

Right and Liberty in the Mist of *Karma*: Secular Values in Thai Constitutional Context and their Tension with Buddhist Doctrines¹

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Abstract

Thailand is known for its long association with Buddhism. In the past, Buddhist doctrines might be the most significant values which dominated Thai society for centuries. Despite experiencing the modernization and the secularization during the reign of King Rama IV- VI, Thai Buddhism did not essentially lose its influence over society. However, secular values gradually took root in the Thai socio-political sphere through the processes of modernization and secularization. Following the Democratic Revolution in 1932, these values were formally introduced as part of the new regime. Core secular principles, especially rights and liberties, have been endorsed in the Constitutions of the Kingdom of Thailand since 1932. Nevertheless, the development of secular values in Thailand have faced significant constraints, including political norms, legal interpretations, and the dominance of Buddhist value. In particular, Theravāda Buddhism has dominated other belief systems and Buddhist morality has an impact on constitutional practice. As a result, the tension between secular and Buddhist values will be considered through the perspective of constitutional development in Thailand. This article aims to explore the development of secular values within the framework of Thai constitutions and examine how these values have come into tension with Buddhism in the context of Thai political society. Furthermore, it argues that the concepts of *karma* and Buddhist moralities in the Thai Buddhist framework have repeatedly been used to justify both social injustice and inequality in Thai society.

Keywords: Secularization, Secular values, Thai Buddhism, Buddhist Doctrines, The Constitutions of the Kingdom of Thailand

Introduction

Due to around 95% of its population identifying with Theravāda Buddhism, Thailand is often perceived as “a Buddhist country” (Dubus, 2017, p. 81). In fact, Buddhism is not just a religion that people believe in or a spiritual refuge, but Buddhist doctrines and values have also shaped the moral and ethical foundations of Thai society and impacted on its cultural, educational, and political institutions for many centuries. In traditional Siam, Buddhist principles became a significant source of political legitimacy. The integration of Buddhist cosmology and moral teachings

into the state apparatus for royal authority and social hierarchies.

At the beginning in the mid-19th century, Siam faced growing pressure of colonial threats from the West. Wide-ranging reforms in education, administration, and law was initiated to modernize the country and secular elements was introduced by some royal elites and literate people. The idea of secularism first took root among royal princes and government officials. Their adoption of secular values was primarily motivated by the desire to modernize Siam so that it

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might stand alongside other civilized nations and to protect the country from the threats of colonialism, rather than to internalize modern values within the social fabric in order to transform the state's structural foundations.

Secular values such as right, liberty, and legal equality were formally adopted in a constitutional regime after the 1932 Revolution. However, the reformers, the People's Party, were unable to instill the new ideology or secular values broadly among the populace. Constitutionalizing secular values, particularly rights and liberties, did not guarantee their effective implementation or that the state would protect rights and liberties in accordance with universal norms. Moreover, the development of secular values in Thailand has encountered significant constraints, for example, political norms, legal system, and particularly the dominance of Buddhist values.

Although Thailand became a modern state, the Buddhist doctrine has continued to influence state policy, legislation, legal interpretation, and the political consciousness of the people. The interpretation of legal provisions through a Buddhist moral framework could conflict with secular values. In many cases where secular values should have played a role, Buddhist values have interfered instead. This coexistence of secular and Buddhist values create persistent tensions, especially where rights and liberty might conflict with Buddhist doctrine.

Objectives

1. To analyze right and liberty as core secular values in Constitutions of the Kingdom of Thailand and their development within constitutional context.
2. To explore how secular values have been limited and their tension with Buddhist values within the context of Constitutions of the Kingdom of Thailand.

Methodology

The methodology to be used in the study is qualitative method and based on philosophical approach. However, Approaches of historical research would be taken into account to analyze sources and data on the historical and constitutional context.

Documentary research on primary sources at the archives namely, Thailand national library, and National assembly library of Thailand. For secondary sources,

books, researches, journals on right, liberty and secularization both Thai and English will be analyzed. Secondary sources: books, researches, and journals about right and liberty, including related issues such as human right, constitutionalism, and secularization in western thought and in Thai context both in Thai and English

Research approaches by using philosophical approach for analyzing right and liberty, and the concept of secularization and historical approach for analyzing the social and historical context of those ideas.

Result

The origin and development of secular values in Thailand

Secular values as new social and political values were introduced in Thai society by the influence of the West. The threat of colonialism pressured Thai rulers and elites to embrace modernization as a means of preserving national sovereignty. This period of transformation in Siam/Thailand was intense during the reigns of King Rama IV to King Rama VI. Modernization is often accompanied by secularization, as evidenced by numerous historical cases across Europe, though the relationship between modernization and secularization is complex and not always straightforward.

The process of secularization in Thailand diverges significantly from the European Enlightenment model, which emphasizes a clear separation between church and state. In Siam during the modernization, while a "religious" sphere (*satsanachak*) and a "worldly" sphere (*anachak*) are distinct, yet they remained overlapped. Buddhist principles continued to shape political authority and administrative practices, aligning statecraft with the moral framework of *dharma*. The Thai concept of *anachak* is somewhat similar to pre-modern European conceptualizations of the secularization. In Medieval Christendom, the term "secular"—often associated with worldly affairs—did not necessarily imply opposition to religion. Similarly, in the Siamese context, *satsanachak* and *anachak* represent two distinct, but equally Buddhist domains (Larrison, 2020, p. 280).

According to Donald E. Smith, secularization in Siam/ Thailand could be "Polity- expansion secularization" which "involves the expansion of the

political system into areas of society formerly regulated by religion. The polity thus extends its jurisdiction into areas of education, law, economic activity [...] which were subject to religious norms and structures in the traditional system” (Smith, 1974, p. 8). Apart from Polity- expansion secularization, secularization in Siam/Thailand would be mixed with “Political-process secularization” which, for this process, becomes not only more secular but also more traditional/religious as lay or clerical rulers discover a powerful instrument in religious symbol (Smith, 1974, p. 9). In other words, rather than separating from religion, the Thai state has taken control over Buddhism and exercised a hybrid form of secularization that mixed Buddhist doctrine with modern governance.

However, the concept of right appeared since ancient times, although the essence was different from modern concept of right. The concept of “right” in traditional Thailand was fundamentally linked to hierarchical power and authority—something conferred upon individuals by those in higher positions within the *sakdina* and patronage system. Rather than embodying individual entitlement, such rights operated as “complexity of right” or “collective right,” which people in the society shared the right in common such as right for agricultural land (Aphornsuvan, 2006, p. 66). It is quite obvious that by this kind of right people was not counted as individual with potential like citizen in modern sense. That kind of right was different from a right in the modern sense or natural right in the west.

On the other hand, the concept of liberty in another important feature of traditional rights is “moral claim,” which is intimately related to Buddhist principles. In this framework, rights are not merely legal or political constructions but are embedded within ideas of legitimacy and authority tied to accrued karma and merit. Consequently, such rights function as indicators of differentiated social roles and responsibilities within a larger moral and cosmic order, rather than solely as individual entitlements (Aphornsuvan 2013, pp. 41–42). In other words, in premodern Thailand rights had to be governed by morality or ethical codes, not only by law. Rights regulated by moral norms therefore assumed the character of duties within governance; from this logic emerged an emphasis on duty that was frequently invoked to counterbalance claims to rights and liberties.

traditional Siam was primarily described through Buddhist framework, emphasizing spiritual autonomy rather than political or social liberation. True freedom is considered as the cessation of suffering. Hence, liberation has become a spiritual attainment within the inner transformation (Aphornsuvan, 2013, pp. 80-81). During the modernized period in Siam, the meaning of freedom underwent a marked shift: what had previously been conceived as a form of spiritual independence was recast in secular terms that foregrounded self-determination of individual. This reworking of the idea opened the way for modern Thai understandings of freedom that incorporate liberal notions of personal autonomy and active civic engagement (Aphornsuvan, 2013, pp. 131-132).

The idea of liberty was first initiated in public by *The Presentation of Opinions on Governmental Reform Submitted to King Chulalongkorn from the Royal Princes and the King’s Servants* in January 1885. The most important argument in the proposal was to change the polity from “Absolute Monarchy” to “Constitutional Monarchy.” Interestingly, the sixth argument suggested to provide freedom to opine and freedom of expression in public and newspaper. While its primary objective was to safeguard national independence and transform Siam into a modern, civilized nation-state, it also subtly introduced secular values such as freedom of speech, social justice, and equality (Murashima, 1988, p. 84). Later, a commoner intellectual Thianwan provoked “freedom of speech,” especially if one spoke or criticized the state in a positive way. In his article “A Plea for Freedom of Speech,” (“รำร้องให้มืเสรีในการพูด”) he wrote as follows:

When will the Almighty grant us permission to speak according to our own knowledge and conscience before our bodies and lives perish? We long to see civilization in our country in such a way that no one is restrained from speaking rightly, justly, and for the benefit of our land. One should not fear punishment, even if what is said proves inaccurate; if the words are true, however, there ought to be merit and reward. I would be greatly delighted, for I believe that this is the true path toward progress. If such a condition were realized, many would surely

become bold in both speech and thought, able to speak openly in public assemblies. I think our country would thereby advance swiftly. Those who engage in wrongdoing would be compelled to fear the honest and courageous, and thus might abandon their misconduct. Good men, in turn, would gain confidence to speak openly, assured that their integrity is protected by the law of the land. Whenever they perceive or think of something, they would promptly reveal it. Our country would then have people striving in competition to pursue virtue and merit, to make their names remembered in the land. The nation would thus become secure, firm, and united, strengthened by the collective love of its people.

(Suriyin, 2000, pp. 252–253)

In his opinion this kind of action would not be found guilty. This circumstance emphasized how the imported idea of liberty had begun to resonate within certain educated circles, reflecting an early societal engagement with secular modernity.

Although secular values had gradually gained traction within Siam society prior to the 1932 democratic revolution, the revolution constituted a decisive turning point at which these values were formally institutionalized in “Six Principles” by People’s Party which provided the foundational blueprint for the emerging constitutional structure. In *Temporary Charter for the Administration of Siam Act BE 2475*, there was no section concerning rights and liberties. The charter was drafted shortly before the Siamese revolution and its primary function was to serve as a provisional legal framework that established the structure of the new regime, modeled by the British parliamentary system. Only after several months was the 1932 Constitution of the Kingdom of Siam formally promulgated, marking the first instance in which rights and liberties were explicitly recognized and officially endorsed within the Siamese constitutional order. The division of rights and liberties was stated in division 2 in the Constitution with 4 sections regarding equality, freedom of religion, freedom in life and to property and duties to obey the law.

Rights and liberties by the Constitution are regarded as supreme values to which all institutions are duty-bound to adhere. Their recognition transcends mere rhetorical affirmation; they are enshrined within the legal framework as binding provisions that exert direct authority upon the structure and operations of state institutions (Visrutpich, 1996, p. 9). The difference between “right” and “liberty/ freedom” by the Constitution is that right is the power that a person has to demand that others act or refrain from acting in a particular way. In contrast, liberty/freedom denotes the autonomous capacity of a person to engage or abstain from particular behaviors without external coercion or undue interference, emphasizing personal agency and non-domination (Singkaneti, 2024, pp. 65 - 69).

Although the People’s Party established a democratic regime endorsing rights and liberties, it failed to embed secular values as the basic framework for political and societal consciousness among the populace. Furthermore, the People’s Party was unable to supplant the entrenched Thai Buddhist cosmology—which normatively accepts social hierarchy—with democratic ideals predicated on equality and popular sovereignty (Chantravong, 2019, pp. 135-136). In Thai society, the concept of rights and liberties has been predominantly grounded in the “power” and “legitimacy” of ruling elites, rather than in the promotion or protection of citizens’ rights and liberties. This is largely attributable to the enduring hegemony of absolute monarchy and *sakdina* system, which has inhibited the capacity of rights and liberties to serve as foundational forces in the formation of a good state or civil society. (Aphornsuvan, 2013, p. 10)

From the above discussion, the development of secular values in Thailand have faced significant constraints, including political norms, legal system, and the predominance of Buddhism. Particularly, Theravāda Buddhism has assumed a predominant position over other belief systems. Consequently, it could be said that during Siam’s modernization Buddhism played an especially significant role, giving rise to what has been termed “the bureaucratization of Buddhism,” founded on the relationship between the state and the Buddhist sangha, a relationship that endures to the present day (Larsson, 2018, p. 198). The bureaucratization of Buddhism was driven by the monarchy and the state to secure Buddhism’s political utility — royal legitimacy,

state formation, and nation-building (Larsson, 2018, p. 199). Accordingly, the following section will examine the relationship between Buddhism and the Constitution within Thai society.

Buddhist doctrine and the Constitutions

The concepts of *karma* and merit constitute an indispensable foundation of Thai Buddhism. In certain respects, these concepts reflect the so-called "logic of the gift"—a system of reciprocal exchange—such as the belief that virtuous actions yield positive outcomes. Nidhi Eoseewong observes that the motivations for moral conduct in the past differ markedly from those in contemporary society. Traditionally, Buddhists pursued virtuous deeds with the ultimate aim of attaining *nirvana*. In contrast, modern practitioners often engage in moral behavior with the expectation of tangible rewards in this life. This shift in worldview began to emerge during the reign of King Rama V, which Buddhism was demystified by minimizing supernatural elements and privileging aspects that could be empirically verified (Eoseewong, 2023, p. 96). This phenomenon occurs in parallel with the fact that Thai Buddhism tends to emphasize too much on personal morality, not on civic virtue, to the point that many people may view Thai Buddhism as indifferent to social problems. Even many monks consider social problems as a matter of *karma* (Visalo, 2009, p. 13).

The emphasis on the moral dichotomy between good and bad *karma* began to emerge during the Sukhothai period, notably within the *Traibhumikatha*—a canonical text that delineates the Buddhist cosmological structure of the universe, the relation between merit and power and the determination of *karma* (Suksamran, 1993, pp. 36-37). Doctrines of *karma* and merit are simplified and popularized via stories from the *Jataka* and *Sutta* which are significant instruments to edify common people. Over several centuries, the concepts of *karma* and merit have become the foundation of Thai people, around 95% of whom are Buddhists. Hierarchical Thai Buddhism also parallels with the bureaucratic order, and is closely tied to the Thai state (McCargo, 2006, p. 156). In this respect, Buddhism is both source and function of legitimacy in Thai political sphere.

Although contemporary Thai society has undergone substantial change and adopted Western

technologies and material advances, Buddhist doctrine remains deeply embedded in collective thought. Beliefs in *karma*, merit, and demerit continue to shape everyday moral evaluation. In the digital age, prolonged exposure to news on social media means that reports of corruption, serious crimes, or social injustice often elicit comments such as “May *karma* catch up with them swiftly” or “You may escape the law, but you cannot escape *karma*,” which demonstrates the enduring resonance of *karma* in popular consciousness. Further, where the legal system does not function efficiently, the rule of law has not been firmly established, and impunity is widespread, belief in *karma*, merit, and demerit may become a tenuous source of popular hope for justice in lieu of legal texts and formal judicial processes.

Despite adopting secular principles in its constitutional framework since 1932, Buddhist values continue to permeate the legal system, political norms, and national identity in Thai society. Buddhism was treated as “a principal source of Thai national unity,” along with nation and monarchy. Duncan McCargo argues that incorporating *Sangha* into political order was a significant element of the absolute monarchy. That is what he calls “a subordinated and captured Buddhist *Sangha*” (2006, p. 157). With the “special / superior status” of Buddhism in the framework of constitutions and historical contexts, it could lead the relationship between Buddhism and the state into the “problematic direction,” especially by the criteria of modern (secular) state. Further, due to the close relationship between Buddhism and the Thai state, some scholars have proposed that Thailand is “a Buddhist state”, defined as “a state structured such that the king supports the sangha, the sangha supports the dharma, and the dharma legitimates the monarchy” (Ishii, 1986, p. 46). Even so, the Thai state has never endorsed Buddhism as the state religion. The first *Constitution of Siam* (The Interim 1932 Constitution) did not mention Buddhism, but subsequent constitutions progressively added both direct or indirect references to Buddhist principles and Buddhist kingship (Mérieau, 2018, p. 4). Thongchai has argued that Legal Positivism fit readily with preexisting cultural foundations in Thailand because its concept of law accords with an absolute-monarchic conception of power historically present in Thai society, where the King in premodern times had plenary authority to promulgate laws that were directly

binding on people's lives (Winichakul, 2020, pp. 158–159).

Indeed, the king is not bound by the constitution but by *dharma*. It is obvious that the king swears an oath to *dharma*, instead of the constitution, in the coronation ceremony. (Mérieau, 2018, p. 16) On the other hand, as the protector of Buddhism, king's power was justified and legitimized by the Buddhist concept of merit and power. Ironically, the king is only a person who have no freedom of religion, since all Thai constitution have stated that the king is a Buddhist (and upholder of religions). More interestingly, Buddhist terminology has served as references to translate Western constitutional ideas into Siamese political context in a process one could call "a Buddhization of legal system" (Mérieau, 2018, p. 23).

Nidhi Eoseewong's concept of a "cultural constitution" argues that political culture is the true supreme arrangement of power relations—the state's real constitution—and this helps explain how deeply embedded Thai political culture, including Buddhist notions of authority and legal elements influenced by Hindu and Buddhist traditions, has mediated the reception of Western rule-of-law ideas until they became fused with local political culture (Eoseewong, 2014, pp. 114-143).

In fact, many legal systems in the world, especially in ancient time, were deeply influenced by religious moral frameworks. Thailand is no exception, where the influence of Buddhism has significantly influenced the political sphere and legal system—particularly through the doctrines of *karma* and merit. In recent times, the main teachings of Thai Buddhism have been overlaid with many forms of the idea of *karma* and preoccupied with accumulating merit (McCargo, 2006, p. 156). These doctrines have implications for the justice process and public policy, insofar as individuals may place more faith in "the law of *karma*" than in formal judicial mechanisms, perceiving it as a more "just" or morally reliable system of accountability. (Mamout, 2014, p. 25).

Since the democratic revolution in 1932, most Thai constitutions have recognized Buddhism in some form. The 1997, 2007 and 2017 constitutions which the last two are constitutions after coup d'états, for instance, mandate the state to protect and promote Buddhism and encourage its role in fostering morality. During drafting

the three constitutions, there were some campaigns for Buddhism to be declared the state religion by many Buddhist nationalist groups. To avoid the great pressure, the committees of drafting the constitutions found the solution by acknowledging Buddhism's "special status." In the 1997 Constitution, there is a provision obligating the state to "patronize and protect" Buddhism, reflecting its cultural centrality. The 2007 Constitution reaffirmed this duty, adding that the state must promote "good understanding and harmony among all religions" (section 79), but Buddhism still predominates over other religions as well. Further, the patronage of Buddhism has been enhanced at most in the 2017 Constitution by containing the support and promotion of Buddhism in "Directive Principles of State Policies" in Section 67 as following

The State should support and protect Buddhism and other religions. In supporting and protecting Buddhism, which is the religion observed by the majority of Thai people for a long period of time, the State should promote and support education and dissemination of dharmic principles of Theravāda Buddhism for the development of mind and wisdom, and shall have measures and mechanisms to prevent Buddhism from being undermined in any form. The State should also encourage Buddhists to participate in implementing such measures or mechanisms.

For the first time, the Constitution implicitly states that "Theravāda Buddhism" is the most important and most supported religion over other religions in Thailand and encourage Buddhism's role in cultivating morality for the society. This constitutional arrangement reflects what is academically called "Buddhist constitutionalism" — a model where Buddhism is not formally established as a state religion but is nonetheless institutionally privileged.

Buddhist morality and secular value in Thai political society

As stated earlier that Thailand is recognized for its relation with Buddhism for centuries. Hence, many of the moral and virtue familiar within Thai society—such as the Five Precepts, gratitude, and compassion—are

deeply intertwined with social order and find their origin in Buddhist teachings, particularly as these were rearticulated during the period of modernization in Siam, particularly during the reign of king Rama V to king Rama VI (Kumpha, 2024, p. 44). Accordingly, there are often the interpretations that the principles of Buddhism could align with civic virtues and the idea of civil society—an interpretation exemplified in the works of P. A. Payutto. However, Thai Buddhism, comparatively speaking, has undergone less adaptation than religions in other societies. This is partly because Thai Buddhism has never been rigorously challenged, nor has it been significantly affected by colonial forces. Consequently, the Buddhist principles that have permeated Thai society and appear encouraging to a democratic society are largely mediated through the concept of “Buddhist organic society,” which views social harmony as the result of individuals fulfilling interdependent duties (Boonnoon, 2024, p. 107).

In this respect, although we may observe the existence of civic virtue discourses within Thai society, it is often based on Buddhist principles, such as the establishment of “moral organizations,” the Five Precepts Village Project, or the promotion of Buddhist monks teaching ethics in schools. Nidhi argues that the modern Thai state did not cultivate civic virtue in the same way as Western traditions. Instead, it extended the moral ethos of the royalty—shaped by Buddhist influences and inherently hierarchical—as a substitute for civic virtue. This moral framework became embedded within the structure of modern law and the justice system. He also observes that numerous Buddhist teachings have the potential to be elaborated into civic virtues—for instance, the notion of human capacity could lead to the idea of human equality and the concept of human rights. However, the Thai state’s “religious reform” has never resulted in the cultivation of civic virtue. (Eoseewong, 2020).

One significant point of Buddhist influences on secular values or civic virtues is duty-based morality. This kind of morality implies an obligation to act, often driven by externally imposed moral authority, rather than stemming from a belief in human capacity or human dignity as the basis for determining oneself as a moral agent. An example lies in the Buddhist doctrine of the “Six Directions” (ทิศ 6), which delineates one's

position within a conceptual space of social relationships through moral codes (Boonnoon, 2024, pp. 283–5). Additionally, the doctrine of karma can be interpreted through this same line of duty. The maxim “good deeds deserve good outcomes” (“ทำดีได้ดี”) represents the way of moral conduct governed by a cosmic order—where right action aligns with a preordained code and is performed in pursuit of prosperity or well-being in future. Such teachings render moral action less as an autonomy of individual dignity, and more as a fulfillment of duty within a prescribed order. (Boonnoon, 2024, pp. 321-2).

Having already examined the influence of Buddhist doctrines on Thai national identity and constitutional context, this section is to explore how such doctrines also permeate Thailand’s legal system. This is particularly noteworthy given that legal frameworks in a modern democratic state are expected to be free from religious influences. A concrete illustration of this convergence between religion and judicial practice can be traced to the longstanding relationship between former Supreme Court President Sanya Thammasak and the revered scholar-monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, dating back to the early 1930s.

It has become customary for newly appointed judges to undergo a meditation course (in the basis of Buddhist practice) during their initial training, and even non-Buddhist judges are expected to join the course. Moreover, in the 1970s and 1980s they were given lectures on Buddhist morality by Buddhadasa, by the invitation of Sanya Thammasak (McCargo, 2019, p. 76). Such practices suggest that judges are likely imbued with a foundation in Buddhist ethics, despite operating within what is nominally a secular legal framework. It is thus not surprising that many judges articulate their worldviews through explicitly Buddhist minds. Concepts such as *karma*, demerit, and defilement have consistently featured in Thai judicial discourse, indicating the deep entanglement between religious morality and legal reasoning (McCargo, 2019, p. 78).

Many social values that ought to be used in secular contexts—such as fairness—are, in the Thai society, often intertwined with Buddhist doctrines (Ito, 2012, p. 188). This phenomenon reflects a common tendency to blur the boundaries between secular values and Buddhist values, a process frequently facilitated by

scholars and prominent monks. Indeed, the primary reasons for this convergence those scholars have in common appear to be 1. An effort to prevent Buddhism from becoming alienated from modern social values and 2. A desire to ensure that Buddhist doctrines remain meaningful and relevant to individuals in a rapidly changing modern world.

However, although the Buddhist attitude toward secular values expressed by scholars and prominent monks has significantly influenced the thought and mentality of many people, their specific proposals tend to differ in detail. For instance, in the view of P.A. Payutto, rights or human rights are regarded as a social construct (Buddhaghosacharya, 2017, p. 35). Human rights, he argues, arise from mutual agreement and acceptance among human beings, serving as a means to facilitate harmonious life within society. He further considers Western-style rights to be “negative” rights, meaning that they primarily function as principles safeguarding the interests of the individual (Buddhaghosacharya, 2017, p. 21). In addition, Payutto advances a particularly challenging view that the Five Precepts constitute an essential social guarantee. If human beings abide by the Five Precepts, there would be no need for what is called human rights. In fact, upon closer examination, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, essentially falls within the scope of the Five Precepts themselves (Dhamma Pitaka, 1998, pp. 18–19).

Furthermore, Payutto proposes additional connections between secular values and Buddhist morality. For instance, liberty is interpreted as freedom from influences that lead one astray from the path of dharma, while equality is understood as the provision of opportunities that enable individuals to contribute to the welfare of others and the broader community. Even the notion of “rights in ethics” is reinterpreted as the right to pursue self-development (Visalo, 2016, p. 503). It should also be noted that Payutto’s perspective has exerted considerable influence, particularly among the urban middle class.

The interpretation of the relationship between Buddhist doctrines and secular values—one which tends to position Buddhism as holding a superior status—can also be found in Saneh Jamarik’s analysis. He examines the issues of rights and liberty through a Buddhist conceptual framework, viewing freedom or liberation as a core principle of Buddhism. In Buddhist thought,

liberation (*moksha*) refers to emancipation from the self; it does not focus on immediate benefits, nor is it directed toward any single individual (Jamarik, 1999, p. 291). This view also implies that the notion of rights and liberty, when conceived through a Buddhist perspective, transcends the libertarian perspectives found in Western thought.

Buddhadāsa, one of the most prominent monks in modern Thai Buddhism, shared a perspective with Saneh in considering liberal democracy as a system that enables individuals to pursue personal gain (Buddhadāsa, 2005, p. 34), thereby perpetually generating new forms of bondage. His broader critique of liberalism focuses on the promotion of individualism. In his perspective, liberalism encourages selfishness by prioritizing the aims of the individual over the collective good. In a radical reinterpretation, He asserts that true liberty is not found in secular freedom but only through the attainment of *nirvana* (Buddhadāsa, 2005, pp. 83–84).

Moreover, while Buddhadāsa considers morality as a normative ground of human conduct, he explicitly refers to Buddhist morality—the morality of the Dharma—rather than any secular conception. His invocation of morality is thus grounded entirely in Buddhist principle, devoid of any secular implication (Buddhadāsa, 2005, p. 213).

Although Phra Paisal Visalo explains that many Buddhists share the same with that of Buddhadāsa—namely, secular values such as rights are originated in self-interest and primarily concerned with individual entitlements. However, Phra Paisal offers a more critical stance. He proposes that “the moral system in Buddhism, as it currently is, is not particularly conducive to democracy,” citing the biases within Buddhist circles toward fundamental principles of democracy such as liberty, freedom, and equality (Visalo, 2009, p. 13). Nonetheless, Phra Paisal expresses a subtle understanding of secular values that while such concepts were not originated within Buddhist moral frameworks. He proposes that liberty and equality may be interpreted in terms of opportunities for personal development and contributions to society. Similarly, the concept of rights can be expanded to the respect for and protection of others’ rights. Phra Paisal’s interpretation renders the concept of rights inseparable from Buddhist morality. While the Five Precepts or the compassion

pertain to interpersonal conduct, rights are framed as ethical obligations between individuals and society. This moral logic allows an integration of secular values within a Buddhist ethical context.

That said, the proposition or interpretation that Buddhist doctrines and secular values are not inherently conflicting is often premised on the assumption that Buddhist principles hold a superior status. Such a proposition appears conceptually misaligned, as analyses that position Buddhism as transcendent to secular values frequently suggest that Buddhism pursues higher or nobler ends—namely, liberation from suffering and the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*), or the elevation of mental and moral states. However, such interpretations tend to overlook that secular values were never conceived for transcendental aims, but were instead conceived to fulfill worldly purposes: the cultivation of harmonious relations among individuals as well as the establishment of a just society and state.

Upon closer examination, modern political systems such as democracy embody ethical frameworks that cannot be fully substituted by Buddhist ethics. For instance, freedom in expressing and accessing information—an essential component of democratic society—does not find a direct counterpart in any Buddhist precept. This form of freedom emerged alongside the modern state, and in this respect, the neglect of democratic ethics has led Thai Buddhism to serve as a bulwark for state authority or even authoritarianism. This is evident in the socio-political orientation of Thai Buddhism, which emphasizes virtues such as “goodness,” “moral individuals,” or “social harmony,” even when such harmony is grounded in hierarchical order (Eoseewong, 2023, p. 72).

Consequently, there has been little recognition of Thai Buddhist thinkers, whether monastic or lay, interpreting Buddhist principles in ways that support modern values (Eoseewong, 2023, p. 42). Conversely, secular morality—non-religious in nature—is rarely discussed in Thai society, likely because it lies outside the purview of Buddhism. Thai society has long intertwined morality with Buddhism, despite the fact that morality, in essence, is a human faculty by nature for discerning right from wrong and does not inherently require religious grounding (Eoseewong, 2023, p. 126). Nevertheless, in many societies around the world (not

only in Thailand), the state and religion often monopolize the moral consciousness of the populace.

A particularly crucial issue concerning the relationship between Buddhist doctrines and secular values in Thai political society is the recognition that secular values need not be viewed as oppositional or competitive to Buddhist principles. Generally speaking, religious forces are capable of adapting to accommodate contemporary values (Eoseewong, 2023, p. 311), and such adaptation or integration does not necessitate the dominance of one side over the other.

In this aspect, the more fundamental concern lies in the complicated relationship between Thai Buddhism and institutional structures within society, including the prevailing system of values and conceptions of civic virtue. In principle, these features should embody the secular norms expected of a modern democratic state. In practice, however, their evolution and public functions have been limited by Buddhist tenets and clerical authority. In other words, the secular values that ought to be institutionalized in a democracy have not yet taken firm hold or superseded religious doctrines that remain deeply embedded in political life. The relationship between Buddhist doctrines and secular values in a modern society like contemporary Thailand may be reconfigured to function in interrelated ways. Conversely, when dealing with broader social or public issues, secular values may assume a more prominent role.

Conclusion

In considering the concept of secularization, Thailand is a secular state in the condition that Siamese/Thai state was secularized by the process of political expansion with modern bureaucracy into domains of society formerly regulated by religion without the distinct separation of religion and state.

While secular values—particularly rights, liberties, and legal equality—were formally institutionalized in the aftermath of the 1932 Revolution, However, even right and liberty have developed for many decades, those values are limited by political culture, legal interpretation, and tension with Buddhist dogma. Especially, the relationship between Buddhist doctrines and secular values in Thailand reveals a long-standing and complex interplay between religious morality, state authority, and the constitutional

order. Even remaining secular, some Thai constitutions also play a significant role in promoting special status of Theravāda Buddhism over other religions in the state which allows the influence of Buddhism into political sphere and probably causes the conflicts with other religion in some extent.

Although some prominent Buddhist thinkers have reinterpreted democratic concepts like rights, liberty, and equality through Buddhist moral perspectives. These interpretations frequently prioritize spiritual liberation or social harmony over individual autonomy, thereby subordinating secular values to religious principles. It seems to indicate that the tension between Buddhist doctrines and secular values still exists.

Recognizing this tension does not require considering Buddhism and secular values as irreconcilable. Religious and secular moral systems can coexist in some certain ways. Viewed in a broader global context, the influence of religion has been rising not only worldwide but also within national public spheres. Newer philosophical and political perspectives such as postsecularism do not treat state and religion as inherently adversarial in the way older paradigms do. If we accept the premise that religion exerts influence on states and public spheres in many parts of the world, and if we refrain from presuming that religion necessarily conflicts with the state, then treating religion as one among many forms of belief enables us to assume that we live in a world of pluralism. From this perspective, society should seek a neutral domain to accommodate such diversity—whether in the constitution, parliament, or any public sphere. Finally, a sustainable balance depends on reaffirming the universal basis of rights and liberties without utilizing the enduring role of Buddhism in shaping the moral practice of Thai society.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

□ Generative AI tools have been used only to improve the readability and language of the manuscript.

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