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Revisiting civil religion: Lessons from Thailand

Tomas Larsson

Since the 1960s, the concept of civil religion has informed a great number of scholarly works exploring the relationship between religion and nationalism in the west — and beyond. It is therefore not surprising that the concept also informed seminal works on Buddhism and politics in Thailand. In recent years, however, the concept appears to have fallen out of fashion within Thai Studies and perhaps Southeast Asian Studies more broadly. This article surveys and critically discusses the widely diverging and confusing ways in which the concept of civil religion has been used in the study of Thai history and politics. It then seeks to demonstrate the continued relevance and analytical utility of civil religion, understood as a particular kind of nationalism, according to which the state should accommodate or actively encourage and support religious pluralism by developing ideological and institutional links with multiple religious communities. In Thailand, the dominant form of civil-religious nationalism is 'cosmopolitan royalism', which positions the king as the leading patron and protector of religions (plural). The final section of the article illustrates how this conception of civil religion might inform both the study of Thai intellectual history and the study of contemporary political contestation.

Over the past 50 years, 'civil religion' has been part of the conceptual vocabulary of leading scholars of religion and politics in Thailand. However, there has been very little agreement among them about the meaning of this term. That is not necessarily their fault. Rather, the conceptual confusion that surrounds the study of 'Thai civil religion' — the existence of which is, as we will see, disputed — reflects the widely divergent notions that Western social scientists have chosen to name 'civil religion'.

The concept of 'civil religion' was coined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to refer to a state-sponsored faith distinct from church and clergy. Such a faith was needed, he believed, by every state, and should consist of a few simple dogmas: belief in God, an afterlife, and divine justice; the sanctity of secular law; and, finally, a ban on religious intolerance. Embrace of such a civil religion should, furthermore, be compulsory, and breaches punishable by banishment or death.[1] Despite its pedigree

Tomas Larsson is Associate Professor in the Department of Politics and International Studies and Fellow of St John's College at the University of Cambridge, UK. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: thl33@cam.ac.uk. A previous version of this article was presented at the 2023 Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference in Boston. The author wishes to thank Kikue Hamayotsu and three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on earlier drafts. The usual caveat applies.

1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Victor Gourevitch, *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 154.

in political theory, the concept only gained traction in the social sciences following the publication in 1967 of Robert N. Bellah's essay 'Civil religion in America'.[2] There he defined civil religion as 'a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity'. More specifically, he emphasised the significance of the fact that this civil religion, while broadly informed by Christianity, was 'neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian.'[3] American civil religion, as Bellah conceived it, was therefore full of talk about 'God', but never of Jesus Christ. 'God' is thus a rather empty signifier, the frequent references to which nevertheless provide the 'political sphere' with a 'religious dimension'.[4] Rather than a manifestation of a statist ideological project, Bellah invoked Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of the religious basis of American democracy, thus associating civil religion with mass political culture.

The concept of civil religion was further elaborated by John A. Coleman, who defined it as 'the set of beliefs, rites, and symbols which relate a man's role as citizen and his society's place in space, time, and history to the conditions of ultimate existence and meaning'.[5] In contrast with Rousseau and Bellah, for whom civil religion was a phenomenon that might emerge in certain historical circumstances, Coleman conceptualised civil religion as a universal category — a dimension of all polities, whenever and wherever they may be found. Like Bellah, Coleman took inspiration from Durkheim, who had defined religion in terms of the sacred, from which it followed that all communities are fundamentally 'religious' in character, in the sense that they sacralise some set of values and symbols and engage in associated rituals (which may have nothing to do with Gods and other supernatural forces). The question, for Coleman, was not whether a society had a civil religion, but what form it took. The civil religion of the United States was, to Coleman's mind, unique, because it was reliant neither on state nor church, unlike the civil religions that he identified in other places and other times.

The publications by Bellah and Coleman stimulated a great deal of debate about civil religion — in the United States and beyond. But as should be apparent, the concept of civil religion was beset with ambiguities. Was it a state-imposed civic creed (top down)? Was it a widely shared sense of the sanctity of the state and/or the nation, with associated popular symbols and rituals (bottom up)? Was it a feature of particular social orders or of all? Was civil religion something on which there was consensus within any given society — or was it an object of contestation?

Despite or perhaps because of these conceptual ambiguities, civil religion experienced considerable success in the social science export market. A minor cottage industry arose as scholars went looking for civil religion beyond American shores. In Southeast Asia, scholars associated civil religion with the doctrines of *Pancasila* in Indonesia and *Rukunegara* in Malaysia.[6] In Burma, U Nu's Burmese Buddhism

2 Robert N. Bellah, 'Civil religion in America', *Daedalus* 96, 1 (1967): 1-21.
3 Ibid, p. 8.
4 Ibid, p. 4.
5 John A. Coleman, 'Civil religion', *Sociological Analysis* 31, 2 (1970): 70.
6 On *Pancasila* as civil religion, see Susan S. Purdy, 'The civil religion thesis as it applies to a pluralistic society: Pancasila democracy in Indonesia (1945-1965)', *Journal of International Affairs* 36, 2 (1982): 307–16; Ira Allen and Saul Allen, 'God terms and activity systems: A definition of religion for political

and Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism were understood as 'rival variants' of civil religion.[7] In Vietnam, the communist party-state's more recent promotion of the cult of the legendary Hung Kings has been described as 'an attempt to set up a kind of civil religion'.[8] In Singapore, the People's Action Party 'appears self-consciously to model itself after a kind of priesthood' that serves as guardian of the country's 'Shared Values', which were officially adopted in 1991.[9]

While much of this research was concerned with civil *religion*, as an instrument of Rousseau-inspired state builders, others adopted a more Tocqueville-inspired understanding of civil religion, shifting the emphasis to *civil* religion. In this vein, Robert W. Hefner used the concept of 'civil Islam' to refer to 'the emergence of a democratic, religiously ecumenical, and boldly reformist movement' in Indonesia, which stood in contrast to the 'regimist Islam' of Suharto's New Order.[10] Likewise, Juliane Schober associated the original agenda of the Young Men's Buddhist Association in early twentieth century British Burma with a 'civil Buddhism', which she contrasted with the 'maximalist' varieties of Buddhist nationalism that came to shape religion–state relations following independence.[11] Finally, Eva-Lotta E. Hedman's comparative study of 'mobilization in the name of civil society' in four Southeast Asian countries cited both Bellah and Tocqueville in support of an argument that posited 'the institutions of civil religion' as an important explanatory factor.[12] What makes religion 'civil' for these authors is the willingness of members of the religious majority to afford accommodations to the realities of religious pluralism and to the principle of a degree of separation (not necessarily total) between organised religion in the conventional sense (i.e., 'church') and state.

Most if not all these diverging conceptions of civil religion are encountered in debates about religion and politics in Thailand. The first task of this article is to map how scholars have made use of the concept of civil religion in their study of religious and political life in Thailand. These civil religion-inspired research efforts have generated a great deal of knowledge and understanding of important aspects on the role of religion, and Buddhism specifically, in relation to questions of political legitimation and national integration.[13] However, it is also striking how confused scholars

science', *Political Research Quarterly* 69, 3 (2016): 557–570. On *Rukunegara*, see Daniel Regan, 'Islam, intellectuals and civil religion in Malaysia', *Sociological Analysis* 37, 2 (1976): 95–110; Justus M. Van der Kroef, 'Southeast Asia's restless Muslims', *Strategic Studies* 4, 3 (1981): 23–44.

7 John Markoff and Daniel Regan, 'The rise and fall of civil religion: Comparative perspectives', *Sociological Analysis* 42, 4 (1981), p. 349.

8 Mathieu Bouquet, 'Vietnamese party-state and religious pluralism since 1986: Building the fatherland?', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 25, 1 (2010): 99.

9 Kenneth Paul Tan, 'Pragmatic secularism, civil religion, and political legitimacy in Singapore', in *State and secularism: Perspectives from Asia*, ed. Michael Heng Siam-Heng and Ten Chin Liew (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), pp. 353–4.

10 Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. xvii.

11 Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), ch. 4.

12 Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, 'Contesting state and civil society: Southeast Asian trajectories', *Modern Asian Studies* 35, 4 (2001): 925.

13 A great many scholars have of course shed valuable light on Buddhism, the state, and national identity in Thailand without invoking the concept of civil religion. Given the conceptual focus of this article, their contributions generally fall beyond its scope, and hence will not be discussed.

have been about Thai civil religion. The second task of the article is to highlight how debates about Thai civil religion have been bedevilled by conceptual imprecision, and to offer an alternative way of conceptualising civil religion. Drawing on recent scholarship I propose that civil religion might fruitfully be approached as a particular kind of religio-political ideology concerning the relationship between religion and the political community. According to this form of nationalist ideology, the state should accommodate or actively encourage and support religious pluralism by developing ideological and institutional links with multiple religious communities. The third and final task of this article is to provide some tentative illustrations on how this conception of civil religion might inform both the study of Thai intellectual history and political thought, and the study of contemporary political contestation. Here I will characterise the dominant form of Thai civil religion as 'cosmopolitan royalism', a nationalist ideology in which the Thai monarchy is positioned as the leading patron and protector of religions (plural).

The search for civil religion in Thailand

While it was Rousseau who had pioneered the notion of 'civil religion', Thai intellectuals who found his writings on the 'social contract' and the 'general will' greatly inspiring paid little or no attention to the religious dimensions of Rousseau's political theory. At least it appears that way in recent intellectual histories of the Thai reception of Rousseau, which make no mention of 'civil religion'.[14]

The first reference to Bellah's notion of civil religion in relation to the study of Thailand appears in 1970, in a Thai-language article by Frank E. Reynolds entitled 'Civic religion in Thai history'.[15] This was a translation of a talk that Reynolds had given in 1970 to a workshop at the University of Chicago, where he was teaching in the Divinity School and in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. Why Reynolds substituted one letter — turning civil into civic — is not clear from the text, but a later publication, which I will soon come to, provides an explanation.

In this first stab at using civil religion as a conceptual lens for the study of Thai religious and political history, Reynolds explains that 'religion' has a wider meaning beyond conventional world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, etc.) and that it refers to sacred things, sacred people, and sacred places. Thus, civic religion refers to nothing other than 'the sacred things of the nation'.[16] The cult of these sacred things is what constitutes the national community.

Reynolds presented a paper on the same theme, entitled 'Civil religion—the case of Thailand' at the March–April 1973 Association for Asian Studies meeting in

14 Suphachai Suphaphol [ศุภชัย ศุภผล], '**ประวัติศาสตร์ทฤษฎีการเมืองของฌอง ฌาคส์ รุสโซ ในบริบทการเมืองไทย (พ.ศ.2475-2555)**' [History of the political theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Thai political context (1932-2012)], **วารสารรัฐศาสตร์และรัฐประศาสนศาสตร์** 4, 1 (2017): 169–215; Ploypai Pintobtang, 'Rousseau in Thai constitutionalism', in *Rousseau today: Interdisciplinary essays*, ed. Neil Harris et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), troubles, pp. 221–38; Tomas Larsson, 'In search of liberalism: Ideological traditions, translations and in Thailand', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 32, 3 (2017): 531–61.

15 Frank E. Reynolds, **ศาสนาของพลเมืองในประวัติศาสตร์ไทย** [Civic religion in Thai history], **สังคมศาสตร์ปริทัศน์** [*Social Science Review*] 9, 2 (1970): 54–67.

16 Ibid., p. 57.

Chicago. Note the timing: this was just a few months before the student uprising that toppled the dictatorship of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn (prime minister 1963–73). I have not been able to locate this paper, but a revised version was subsequently published as 'Civic religion and national community in Thailand'. Here Reynolds builds on his earlier paper to trace the evolution of the Thai 'civic' religion as the pre-modern Thai kingdoms were transformed into a modern nation-state with democratic aspirations.[17] He argues that the 'Ayutthayan kings … were able to stimulate and foster a remarkably stable tradition of civic religion—incorporating Buddhist, Brahmanic, and local elements'.[18] Following the fall of Ayutthaya, this Thai civic religious tradition was restored in Bangkok by the early Chakri kings, refashioned by King Vajiravudh, and further adapted in the wake of the political upheaval of 1932. This, Reynolds shows, involved the sacralisation of new symbols and elements, notably Nation and Constitution, which were added to the traditional symbols of Religion and Monarchy.[19] In the final section of his article, Reynolds comments on the implications of the 1973 uprising. While the associated events 'conclusively demonstrated the continuing importance and vitality of the civic religious tradition', the deep polarisation between reactionary right-wing and radical left-wing forces raised questions about the future of the tradition.[20]

Reynold's analysis of modern Thai civil religion evolved in dialogue with one of his Thai students at the University of Chicago, Koson Srisang. Koson's Ph.D. thesis argues that the nationalist ideology articulated by King Vajiravudh (r. 1910–1925) constitutes the 'Thai Ideal of nationhood'. Koson describes Vajiravudh's nationalist ideology as 'a kind of "religion" that has served to constitute the Thai nationhood, to unite the Thai people, and to provide the Thai people with a sense of destiny.' He continues: 'It is this reality that scholars such as Robert Bellah have called "civil religion." And it is this reality which has been referred to as "Thai Dhammocracy".'[21]

In the conclusion to his 1977 article, Reynolds explains why he has articulated his argument in terms of civic rather than civil religion. Reynolds' disagreement with Bellah and Coleman, if I understand him correctly, essentially parallels the debate between modernist and primordialist scholars of nationalism. Bellah and Coleman, like the modernists (Karl Deutsch, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson), considered civil religion in its 'full and differentiated form' (i.e., as found in the United States) a quintessentially modern phenomenon. In contrast, Reynolds, like the primordialists (Edward Shils, Clifford Geertz, Anthony Smith), wished to emphasise 'the high degree

17 Frank E. Reynolds, 'Civic religion and national community in Thailand', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 36, 2 (1977): 267–82.

18 Ibid, pp. 268–9.

19 For a striking example of a 'top down' effort to modernise the civic religion, see Puli Fuwongcharoen, '"Long live ratthathammanūn!": Constitution worship in revolutionary Siam', *Modern Asian Studies* 52, 2 (2018): 609–44.

20 Reynolds, 'Civic religion', pp. 278–81. Elsewhere Reynolds elaborated on the role of the civic religion in the success of the student movement, which he attributed to it being framed in relation to the symbols of the Thai civic religion, including the monarchy and religion (understood as Buddhism). See Frank E. Reynolds, 'Legitimation and rebellion: Thailand's civic religion and the student uprising of October, 1973', in *Religion and legitimation of power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg: ANIMA Books, 1978), pp. 134–46.

21 Koson Srisang, 'Dhammocracy in Thailand: A study in social ethics as a hermeneutic of dhamma' (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1973), pp. 220–1.

of continuity between the religious forms of the past and the present', between the civic religion of the traditional kingdoms and the modern Thai nation-state, as manifested by the continued central role of institutional Buddhism as a pillar of the national community.[22] In other words, Thailand remained too mired in religio-political traditionalism to qualify for the level of modernity with which 'civil religion' was associated.

One puzzling aspect of Reynolds' engagement with the debates about civil religion is the very limited attention he paid to the role of Thai civic religion in relation to ethnic and religious pluralism. After all, Coleman had observed that, 'a civil religion based on one highly specific world religion is bound to fail to provide integrating national symbols for the whole population in the land'.[23] The closest Reynolds comes to touching on this challenge for aspiring Thai nation builders comes in a footnote, where he explains that he due to space limitations has had to focus the discussion of *satsana* on Buddhism alone,[24] thus ignoring 'the character and importance of the tension between the identification of the satsana with Buddhism and its use as a referent to all of the "great religions" that have Thai adherents, including especially Islam and Christianity'.[25] What Reynolds is briefly alluding to here, then, is the possibility that satsana broadly conceived might fulfil a role in a Thai civil religion that is analogous to 'God' in American civil religion. Just as it is possible to be strategically ambiguous about whose God one is referring to, so it is possible to be strategically ambiguous about whether satsana refers to one religion in particular (Buddhism) or to all religions.

The notion of civil religion also had an appeal to other scholars of Thai religion and society, but no one cared to engage in as explicit a conversation with Bellah and Coleman as Reynolds had done. Most noteworthy is the central role of the concept of civil religion in the work of Donald K. Swearer, a professor of religion and philosophy at Swarthmore College. His 1995 book, *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asia*, includes a chapter on 'Buddhism as civil religion'. However, Swearer provides no explicit clarification of the meaning of the concept. The seminal works by Bellah and Coleman on civil religion are not cited, and neither is Reynolds's 1977 article. Implicitly, it seems clear that Swearer considers Buddhism a 'civil religion' to the extent that ruling elites seek to use it as the basis for 'political legitimation and national integration' (the subtitle of the chapter).[26]

The concept of civil religion also plays a central role in Swearer's contribution to Ian Harris's edited volume on *Buddhism and politics in twentieth century Asia*. Here, Swearer discusses the development of Thai Buddhist civil religion from the classical kingdoms to the modern era. While Swearer again provides no definition of civil

22 Reynolds, 'Civic religions', p. 281.
23 Coleman, 'Civil religion', p. 71.
24 When referring to the Thai linguistic context I will render the words for religion (**ศาสนา**) and the cosmic law and order (**ธรรมะ**) as *satsana* and *thamma*, respectively. When discussing the broader civilizational sphere, I will follow the Pali transcription of these terms (i.e., *sasana* and *dhamma*).
25 Reynolds, 'Civic religion and national community', p. 274. Reynolds comments on the position of religious minorities in a later paper, but then in relation to secular law rather than to civic religion. See Frank E. Reynolds, 'Dhamma in dispute: The interactions of religion and law in Thailand', *Law & Society Review* 28, 3 (1994): 433–51.
26 Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asa* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), ch. 2.

religion, it seems to refer primarily to the position and function of the Buddhist *sangha* in the Thai polity, and especially to its more instrumental political uses. Thus, Swearer contrasts the 'civil religion Buddhism' of Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn with that of Field Marshal Sarit and his immediate successors: whereas 'the former used *sangha* reform to create a nation out of disparate regions; the latter used the national *sangha* organization to promote the goals of national development'.[27] Swearer goes on to identify a new religious movement — Wat Phra Thammakaya — as 'one of the most distinctive new forms of Thai Buddhist civil religion'.[28] He describes the goal of Wat Phra Thammakaya as one of restoring 'a modernized version of a Buddhist civil religion built around a national shrine'.[29] At the same time, Swearer observes that some other new Buddhist lay and monastic movements — notably those associated with Buddhadasa, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Phra Bhodirak — offer 'resistance to … establishment civil religion'.[30] Swearer's formulation raises the possibility that such resistance may be grounded in rival conceptions of Thai civil religion, but it is not one he addresses. Finally, it is worth noting that Swearer's various discussions of Thai civil religion pay no attention to the position of non-Buddhist minorities within the kingdom.

Swearer's treatment of the Cold War-era permutations of the Thai Buddhist civil religion owes much to the anthropologist Charles F. Keyes's analysis of the instrumental use of 'Buddhism' to combat Communism, foster development, and assimilate the so-called hill tribes.[31] While Keyes makes no explicit references to civil religion, Bellah, or Coleman, his path-breaking article is centrally concerned with the role of religion in relation to questions of social integration and cohesion. And unlike Reynolds and Swearer, he raises the question of the position of religious minorities within the Thai nation-state:

> Insofar as equation of being Thai with being Buddhist is a cornerstone of Thai official thinking, non-Buddhists could be denied access to participation in the national community. It could be predicted that such a policy would lead to increasing alienation on the part of such minorities as the Thai-Islam who show no signs of becoming Buddhists. A similar case could be made for the tribal peoples unless the assimilationist programs become far more successful than they have to date.[32]

Note the ambiguity. Keyes is not quite claiming that 'Thai official thinking' fully equates being Thai with being Buddhist, nor that the government is pursuing such a policy. He is suggesting that such thinking and policy would be inadvisable. In a subsequent article Keyes observes that, 'The King himself in recent years has

27 Donald K. Swearer, 'Centre and periphery: Buddhism and politics in modern Thailand', in *Buddhism and politics in twentieth-century Asia*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Continuum, 1999), p. 214.
28 Ibid., p. 215.
29 Ibid., p. 224.
30 Donald K. Swearer, 'Sulak Sivaraksa's Buddhist vision for renewing society', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 6, 2 (1991): 218. For a similar argument primarily focused on Santi Asoke, see Jim Taylor, 'Buddhist revitalization, modernization, and social change in contemporary Thailand', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 8, 1 (1993): 62–91.
31 Charles F. Keyes, 'Buddhism and national integration in Thailand', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30, 3 (1971): 551–567.
32 Ibid., p. 567.

instituted patronage for Muslim, Christian, and non-Buddhist tribal peoples in Thailand and has had such patronage widely publicized in the country'. King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946–2016) evidently did not equate being Thai with being Buddhist.

I mention this because Keyes would many years later return to the theme in order to argue for the salience of an explicitly Tocquevillean and 'American' understanding of civil religion in the Thai context.[33] Keyes's contrast between civil religion — which is independent of any specific religious organisation or denomination, and of the state — and politicised religion in Thailand, is worth quoting at length:

> [I]n 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 … 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.[34]

Keyes goes on to suggest that Thailand had, in effect, turned into an approximation of Bellah's America:

> 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.[35]

So far, all the scholars who have engaged with the concept of civil religion in relation to Thailand have been either religious historians and sociologists, or anthropologists. However, in response to Swearer and Keyes, and in the wake of the intensification of a Malay-Muslim secessionist movement in Southern Thailand, the political scientist Duncan McCargo joined the conversation.[36] He argues that 'The recent rise of Buddhist chauvinism in Thailand illustrates the shortcomings of earlier claims that

33 Charles F. Keyes, 'Buddhism fragmented: Thai Buddhism and political order since the 1970s.' Keynote address presented at the Seventh International Thai Studies Conference, Amsterdam, 4–8 July 1999.
34 Ibid, p. 3
35 Ibid., p. 28.
36 Duncan McCargo, 'The politics of Buddhist identity in Thailand's deep south: The demise of civil religion?' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, 1 (2009): 11–32.

Thai Buddhism is essentially inclusivist and tolerant — in short, that it constitutes a "civil religion".'[37] On the contrary, he asserts that, 'Religion in Thailand is national, particularist, and deeply uncivil'. Moreover, he charges that, 'Scholars who suggest that Thai Buddhist ethno-nationalism has somehow quietly transformed itself into a harmless civic religion are engaging in some very wishful thinking indeed.'[38]

McCargo's polemic against Swearer and Keyes is helpful in the sense that it brings the religious minority question clearly into focus. It is less helpful to the extent that it perpetuates the confusion surrounding the concept of civil religion. McCargo assumes that a civil religion is 'essentially inclusivist and tolerant.' But that is not necessarily how earlier authors have conceived it. In his seminal article, Bellah warned of the potential for 'deformation and demonic distortions' of civil religion.[39] Coleman's typology of civil religions included numerous exclusivist and intolerant varieties. Likewise, in an article on the thought of one of Thailand's leading lay Buddhist intellectuals, Sulak Sivaraksa, Swearer had made reference to 'conventional ritualistic Buddhism, the *pro forma* Buddhism of civil religion, a Buddhism identified with Thai chauvinism and militaristic, aggressive values.'[40] Moreover, in his regional survey of 'Buddhism as civil religion,' Swearer made clear that Buddhism as civil religion could manifest as forms of 'Buddhist nationalism' that are associated with 'extremes of violent conflict and repression,' as had been the case in Burma and Sri Lanka.[41]

It should be clear from this that Swearer and Keyes operate with fundamentally different conceptions of civil religion. For Swearer, chauvinistic manifestations of Buddhist nationalism are simply one type of civil religion. For Keyes these would be examples of 'politicised' and 'militant' religion — in sharp contrast with what he takes genuine civil religion to be. It is therefore rather surprising that McCargo presents Swearer and Keyes as proponents of '*the* "civil religion" perspective'.[42]

Although they differ fundamentally in their interpretation of civil religion, Swearer and Keyes have one important thing in common that sets them apart from McCargo. Far from suggesting that Buddhism, in Thailand or anywhere else, is essentially anything, both recognise the malleability of the Buddhist tradition and its relation to politics, and they go to considerable lengths to illuminate the many varied ways in which Thai Buddhists have imagined religion-state relations. For Keyes and Swearer Thai Buddhism is plural. For McCargo it is singular.

Prompted by McCargo's intervention, Keyes later elaborated on his understanding of the evolution of the religious and political landscape in Thailand. He drew attention to a growing tension 'between "civil Buddhism" and other more nationalistic versions of Buddhism, the most prominent representative of which is what I [Keyes] term "establishment Buddhism".'[43] To add to the conceptual mess, Keyes's contrast between civil and establishment Buddhism echoes the distinction between civic and

37 Ibid., p. 11.
38 Ibid., p. 13.
39 Bellah, 'Civil religion', p. 12.
40 Swearer, 'Sulak Sivaraksa's', p. 43.
41 Swearer, *The Buddhist world* (1995), p. 102.
42 McCargo, 'The politics of Buddhist identity', p. 12 (emphasis added).
43 Charles Keyes, 'Muslim "others" in Buddhist Thailand', *Thammasat Review* 13, 1 (2009): 23.

civil Buddhism made by Michael Parnwell and Martin Seeger.[44] While Keyes notes this, he fails to spot that Parnwell and Seeger reverse the meaning of these categories: their civic Buddhism equals Keyes' civil Buddhism; and their civil Buddhism (following Swearer) maps onto what Keyes calls establishment Buddhism.

Considering this combination of confusion and critique it is not difficult to understand why Swearer eventually abandoned the notion of civil religion entirely. In a revised edition of *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asia*, the chapter originally entitled 'Buddhism as civil religion' was given a new gloss, 'Buddhism and the state', and the many references to civil religion disappear without trace.[45]

Before I turn to the task of making a case for the continued relevance of civil religion as an analytical tool, I would be remiss if I did not mention a major Thai research project which used Bellah's work on civil religion as its conceptual starting point. In the wake of the cycle of Red Shirt versus Yellow Shirt mobilisation following the 2006 coup that toppled the popularly elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra, the senior political scientist Sombat Chanthornvong (whose Ph.D. dissertation at Claremont was supervised by the Straussian political scientist Harry Jaffa) led a collaborative research project, funded by Thailand's national research agency, which posited that the process of political polarisation was driven by conflict between proponents of the 'traditional' Thai civil religion, centred on king and Buddhism, and advocates of a 'new' civil religion — progressive, egalitarian, and devoid of any religious (Buddhist) grounding. The project's title was: 'The crisis of competing civic religions: A study of contemporary prophets and their teachings'.[46] Among the 'prophets' in question were some of Thailand's most prominent social scientists and public intellectuals: Kasian Tejapira (Ph.D. in Government from Cornell), Thongchai Winichakul (Ph.D. in History from Sydney), Somsak Jeamteerasakul (Ph.D. in History from Monash), and Nidhi Eoseewong (Ph.D. in History from Michigan-Ann Arbor). Their critiques of the kingdom's 'traditional civil religion' were analysed in two main publications by Chulalongkorn University professors Supamit Pitipat (Ph.D. in Political Science from Chulalongkorn) and Chaiyan Chaiyaporn (Ph.D. in Government from LSE).[47] The progressive new civil religion represented by these Western-educated public intellectuals was contrasted with the older civil religion championed by King Bhumibol, and by Sonthi Limthongkul and other leaders of the Yellow

44 Michael Parnwell and Martin Seeger, 'The relocalization of Buddhism in Thailand', *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 15, 1 (2008): 79–176.

45 Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asia*, second edition (SUNY Press, 2010).

46 Around the same time, another former student of Harry Jaffa, the prominent Thai statesman of Malay-Muslim descent, Surin Pitsuwan (Ph.D. in Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard), argued that the survival of democracy in Thailand, and Southeast Asia more broadly, would require the successful institution of 'civil religion'. See Surin Pitsuwan, 'Civil religion, secular state, and democracy: The taming of religious sentiments in Thailand', in *Religion and democracy in Thailand*, ed. Imtiyaz Yusuf and Canan Atilgan (Bangkok: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2008), pp. 6–13.

47 Supamit Pitipat [ศุภมิตร ปีติพัฒน์], บทวิพากษ์ธรรมวิทยาแห่งพลเมืองของประกาศกร่วมสมัย: เกษียร เตชะพีระ, ธงชัย วินิจจะกูล และ สมศักดิ์ เจียมธีรสกุล [*Contemporary prophets and their critiques of Thai civic religion: Kasian Tejapira, Thongchai Winichakul, and Somsak Jeamteerasakul*] (Bangkok: Khop Fai, 2012); Chaiyan Chaiyaporn [ไชยันต์ ไชยพร]. นิธิ เอียวศรีวงศ์ ใน/กับวิกฤตการเมืองไทย [*Nidhi Eoseewong in/and the Thai political crisis*] (Bangkok: Khop Fai, 2014).

Shirt movement, as outlined in studies by Waruni Osatharom, Sunai Setbunsang, and Khachon Faihet.[48]

One of the contributions of Sombat's research project was to establish a novel rendering of the concept of civil religion in the Thai language. Rather than the civic satsana from Reynold's 1970 article, Sombat and his team of researchers spoke of 'civic thammology' (*thammawitthaya haeng phonlamueang*).[49] Sombat's invocation of the concept of *thamma* rather than satsana in this context seems like an inspired move. It is arguably thamma, rather than the category of religion, that is the 'referent, albeit differently understood, to an ultimate reality on which the moral order of society depends'.[50]

Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, McCargo contributed to Sombat's research project on Thai civil religion. In the resultant article on the Thai sangha's role in state legitimation, McCargo nevertheless steered clear of the concept of civil religion. Instead, he couched his discussion in relation to the notion of 'an implicit social contract, along the lines Robert Bellah has suggested for the United States'.[51]

What are we to make of all this? This survey has hopefully revealed that several generations of leading scholars of religion and politics in Thailand have found the concept of civil religion a stimulating and provocative one. It has also revealed that this literature is sorely lacking in conceptual clarity. This is partly a consequence of the stretching of the concept, going back to Coleman, to incorporate every conceivable variant of religion–state relationship, from extreme religious nationalism to the most militant forms of secularism, and everything in between. Despite the decidedly chequered history of civil religion as an analytical tool in the study of Thai religion and politics, the objective of the remainder of this paper is to argue that the concept remains useful. To put the study of civil religion in Thailand on a firmer footing, it is, however, necessary to refashion the concept.

Rethinking civil religion

In recent years, scholars have again made productive use of the concept of civil religion in studies of the relationship between religion, nation, and state. Most notably, Philip S. Gorski has sought to 'reformulate and rehabilitate the notion of civil

48 Waruni Osatharom [วารุณี โอสถารมย์], 'ธรรมวิทยาแห่งพลเมืองจากพระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัวภูมิพลอดุลยเดช สารจากพระบรมราโชวาท พระราชดำรัส พระราชนิพนธ์ และจิตรกรรมบางเรื่อง: รายงานการวิจัย' [Civil religion from King Bhumibol: Messages from royal speeches, royal writings, and some paintings: A research report], 2008; Sunai Setbunsang [สุนัย เศรษฐ์บุญสร้าง], ทางออกวิกฤติความขัดแย้งแตกแยกในระบบสังคมการเมืองไทย [*Analysis on the conflicts in Thai society and ways to solve them*] (Bangkok: Din Nam Fa, 2009); Khachon Faithet [ขจร ฝ่ายเทศ], 'บทบาทประกาศก ของนายสนธิ ลิมทองกุลและกลุ่มพันธมิตรประชาชนเพื่อประชาธิปไตย ในการนำเสนอประเด็นสาระธรรมวิทยาแห่งพลเมืองทางรายการโทรทัศน์เพื่อต่อต้านรัฐบาล ทักษิณ ชินวัตร พ.ศ. 2548-2549' [The prophet role of Sondhi Limthongkul and the People's Alliance for Democracy in presenting civil religion issues on their television programs against the Thaksin Shinawatra government, 2005-2006], *Humanities and Social Sciences Nakhonsawan Rajabhat University Academic Journal* 6, 2 (2019): 180–90.

49 Sombat Chanthornvong [สมบัติ จันทรวงศ์], โครงการวิกฤตความแตกแยกของธรรมวิทยาแห่งพลเมือง: การศึกษาคำประกาศธรรมของประกาศกร่วมสมัย [The crisis of competing civic religions: A study of contemporary prophets and their teachings] (Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund, 2013).

50 Keyes, 'Buddhism fragmented', p. 28.

51 Duncan McCargo, 'The changing politics of Thailand's Buddhist order', *Critical Asian Studies* 44, 4 (2012): 630.

religion' by drawing on Weber.[52] Gorski conceives civil religion as a religio-political order characterised by an overlap between religion and politics (in contrast with either fusion or separation of the two), and by a balance between religion and politics, such that neither sphere dominates the other. Furthermore, Gorski associates civil religion with a discursive and cultural 'tradition' that, in the US context, competes with two rival traditions. Namely, religious nationalism and radical secularism. While the former advocates for a fusion of religion and politics, the latter seeks a total separation of religion and politics.[53]

We find a strikingly similar basic structure in the analytical framework adopted by J. Christopher Soper and Joel S. Fetzer in their study of the 'religion-nationalism nexus'. They distinguish between three different types of nationalism: secular nationalism, civil-religious nationalism, and religious nationalism. As for Gorski, the civil-religious form of nationalism is characterised by state accommodation or active support of religious pluralism.[54]

These recent re-conceptualisations of civil religion can, I hope to show, help advance the study of religion and politics in Thailand and in other parts of Southeast Asia. They provide a conceptual map for investigating civil religion as one strand of religio-political discourse and ideology among others. Such an ideology may, but need not, be institutionalised in the state and reflected in the wider political culture.

Roots of a civil-religious tradition in Thailand

With this in mind, we can now revisit some of the arguments discussed earlier. Of the scholars discussed so far, it is without doubt in Keyes's writings that one finds the strongest resonances with the idea that civil religion should be considered a particular form of nationalism, and that a civil-religious strand of nationalism is an important feature of the political landscape in Thailand. Keyes is correct to identify the double meaning of satsana as one of the keys to this form of nationalism. Unlike Keyes, who identifies the tension between the two interpretations as a phenomenon that became apparent only in the 1990s, it arguably has a longer history. In fact, Reynolds observed in the 1970s that the meaning of satsana was contested by 'reactionary forces' and advocates of 'more liberal interpretations'.[55] The latter, according to which satsana is understood as 'religion', represents what I would call a civil-religious form of nationalism, while the former, who insist that satsana equals Buddhism exclusively, exemplify religious nationalism. But neither Keyes nor Reynolds shed any light on the roots of the plural interpretation of satsana in Thai political thought.

The civil-religious conception of satsana — according to which the term refers to religions in the plural rather than to Buddhism specifically — dates back at least to the

52 Philip S. Gorski, 'Barack Obama and civil religion', in *Rethinking Obama*, ed. Julian Go (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2011), p. 183.

53 See Philip S. Gorski, *American covenant: A history of civil religion from the puritans to the present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Philip S. Gorski, 'Reviving the civil religious tradition', in *Religion and progressive activism: New stories about faith and politics*, ed. Ruth Braunstein et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), pp. 271–88.

54 J. Christopher Soper and Joel S. Fetzer, *Religion and nationalism in global perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

55 See Frank E. Reynolds, 'Legitimation and rebellion', p. 137.

early 1930s. Following the 1932 revolution which toppled the absolute monarchy, it became imperative to clarify the meaning of satsana. The distinction between a singular and a plural reading of satsana was highlighted as Siam's new leaders reflected on the English-language translation of the kingdom's new constitution. In an early draft, the king's constitutional role as *akkhara satsanupathamphok* (**อัครศาสนูปถัมภก**) had been rendered as 'upholder of The Faith' (i.e., Buddhism). At this point Prince Wan Waithayakon Worawan intervened and proposed that the relevant clause should read '[The King shall] Profess the Buddhist *Faith* and is the upholder of *Religion*'.[56] Thailand has churned through a great number of constitutions since then, but this strategically ambiguous phrase has remained a constant. Over time the plural understanding has been further amplified. Notably, the preamble to the 1974 constitution introduced a commitment to the protection not of religion but of *every* religion, and the English-language translation of the clause about the religious role of the king added a plural -s, making him 'upholder of religions'.[57] Consider also the fact that royalist paramilitary mobilisation in the 1970s and 1980s sought to foster loyalty 'to the nation, religions, and the King'.[58] While the nation and the king were singular, religions were plural.

The idea that the secular ruler has a duty to protect and promote religion in general — rather than act as a partisan of a creed or sect — is not without precedent in the Buddhist world. Arguably, it can be traced back to the model Buddhist ruler of ancient India, King Asoka. Patrick Olivelle has advanced the idea that Asoka's inscriptions articulate 'a particular kind of imperial ideology', which Olivelle characterises as a 'civil religion'.[59] According to Olivelle, *dhamma* serves the same function in Asoka's civil religion as 'God' does in Bellah's American civil religion.[60] Like *sasana*, dhamma can be interpreted narrowly, as referring to the teachings of the Buddha, or broadly, as a universal ethic applicable to followers of every religion. The strongest evidence for the idea that Asoka's dhamma was 'not narrowly Buddhist' is found, according to Olivelle, in his twelfth rock edict.[61] There, Asoka declared his equal support for all the different sects and urged them to live in harmony. To foster such peaceful condominium, Asoka encouraged members of the different communities to refrain from exalting their own sect and from speaking ill of other sects.

Both Reynolds and Swearer have commented on the significance of Asoka as a model for Thai Buddhist rulers. However, they describe Asoka's civil (Swearer) or civic (Reynolds) religion as narrowly Buddhist. This allows them to draw a straight

56 Wan Waithayakon Worawan [**วรรณไวทยากร วรวรรณ**], **อภิปรายร่างรัฐธรรมนูญ** [*Discussion on the draft constitution*] (N.P.: Bamrung Nukulkit, 1932), p. 29 (emphasis in original). This weighs against the 'singular interpretation' of satsana advocated by Eugénie Mérieau, 'Buddhist constitutionalism in Thailand: When rājadhammā supersedes the constitution', *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 13, 2 (2018): 294.

57 Tomas Larsson, 'The ambiguous allure of Ashoka: Buddhist kingship as precedent, potentiality, and pitfall for covenantal pluralism in Thailand', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 19, 2 (2021): 78.

58 Katherine Ann Bowie, *Rituals of national loyalty: An anthropology of the state and the village scout movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 288.

59 Patrick Olivelle, 'Aśoka's inscriptions as text and ideology', in *Reimagining Aśoka: Memory and history*, ed. Patrick Olivelle, Janice Leoshko, and Himanshu Prabha Ray (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 158.

60 Ibid., p. 174.

61 Ibid., p. 172.

line from Asoka, via the pre-modern Theravada kings, to the Buddhist nationalists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. And in the corpus of Buddhist chronicles and legends there is undoubtedly a great deal of material which would support such an interpretation of the Asokan legacy for the modern religio-politics of Buddhist Southeast Asia.

However, there is also some evidence to suggest that modern Thai intellectuals have interpreted Asoka in more civil-religious terms, along the lines indicated by Olivelle. Indeed, an influential strand of Thai history-cum-ideology production, starting in the early twentieth century, sought to forge a link between Asokan-style civil-religious ideals, the reigning Chakri dynasty, and the values of religious toleration and freedom. The twelfth rock edict, emphasised by Olivelle as evidence for Asoka's civil religion, can also provide a key to a modern Thai re-interpretation of the Asokan model of kingship. The inscriptions of Asoka were only deciphered in the 1830s by British colonial officials. In light of the twelfth rock edict, this ancient Buddhist king was soon presented, by Western scholars and statesmen, as an enlightened ruler who championed religious pluralism and harmonious coexistence between faith communities.[62]

It is perhaps not entirely surprising that Thai intellectual elites, often of royal blood, would seize the opportunity to present the Chakri dynasty, or Thai kings more generally, along lines that fit this 'new' and internationally admired Asokan model. For example, a famous 1908 sermon by Prince Wachirayanwarorot, the Sangha Supreme Patriarch, presented King Mongkut as having 'bestowed full freedom of religion, for all religions and sects, protecting and promoting them all as part of [royal] religious patronage'.[63] The link between Asoka's polity and the Thai monarchy's religious inclusiveness was made explicit by Prince Damrong Rajanubhap, who argued that the great Thai kings had embraced a model of 'paternal government' pioneered by Asoka.[64]

The earliest Thai translation of the Asokan inscriptions that I have been able to locate appeared in 1899.[65] Reflecting the English-language original, Asoka actually doesn't appear particularly tolerant here.[66] In later translations, based on different English versions, the archetypical Buddhist emperor does, however, appear as a

62 Lord Acton famously argued that 'liberty of conscience … was first proclaimed, and established by enactment, not in polytheistic and philosophical Greece, but in India, by Asoka, the earliest of Buddhist kings, 250 years before the Birth of Christ'. Lord Acton, 'The history of freedom in antiquity, An address delivered to the members of the Bridgnorth Institute, February 26, 1877', Acton Institute, https://www.acton.org/research/history-freedom-antiquity (last accessed 5 Apr. 2024).

63 Prince Wachirayanwarorot [กรมพระยาวชิรญาณวโรรส], พระธรรมเทศนา: ประมวลพระนิพนธ์สมเด็จพระ มหา สมณ เจ้า กรม พระยา วชิร ญาณ ว โร รส [*Buddha-thamma sermons: Collection of His Royal Highness Prince Wachirayanwarorot's writings*] (Bangkok: Mahamakutratchawithayalai, 1971), p. 58.

64 Larsson, 'The ambiguous allure', p. 77.

65 Phraya Prachakitkonchak's (พระยาประชากิจกรจักร์) translations of rock edicts 1 to 14, from James Prinsep's English-language version, plus H. H. Wilson's translation of the Bhabra inscription, were published in the national library's monthly magazine, วชิรญาณ [Wachirayan], 57 (June 1899), pp. 789–828.

66 It was based on Prinsep's translation of the 12th rock edict rather than that of Wilson. The former begins: 'The heaven-beloved king Piyadasi [Asoka] propitiateth all unbelievers…' And the latter: 'The beloved of the gods King Priyadasi, honours all forms of religious faith…' See H. H. Wilson, 'On the rock inscriptions of Kapur Di Giri, Dhauli, and Girnar', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 12 (1850): 221.

patron of all forms of religious piety, irrespective of sect and creed. It is one of these more 'liberal' translations that P.A. Payutto, who would go on to gain a reputation as one of Thailand's leading scholar-monks, relied on when he made a new translation of Asoka's inscriptions in 1963, although it took another 10 years before it was published.[67] P.A. Payutto's translation of the edicts have been republished many times since then, and in an expanded discourse on Asoka and his edicts published in 2009, P.A. Payutto presented the inscriptions as the basis for a 'political science' of *thammathipatai* (**ธรรมาธิปไตย**), i.e., the sovereignty of thamma. The twelfth rock edict shows, argues P.A. Payutto, that this model of government is an exemplar of religious toleration which allows 'true' religious freedom to flourish.[68]

Following in the footsteps of Prince Damrong and P.A. Payutto, Sulak Sivaraksa, the prominent Sino-Thai activist and intellectual, has likewise put forward an inscription-inspired image of Asoka as an exemplary Buddhist ruler whose thamma principally manifested in his support for all religions and sects.[69] Moreover, as an energetic champion of 'small "b" Buddhism' and inter-religious dialogue and cooperation,[70] Sulak has played an undeniable role in fostering civil-religious sentiments in Thai civil society.

More recently, the philosopher Suwanna Satha-anand has pointed to the Asokan model of religiously tolerant Buddhist kingship — as expressed in the twelfth rock edict — as an ideological counterweight against what she perceives as a rising tide of Buddhist chauvinism.[71] Similarly, leading conservative intellectuals have highlighted Asoka's warm embrace of religious pluralism as a hallmark of ideal Buddhist kingship,[72] and argued that the Chakri kings' benevolence towards all religions has saved Thailand from the kinds of nationalist excesses, leading to communal violence, experienced in many other parts of Asia.[73]

As Bhumibol's long reign drew to a close, the country's religious bureaucracy began to produce hagiographies that showcased cosmopolitan royalism in unprecedented detail. To celebrate Bhumibol's 84th birthday in 2011, the Religious Affairs Department released an illustrated book of over 300 pages to highlight how he,

67 'King Priyadarśī, the Beloved of the Gods, shows reverence to people of all (religious) sects…' See Radaghovinda Bhasak, *Aśokan inscriptions* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1959), p. 61.

68 P.A. Payutto [**ป. อ. ปยุตโต**], **จารึกอโศก (ธรรมจักรบนเศียรสีสิงห์) รัฐศาสตร์แห่งธรรมาธิปไตย** [*Asoka's inscriptions (the wheel of thamma on four lionheads): The political science of thammacracy*] (Bangkok: Phli Tham, 2009), p. 96. In P.A. Payutto's rendering, Asoka 'honours and respects religious people of all religious sects' [**ยกย่องนับถือศาสนิกชนแห่งลัทธิศาสนาทั้งปวง**]. Ibid., p. 95.

69 S. Sivaraksa [**ส. ศิวรักษ์**], **ความเข้าใจในเรื่องพระเจ้าอโศกและอโศกาวทาน** [*Understanding King Asoka and Asokavadana*] (Bangkok: Thai-Tibet Center, 1990), p. 13. In this book Sulak re-published P.A. Payutto's translation of the Asokan rock inscriptions.

70 Swearer, 'Sulak Sivaraksa's', p. 43.

71 See Suwanna Satha-anand, 'Buddhist pluralism and religious tolerance in democratizing Thailand', in *Philosophy, democracy, and education*, ed. Philip Cam (Seoul: Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 2003), pp. 205–6; Suwanna Satha-anand, 'The question of violence in Thai Buddhism', in *Buddhism and violence: Militarism and Buddhism in modern Asia*, ed. Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 176.

72 Pricha Changkhwanyuen [**ปรีชา ช้างขวัญยืน**], **ธรรมรัฐ ธรรมราชา** [*Righteous state, righteous king*] (Bangkok: Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 2014), pp. 138–9.

73 Anek Laothammatas [**เอนกเหล่าธรรมทัศน์**], **พระมหากษัตริย์กับความเป็นไทย** [*Monarchy and Thainess*] (Bangkok: Public Wisdom Institute, 2019), pp. 59–60.

over the decades, had extended his patronage to Thai religions, with separate sections presenting royal activities pertaining to Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Brahmanism/Hinduism, and Sikhism. A not insignificant aspect of the production of this book, was that it was led by a committee which, in addition to members of the religious bureaucracy, also included representatives of the officially recognised religious communities: 11 Buddhists; six Muslims; five Christians; four Brahmins; two Hindus; and, finally, one Sikh.[74]

A few years later, a slightly more academic work, also running to more than 300 pages, was published on the topic of *The monarchy and Muslims in Thailand*.[75] It was considered such as success that it was promptly translated into English, Arabic and Malay,[76] and in 2018 a revised version was released, with an expanded account of King Vajiralongkorn's activities in relation to Muslim communities.[77] Although authored by prominent academics under the leadership of Sunet Chutintaranon (Ph.D. in History from Cornell), the foreign-language translations were published by the Internal Security Operations Command with support from the Crown Property Bureau Foundation, indicating that these publications represent an authoritative articulation of Thai civil-religious nationalism.

One of the more striking aspects of this sudden burst of ideology production, is the prominence given to the consorts of kings Rama II and Rama IV and the 'Muslim blood' of their respective children who ascended to the Siamese throne: Rama III and Rama V. Through their mothers, these Chakri kings could trace their ancestry to Sultan Sulaiman of Singora (r. 1620–76), a small kingdom in what is today southern Thailand. The Chakri dynasty thereby becomes the embodiment, not just metaphorically but literally, of the civil religion of cosmopolitan royalism.[78]

What is the significance of this in relation to the earlier discussion of Thai civil religion? It suggests that while Keyes was correct to draw attention to the importance of the pluralistic interpretation of satsana as a component of a Thai civil-religious tradition, we should recognise two things that Keyes overlooked. The first is that this shift in emphasis from singular to plural reflects a longer tradition of religio-political thought and discourse which, at least in part, draws inspiration from a modern re-interpretation of the Asokan model. The second is that it has been intimately

74 **พระบรมราชูปถัมภ์กิจการศาสนาในพระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัว** [*The king's patronage of religion*], Bangkok: Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Culture, 2011.

75 Muslim Studies Center [**ศูนย์มุสลิมศึกษา**], **สถาบันพระมหากษัตริย์กับมุสลิมในแผ่นดินไทย** [*The monarchy and Muslims in Thailand*] (Bangkok: Muslim Studies Center, Chulalongkorn University, 2013).

76 Multicultural Studies and Social Innovation Center, *The monarchy and Muslims in Thailand* (Bangkok: Internal Security Operations Command, 2017).

77 Multicultural Studies and Social Innovation Center [**ศูนย์พหุวัฒนธรรมศึกษาและนวัตกรรมทางสังคม**], **สถาบันพระมหากษัตริย์กับมุสลิมในแผ่นดินไทย (ฉบับพิเศษ)** [*The monarchy and Muslims in Thailand* (special edition)] (Bangkok: Multicultural Studies and Social Innovation Center, Chulalongkorn University, 2018).

78 Scholars have recently brought attention to the role of Muslim identities and actors in the making of the Thai political elite. See Justin Thomas McDaniel, 'Ethnicity and the galactic polity: Ideas and actualities in the history of Bangkok', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 49, 1 (2018): 129–48; Graham Dalrymple and Christopher M. Joll, 'The demise and rise of Singora's Sultan Sulaiman lineage', *Journal of the Siam Society* 110, 2 (2022): 53–84.

connected with the Thai institution of monarchy. As a consequence, the dominant version of civil-religious nationalism in Thailand is fundamentally royalist.[79]

By recognising that we among Thai nationalist discourses can find an Asoka-inspired civil-religious strand — Thai cosmopolitan royalism — we are better able to make sense of political choices and practices that otherwise appear rather puzzling.

Let us first consider a road not taken (in recent decades) by Thai military elites, as described by three different scholars. Keyes has contrasted the religio-political choices that state elites in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand made in the 1970s and 1980s. While elites in the former two countries embraced highly politicised and militant forms of Buddhist nationalism, Keyes notes that Thai political elites in the wake of the 1976 coup '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'.[80] Writing about the same period, Takahashi Tsukamoto has similarly shown how Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda (1980–88) downplayed the Buddhist elements of Thai national identity and promoted a more multicultural form of Thai nationalism.[81] Reflecting on the period following the 2014 military coup, Janjira Sombatpoonsiri has drawn attention to the fact that activists in Buddhist majoritarian nationalist movements perceive the main 'threat' to Thai Buddhism to consist in the 'subservience' of 'royalist elites' — the military junta and the palace — to the Muslim minority.[82]

Let us also consider the practices of 'civil pluralism' that, Hjorleifur R. Jonsson argues, has characterised Thai relations with the mountain minorities in the country's northern provinces.[83] While Jonsson stresses the importance of practices inclusive of the ethnically Other,[84] he is unable to identify their ideological basis. He concludes: 'The practices of civil pluralism that I have called attention to may never have been clearly articulated as "ideas of power". It appears that inclusive and diverse identities have not left a cultural imprint, in contrast to the many public expressions of identity as singular and exclusive'.[85]

79 Tomas Larsson, 'Religion, political parties, and Thailand's 2019 election: Cosmopolitan royalism and its rivals', *Modern Asian Studies* 57, 2 (2023): 582–612.

80 Keyes, 'Buddhism fragmented', p. 36. Keyes would subsequently develop this comparative perspective, but in doing so he dropped all references to civil religion. See Charles Keyes, 'Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist nationalism: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, 4 (2016): 41–52. For context on the road that could have been, but wasn't, travelled after 1976, see Charles F. Keyes, 'Political crisis and militant Buddhism in contemporary Thailand', in *Religion and legitimation of power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg: ANIMA Books, 1978), pp. 147–64.

81 Takashi Tsukamoto, 'Encountering the other within: Thai national identity and the Malay-Muslims of the deep south' (Ph.D. diss., Australian National University, 2011), pp. 143–66.

82 Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, 'Buddhist majoritarian nationalism in Thailand: Ideological contestation, narratives, and activism,' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 53, 3 (2023): 398.

83 Hjorleifur R. Jonsson, 'Losing the remote: Exploring the Thai social order with the early and late Hanks,' *Anthropological Forum* 32, 1 (2022): 76–94.

84 It bears noting that they are often religiously Other as well, as animists or Christians.

85 Ibid., p. 90.

These observations prompt several questions. Why did the generals 'turn away' from Buddhist chauvinism after the 1976 crisis? Why did Prem promote a 'multicultural' version of Thai nationalism? Why have the ruling 'royalist elites' adopted such a 'weak' — i.e., inclusive — stance towards religious minority communities that it raises the heckles of Buddhist chauvinists? And more importantly, what are the 'ideas of power', or the ideological justifications, that underpin these policies and practices?

My suggestion would be that answers to these questions are likely to be found, in no small part, in the Asoka-inspired civil-religious tradition of cosmopolitan royalism. It is by design and not by accident that hyper-royalist Thai generals and their civilian allies have shied away from making instrumental use of exclusionary Buddhist nationalism during crises of legitimacy, such as in the aftermath of the 1976 coup, as Keyes had noted, and again after the 2006 and 2014 coups.[86] It is likewise by design and not by accident that, as Jonsson observes, it is 'members of the Thai monarchy' rather than 'Bangkok politicians' who have taken the lead in efforts to 'cultivate highlanders' loyalties with visits and exchanges' and similar 'attempts at inclusivity and civil pluralism'.[87] What this points to is the emergence of cosmopolitan royalism as the motive force of religio-political statecraft in Thailand.[88]

Of course, Asoka is not the only role model available to practitioners of civil-religious statecraft in Thailand. It is noteworthy, for example, that Josip Broz Tito (president of Yugoslavia, 1953–80), appears to have made an indelible impression on King Bhumibol, in ways salient to the question about roads not taken. During the Second World War, Bhumibol, who at the time was living in Switzerland, named his Siamese cat after the Croatian partisan and Communist leader. Decades later, Bhumibol would translate Phyllis Auty's 1972 biography of the peasant son who rose to become president (for life!) of Yugoslavia. Auty's biography emphasises how Tito's exceptional personal qualities enabled him to succeed, against great odds, in uniting an ethnically and religiously fractious population while standing up to Great Power imperialism.[89] King Bhumibol distributed his translation to senior government officials in 1976, presumably to provide them with a model for the kind of political leadership that he thought his country required. In 1994, following the outbreak of civil war and break-up of Yugoslavia, Bhumibol's *Tito* was distributed more broadly, to raise funds for a royal charity. The brief foreword, signed 'Chitlada Palace' and dated to Bhumibol's 67th birthday, reminded the Thai general public that ethnically and religiously diverse societies that have been successfully united by great leaders can fall apart once these exceptional individuals have departed the political stage.[90] Two decades later, in the weeks following King Bhumibol's death, Thai public broadcasting drew renewed attention to Bhumibol's promotion of Tito as a model

86 On the more recent period, see Tomas Larsson, 'Royal succession and the politics of religious purification in contemporary Thailand', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52, 1 (2022): 2–22. Cf. Marie-Eve Reny, 'Myanmar's transition and the resurgence of Buddhist nationalism: How incumbents seek to hold on to power', *Asian Survey* 60, 6 (2020): 1072–89.

87 Jonsson, 'Losing the remote', p. 89.

88 It was not always thus. See Shane Strate, 'An uncivil state of affairs: Fascism and anti-Catholicism in Thailand, 1940–1944', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, 1 (2011): 59–87.

89 Phyllis Auty, *Tito: A biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).

90 Phyllis Auty [**ฟิลลิส ออตี**], **ติโต** [*Tito*], translated by Bhumibol Adulyadej (Bangkok: Amarin Printing, 1994).

nationalist leader.[91] It would thus not be entirely far-fetched to suggest that Thai civil religion has found inspiration not just in a refashioned Asokan image, but also, and even more unexpectedly, in Titoism.[92]

The search for the sources of civil-religious forms of nationalism in Theravada Buddhist lands may fruitfully start with the local reception Asoka's twelfth rock edict, but it need not end there.

Civil-religious nationalism and electoral contestation

Re-conceptualising civil religion as one among other types of nationalism can also help guide empirically grounded research in relation to contemporary political contestation. Or so I hope to demonstrate by briefly discussing how rival religio-politial visions recently have manifested in Thai electoral politics.

I first perceived the need for conceptual clarity when newspaper headlines in the run up to the 2019 election drew attention to the sudden emergence of 'Buddhist parties'. Given that an overwhelming majority of Thais are at least nominally Buddhist, all major political parties are in some sense 'Buddhist'. So what was going on? What the press was picking up on was that several newly founded parties presented themselves as champions of Buddhist causes, such as establishing Buddhism as the official state religion and expanding the role of, and material support for, the Thai sangha. In general, these parties sought to implement policies that would strengthen the Thai state's ideological and institutional links with Buddhism while weakening, at least in relative terms, the links to other religions (mainly Islam). Of course, this raised the spectre of Buddhist-nationalist political mobilisation along the lines witnessed in recent years in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar.[93]

While programmatically religious-nationalist parties, such as Prachaphiwat (which won one seat in parliament) and Phaendin Tham (which got none), met with very limited electoral success in the March 2019 election, the rise of religious-nationalist sentiments among the Buddhist electorate nevertheless appears to have influenced some of the major parties. It is worth noting, for instance, that the Pheu Thai Party's leader and candidate for prime minister, Sudarat Keyuraphan, in the years leading up to the election went to great lengths to raise her profile as a champion of Buddhism (including getting a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies), for which she earned numerous prizes and awards for services to Buddhism.[94]

While the religious-nationalist currents attracted attention from observers of the election campaign, so did the secular-nationalist challenge at the other end of the ideological spectrum. A newly established party which proved particularly popular among younger voters — Future Forward — became embroiled in controversy less because of its policy platform (which only referred to religion as one of the

91 Thai PBS Podcast, '**ติโต ตอนที่** 1' [Tito episode 1], 25 Oct. 2016, https://www.thaipbspodcast.com/podcast/library/ติโต_ตอนที่_1 (last accessed 9 Apr. 2024).

92 On civil religion in Tito's Yugoslavia, see Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan idols: Religion and nationalism in Yugoslav states* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 6.

93 See Iselin Frydenlund, 'Buddhist Islamophobia: Actors, tropes, contexts', in *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion*, ed. Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 279–302.

94 Larsson, 'Religion, political parties', p. 601.

characteristics based on which people should not suffer discrimination) than because of things the party leader had said in the past. Notably, political rivals drew attention to an interview from 2017, in which Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit had argued that 'the state should withdraw from religious affairs and should not provide patronage to any religion'.[95]

While these challenges to the status quo are noteworthy, the political landscape was otherwise dominated by parties that aligned themselves with the monarchy-centred model of civil-religious nationalism. These parties often had the least to say about religion. Palang Pracharath, the military proxy party, did not even once mention religion in its party platform. The party's first priority was to promote and preserve the 'democratic regime of government with the King as Head of State', which in turn would provide the basis for the creation of 'unity among the peoples of the nation' and 'public order or good morals'.[96] Among the parties that backed Palang Pracharath's prime ministerial candidate, coup maker and junta leader Prayuth Chan-ocha, were three parties representing different strands of the Yellow Shirt movement, who echoed a common religio-political position. In their party platforms, Action Coalition for Thailand, People Reform Party, and New Palangdharma Party, committed themselves to the pursuit of *thammathipatai*. These political parties viewed Thai politics is a struggle between 'good' and 'bad' people. It is not, it is important to note, a struggle between Buddhists and religious Others. Strikingly, Action Coalition for Thailand committed itself to a democratic political system in which 'the thamma of all religions' (**หลักธรรมของศาสนาทั้งปวง**) are integrated.[97] The thammacratic ideal embraced by these three parties reflects, I would argue, an Asoka-inspired civil-religious ideology, according to which the Thai monarch embodies an interpretation of thamma capable of transcending all religious and ethnic particularisms, thus providing the polity with an ethical and moral foundation.

The general elections in May 2023 were in part fought on ideological grounds, and on the campaign trail religio-political differences along partisan lines became even more apparent than they had been four years earlier. While Move Forward appealed with promises to remake Thailand with radical initiatives of a secular nature, such as rewriting the constitution, watering down the draconian lese majesty law, and abolishing military conscription, the party also championed policies proposals that would, if implemented, affect religion–state relations. Most importantly, the party proposed to abolish several laws and regulations that mark the Thai state as 'Buddhist'. The constitutional ban on political participation by monks and nuns, who are neither allowed to vote nor stand for election, would be lifted,[98] and the bans on the sale of alcohol and on the operation of abattoirs on Buddhist holy days abolished.

95 Ibid., p. 604.
96 Ibid., p. 598.
97 Ibid., p. 598–9.
98 For background, see Tomas Larsson, 'Monkish politics in Southeast Asia: Religious disenfranchisement in comparative and theoretical perspective', *Modern Asian Studies* 49, 1 (2015): 40–82; Tomas Larsson, 'Keeping monks in their place?' *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 3, 1 (2016): 17–28. As it happens, enfranchising monks is one of the few religious policy issues on which advocates of religious nationalism agree with progressive secular nationalists.

At the civil-religious end of the ideological spectrum, the United Thai Nation Party's Prayut Chan-ocha, the 2014 coup leader and incumbent prime minister, warned voters that a future of irreligiosity and moral decline awaited, should the progressives be allowed to transform Thailand beyond recognition, as they had promised to do.[99]

The small religious-nationalist parties continued to champion Buddhist majoritarianism, as they had in 2019. They also continued to refrain from explicit expressions of hostility toward Islam and Thai Muslim citizens — which could be expected to result in a disqualification from the Election Commissioners, who like Asoka's *dhamma mahamatras* (officers of morality) are tasked with ensuring, among other things, that a spirit of religious toleration and harmony prevails on the campaign trail. In a blow to religious nationalist forces in Thai society, one of their leading champions in parliament since 2019, Pheu Thai's Niyom Vechakama failed to win re-election in his Sakon Nakhon constituency, losing to a rival from the Democrat Party — traditionally one of the country's most Muslim-friendly parties.

Taken together, this shows how different conceptions of Thai nationalism, and particularly the relationship between religion and state, provide an important subtext to contemporary political struggles.

Conclusion

In this article I have revisited the concept of civil religion, and its application in the study of Buddhism and politics in Thailand. Many of the most eminent scholars in the field of Thai Studies over the past 50 years have found the concept a useful theoretical lens. In deploying it, they have contributed greatly to our understanding of important aspects of religio-political dynamics in Thailand. However, this body of work is beset by conceptual confusion. Unfortunately, scholars of Buddhism and politics in Thailand have rarely if at all engaged with one another in a way that brings greater clarity to the utility of the notion of civil religion for the study of the sacred dimension of nation-making and state-building. Based on this track record, it would perhaps be reasonable to conclude that civil religion has limited analytical utility, and to abandon it for purposes of future research. That would be a mistake.

In recent years, a number of social scientists interested in the dynamics of interaction between religion and politics have re-conceptualised civil religion as a distinct (1) religio-political order, (2) tradition of religio-political culture, and (3) form of nationalism.[100] In most contemporary societies, these civil-religious alternatives stand in contrast with anti-pluralistic religious orders/traditions/nationalisms or more radically secular orders/traditions/nationalisms.

Recent work suggests that this conception of civil religion and its rivals can provide an analytical framework that helps to illuminate important aspects of the relationship between religion, national identity, and the state in Thailand. With regards to the intellectual history of a Thai-style civil-religious nationalism, I have drawn attention to a strand of religio-political thought which portrays the historical figure

99 Manager Online (ผู้จัดการออนไลน์), '"ลุงตู่" สัน ยอมหรือไม่ "ลูกไม่ไหว้พ่อ-แม่-ไม่ต้องไหว้พระ-ไม่ต้องมีศาสนา"' [Uncle Tu asks if it is acceptable that 'children show no respect to parents, monks, and have no religion'], *mgronline.com*, 30 Apr. 2023, https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9660000039811.
100 Gorski, 'Barack Obama'; Gorski, *American covenant*; Soper and Fetzer, *Religion and nationalism*.

of Asoka as an ideal civil-religious ruler. What characterises this ideal is that the ruler (and by extension the modern state) seeks to promote religions in the plural (rather than Buddhism narrowly conceived), and that the different religions are regarded as compatible with a moral and ethical framework that is rooted in yet transcends their particularities (i.e., thamma). While the person of the king is closely identified with Buddhism, subjects/citizens need not be. They are, however, encouraged to embrace 'their' satsana and expected to be respectful toward satsana broadly conceived. The idea of an Asokan form of civil religion might, I hope, stimulate future work on the fashioning of 'secular grammars' in the Theravada Buddhist world, in the vein pioneered by Streicher.[101] Is there a shared intellectual history of civil-religious nationalist thought in Theravada Buddhist societies, possibly with the Asokan inscriptions as a central point of reference?

Turning to electoral politics, I have argued that political parties and candidates signal commitment to rival religio-political ideals. While a civil-religious model centred on the monarchy — cosmopolitan royalism — represents the centre of gravity in current Thai politics, this status-quo position has in recent years been challenged on two fronts. While religious-nationalist movements have sought to strengthen the ideological and institutional links between the Thai state and Buddhism specifically, secularists have expressed a desire for greater separation between religion and state. Will either of these ideological challengers gain sufficient strength to knock Thailand off the civil-religious road embarked upon during Bhumibol's reign? The answer to this question will in part hinge on the degree to which past 'top down' efforts to cultivate civil-religious sentiments among Thailand's 'grassroots' have succeeded in establishing a robust political culture, one not dependent on the charisma of any individual leader.

101 Ruth Streicher, 'Introduction: Towards an analysis of Buddhist secular grammars,' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52, 1 (2021): 2-6.