese mercenaries came to serve in the Royal Army. They were skilled in the artillery warfare. King Narai granted them a piece of land in Bangkok to establish the Portuguese camp in which they could live permanently with their families. The Immaculate Conception Catholic parish in Bangkok stands now at the same site. They were entrusted with the duty of guarding the waterway in the eventuality of invasion from the sea through the Chao Phraya River. It was a clever move on the part of the King Narai to counteract the power of the Dutch with the help of the Portuguese. The family names of these Portuguese mercenaries, as can be identified from their descendants, are as follows: Libeiro, Fonseca, De Jesu, Diaz, Da Cruz, De Horta, De Paiva, Pezro, Rodriguez and Fereiro.¹ Some of them moved to the other bank of the river to establish another community called the Santa Cruz parish which survives until today.

1.3 *After King Narai the Great* (1688-1767). After King Narai almost all Christian communities outside the capital were suppressed. The only development for almost a century was the beginning of the Chantaburi Christianity in 1707. It brought together the Christians from Annam that came to settle there in order to escape the persecution in their country. In the capital itself a few Christian groups such as St. Joseph, Sao Pedro, Sao Paulo, and Sao Domingo remained.

From the very beginning the Paris Foreign Mission Society (M.E.P.) had worked hard to set up the "College General". It was, in fact, a seminary for the training of native clergy. It was established next to St. Joseph's Church in Ayudhya in 1666. It had to change location and undergo countless ups and downs, and it was even suppressed temporarily in 1783, but was revived in Penang from 1809 until 1983 when it was suppressed again due to the need for the national rather than regional seminary.

1.4 *During the reign of King Tak-Sin of Dhonburi* (1767-1782) After the reign of King Narai no record of the history of the Portuguese descendants is available. We come to know something about them once again during the reign of King Tak-Sin of the Dhonburi period. They served the king as palace guards. When Phya San revolted towards

1. Kirti Bunchua, "Development of Mittakham District," *The Research Document of Chulalongkorn University*, B.E. 2526, p. 5.

the end of the reign these guards had a share in defending the royal palace, until Chao Phya Chakri rose to set all things right and established himself as the founder of the new dynasty—the present Chakri Dynasty.

King Tak-Sin spent the first half of his reign in building Dhonburi as his new capital and in reorganising the kingdom. Many Catholics served him with great fidelity. But in the second half of the reign they and some Buddhists suffered persecution as they could not comply with some of his superstitious actions.

1.5 *Ratanakosin sub-period before the coming of the Protestant Missionaries (1782-1828).* Chao Phya Chakri ascended the throne in 1782 as Rama I. He built Bangkok or Krungthep Ratanakosin as the new capital of his kingdom. During his reign the Portuguese descendants still served as "Portuguese Volunteers" in the "Tha Chang" or the "Elephant Port Army". Once the king ordered new cannons and wanted to try them. One of the Portuguese volunteers named Keo Libeiro at a trial could hit all the targets indicated by the king. So His Majesty appointed him the head of the skilled Portuguese soldiers in the artillery department and after some time elevated him to the rank and honour of Phraya Visessongkram Ramabhakdi and this rank was transferred to his descendants upto eight generations, until the reign of King Rama VI who reorganised the military system in Thailand on the European model and the rank and dignity of Phraya Visessongkram were removed. Thereafter the descendants of the Portuguese became completely Thai-ised and served their adopted country in various capacities. One of the sons of Phraya Visessongkram served as the Governor of different provinces with the dignity of Phraya Samudra Sakdarak. To-day many of them serve as Government officials and social welfare workers. All of them are proud to be born as Thai citizens though they still remember their Portuguese ancestry.

Since King Rama I and II had good relations with all foreign powers the missionaries were allowed to work freely all over the kingdom. The Catholic church began to take root in Thailand really during the sub-period and looked forward to future developments.

During the reign of King Rama III, a group of about 500 Catholic Cambodians and the Portuguese descendants in Cambodia came under the patronage of the King of Thailand following the overthrow of Prince Nak-Ong-Eng. They were allowed to live with the Portuguese descendants at the Immaculate Conception Parish. Most of the Cambodians went back to their own country 12 years later but it had a lasting influence in that the Immaculate Conception Parish of the Portuguese descendants is still called the Cambodian district, instead of the Portuguese camp, though the official name for it is Mittakham district or the District of Friendship.

In 1785 there were 413 Thai Catholics of Portuguese origin at the Santa Cruz Church in Dhonburi and 379 Thai Catholics of Portuguese

origin at the Immaculate Conception Church (in Mittakham district, Bangkok), as well as 580 Thai Catholics of Annamite origin. In 1802 the Christians of the Vicariate including Penang, numbered 2,500. Meanwhile, because of the French Revolution and wars, the Bishop happened to be the only foreign missionary for ten years. He was assisted by seven Thai priests.

2. The period of the Catholic and Protestant Missionaries (1828-1965):

The Missionaries of both denominations worked separately and with the spirit of competition. Both denominations gained the favour of King Rama IV and the King appreciated the works of charity carried on by both independently. Both denominations could establish themselves firmly during his reign.

The outstanding missionary of the 19th century whose fame spread far beyond the borders of the Thailand was the Vicar Apostolic, Bishop Pallegoix (1841-1861). He was the author of the well-known two volume Thai-Latin-French-English dictionary, the first such fundamental work to be written in the Thai language. While the Bishop was at the Immaculate Conception Church he had learnt that a prince, who had entered the monkhood at Wat Rajathivas near his Church, was interested in the study of the languages. A firm friendship developed when the Bishop learnt Pali from the prince-monk who in turn took Latin lessons from the Bishop. The prince was later crowned as His Majesty King Mongkut (Rama IV). When Bishop Pallegoix died on 18th June 1861, the King did not forget his old friend and not only ordered a royal palanquin to be used for the funeral but he also joined the mourning by ordering all flags in the kingdom to fly at half mast. The Mission made a steady progress.

The Catholic mission had envisaged the needs of the modern times. A printing press had been set up by them. In 1885 Fr. Colombet, M.E.P., founded the Assumption College, the first modern Catholic school in Bangkok. It was placed under the care of the Brothers of St. Gabriel when they arrived in 1901.

The Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres came to Thailand in 1898, even before the Brothers of St. Gabriel, and had begun to take care of the poor, the sick and the education of girls.

Since the nineteen-twenties, many other religious orders came to work in Thailand, such as Ursulines of the Roman Union, Carmelites, Salesians, Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, Capuchin Sisters, Redemptorists, Camillian Fathers, Fathers of Betharam, De la Salle Brothers, Stigmatines, Jesuits, Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus and S.A.M. Fathers. Mention must be made here of the Thai congregations of Sisters in every diocese.

Since the Catholic Church in Thailand had greatly grown through the zealous labour of the local clergy and the missionaries there were indications that it would grow further. In view of this the sacred congregation of the propagation of the faith in Rome felt that the time was ripe to establish the sacred hierarchy in Thailand.

Therefore, on 18th December 1956, the two ecclesiastical provinces of Bangkok and Thare Nongseng were created and Thailand got its first native archbishops who took up the responsibility of the Catholic Church in Thailand. Since then the Catholic Church in Thailand has become the responsibility of the Thai Catholics.

The first to be set up was the ecclesiastical province of Bangkok made up of the metropolitan Church of Bangkok, whose cathedral was dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, with the suffragan dioceses of Ratchaburi and Chiang Mai.

The second ecclesiastical province was called Thare whose cathedral church was dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel, with the suffragan dioceses of Ubon Ratchathani, Nakhon Ratchasima and Udon Thani.

The Protestant missionary work began with the arrival of Rev. Dr. Carl Augustus Friedrich Gutzlaff and Rev. Jacob Tomlin of the London Missionary Society at Bangkok on the 23rd of August, 1828. Since then more and more missionaries, especially from the United States, collaborated to establish the Protestant Church in Thailand. During the time of King Rama IV, outstanding missionaries like D.B. Bradley, G.B. McFarland and others helped to establish the Protestant Church firmly in the country.

3. The period of the Thai Church (1965-till today)

Since the second World War, the Catholic and the Protestant Churches have tried to transfer the responsibility of the mission work to the Thai pastors. The transfer has been gradual, and we can notice that since the year 1965 (the year the Vatican Council II ended), the responsibility of running the Thai Church (both Catholic and the Protestant) is in the hands of the Thais. The cooperation and the efforts made to bring mutual understanding between the two forms are the main characteristics of this period. The cooperation between the two churches is best seen in the working of the Bible Society of Thailand.

Sources

The Payap University Archives contain a wide variety of records, which include relevant books, pamphlets, journals and many different types of inter-related material.

1. Archives The Payap University Archives contain three kinds of collections of source materials. The largest collection is the official documents of the Church of Christ in Thailand C.C.T. This collection

includes records from the various organizations, covering the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the vast bulk of these records date from 1946 onwards. Forty-five record groups totalling 312 feet are included. They include Records of the American Presbyterian Mission, Records of the General Secretary's Office, Records of the Church Renewal Project, Records of the Department of Education, Records of the Thailand Baptist Missionary Fellowship, Records of the United Christian Missionary Society, Records of the Ecumenical Secretary and Records of the Office of Property. There are also records pertaining to a number of local churches, Christian schools and hospitals.

The C.C.T. Archives contain records on virtually every facet of the work of the C.C.T. and also have documents on the work of other religious groups. From a study of the records one can trace the development of the C.C.T. since its founding in 1934, and show how missionary work has progressed over the last fifty years. Nearly 1,000 sets of blueprints, plus a large number of older property records describe the physical situation of the churches in Thailand. There are also several thousands of photographs, some of which go back to the 1880s and 1890s. The C.C.T. Archives observe a 25 year restriction rule. Any material not reproduced for general distribution cannot be used for twenty-five years from its date except with the permission of the General Secretary of the C.C.T.

The second kind is the Payap Collections. There are twenty-two record groups totalling 105 feet. These records also include old source material relating to the Thailand Theological Seminary which has become the McGilvary Faculty of Theology and the McCormick School of Nursing and Public Health, which is now the McCormick Faculty of Nursing of Payap University. Since Payap University was founded in 1974, it has not yet gathered a large collection of its own. However, the records it has collected are specially important because these documents relate to the founding and early years of the University. They are also significant because they represent the only body of archival material collected by an institution of higher learning in Thailand. There are over 12,000 photographs. Payap University records also have a twenty-five year restriction.

The third kind of collections are general. These are composed of a number of private collections from individual persons as well as records from organisations not officially related to the C.C.T. or Payap University. There are forty-two general collections containing 68.5 feet of records. Significant collections include the Papers of Paul Eakin, the Paper of Lek Taiyong, the Papers of Charoon Wichaidist, the Records of the Dhamma Logis Project, and the Records and papers directly related to the work of the C.C.T. The Eakin Papers contain some very old documents (from 1860s) regarding missionary work in the Phet Buri, and the Lek and Charoon

Papers are important as they contain records relating to C.C.T. administration.

An important part of the general collection are the sets of microfilms of records held in overseas repositories. These sets of microfilms include the records of every foreign Protestant missionary group that worked in Thailand in the nineteenth century. Of particular note are the twelve reels of Presbyterian mission records that include mission work in northern and southern Thailand as well as Bangkok. In all, the Payap University contains the following sets of microfilms

1. American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Mission—Siam Mission
2. Presbyterian Board of Foreign Mission—Siam and Laos Mission
3. Papers of Dan Beach Bradley
4. American Missionary Association—Siam Mission
5. Baptist Foreign Mission Society—Siam Mission

In addition to these microfilm collections, the research Papers of Maen Pongudom contain several boxes of photocopies of records from the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia USA. There are no restrictions on the use of any of these records.

2. Library Collections

The library collections of the Payap University Archives include books, pamphlets and serial publications directly or indirectly related to missionary and church history. The Payap Archives house a number of very early examples of Thai printing and a significant number of northern Thai printed materials. This collection is relatively strong in nineteenth century Thai history because of the large number of missionary publications and their involvement in the introduction of printing both in Bangkok and in Chiang Mai. Of particular note is a complete set of publications, *Laos News*, a treasure of data on early twentieth century northern Thailand. The Archives also contain school yearbooks from Christian schools. The pamphlet collection is important because it contains many smaller publications that cannot be obtained elsewhere. The same is true of the serial publications which emphasize newsletters and publications of Protestant organizations. The missionary publication, *Nangsu Sirikitisap*, printed in northern Thai covering the period from 1903 until 1926 is a particularly important publication.

In addition to regular library holdings, the Payap University Archives are the repository for the library of the Dhamma-Logos project, an inter-faith dialogue and study project that came to an end some years ago. This collection includes more than 200 volumes and is useful for the study of Thai Buddhism and its relationship to other religions.

3. Oral History

This section contains recordings of the interviews with aged Christians and missionaries who have retired or are still active on the field. These interviews are important not only for their general contents and the impressions they give of the Christian church in Thailand but also because they contain data obtainable on other matters, particularly data regarding local Christian groups.

In addition to these three major categories of research materials, the Payap University Archives also contain a number of tape recordings of meetings and seminars, a large number of general photographs, a few reels of movie pictures and video tapes.

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