

Book Review

Luigi Bresson: A Meeting of Worlds: The Interaction of Christian Missionaries and Thai Culture

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Daniel Sackin*

School of English, Institute of Social Technology, Suranaree University of Technology

Luigi Bresson is a Catholic priest from Italy. In 1998 he wrote a book about the relationship between King Chulalongkorn and Pope Leo XIII. He was the Papal Representative to Thailand from 1993 to 1999. A MEETING OF WORLDS: THE INTERACTION OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AND THAI CULTURE by Luigi Bresson (Assumption University Press, Bangkok, 2000) is primarily about the relationship between Christian missionaries and King Narai during the King's reign, from 1656 to 1688. Though there were Thai kings before King Narai the Great who opened the doors to foreigners, it was King Narai who was on a mission to help Thailand grow via exposure to Western culture. The King recognized that Christian missionaries, though their primary purpose was to impart Christianity to as many Thais as possible, had much to offer Thai people, such as their knowledge of science, medicine, and architecture. As well, King Narai was genuinely interested in expanding his and the Thai people's spirituality, and thought that the missionaries could impart some "wisdom of the west" through their preachings. Though Mr. Bresson ventures into other territories, such as pre- and post-Narai Siam's treatment of foreigners, Christian Art in Siam, and Christian literature in which Siam is featured, the King Narai reign is given the most thorough and profound treatment. Though Mr. Bresson is a historian, not a philosopher - he writes about history with-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: kyoozoocanada@yahoo.com

out contemplating how it has had an impact on the Thailand of today - I could hypothesize about the impact of not only Christian missionaries in Thailand, but of how much Thailand benefited from having such an open-minded, curious, and loving King who embraced, rather than pushed away, the outside world. Mr. Bresson has written about how Christian and Thai values came together long ago, and what an interesting era it was.

The first documented Christian school in Siam was founded in 1656 in Ayutthaya by Father Valguarnera of Italy and Portugal. King Narai recognized his great talents in architecture, and made him the official architect of the Royal House. The Father was happy to help the King with many projects as long as the King gave him free reign to preach Christianity. The Father “felt grateful to a country that had received him hospitably.” (p. 5)

Shortly after came the establishment of a Christian college in Ayutthaya by French missionaries. In this case, King Narai was excited about the great scientific knowledge which the missionaries possessed, and again, let them teach their religion without restriction as long as they taught Western science to Siamese people. The King at one point asked a Bishop, “Do you think your religion is better than the religion of the Thai people?” (p. 23) The Bishop was moved by the King’s sincere interest in an outside religion, and listened patiently to the Bishop explain the principle dogmas of Christianity. The King cared so much for his people that he wanted them to not only gain by having Western architectural and scientific prowess in their midsts, but was even open to expanding their Buddhist minds with some Christian wisdom. Remarkable.

French missionaries brought Western medicine to Thailand during the King Narai era. They opened clinics and translated medical books into Thai. The French missionaries also modernized hydrolics and astronomical science in Siam. At the same time they saw value in Thai science, and brought back a lot of knowledge to their own people. King Narai was especially interested in astronomy, and was often present during star-gazing sessions. He was proud of the Thai system of reading the stars, but was also fascinated by, and recognized the value of, Western science.

The King had an easy-going attitude towards his Christian guests. He liked, and did not feel threatened by, even the most aggressive preachers. Despite their intentions, the King saw *naam-jai* behind their ulterior motives. In 1665 the King gave a French Father permission to open a school, even though the Father told the King that the main goal of the school was to convert locals to Christianity! The King offered land for a church to an Italian Bishop, whose primary purpose was also to preach Christianity. (He was also on a mission to care for the sick and teach children.) Most of the time during the reign of King Narai, Christian missionaries did far more than just preach, and many of them grew to love Siam and the Siamese people, losing any condescending attitudes towards them for not being Christians nor from a so-called modern society.

Sometimes the goal of the missionaries was to debunk Thai culture and religion, however. But somehow the King knew that this could be beneficial too. In order to show Thais “the errors of their ways”, some missionaries worked hard at translating Christian doctrine into Thai. Perhaps the King thought that this could only increase the Siamese people’s knowledge of the outside world, and of other points of view, but it wouldn’t necessarily convert anyone! Further, some missionaries believed that they’d have to study Thai culture thoroughly in order to find defects, but in doing so, came closer to seeing the Thai points of view, and grew to love Thailand.

King Narai believed that cultural exchange would be a great thing for Thailand, and though Christian missionaries primarily came to Thailand to convert Thais, most of them helped Thai people in other ways. King Narai the Great was an expert at exploiting the “natural resource” of Christian missionaries. Mr. Bresson’s book may be a straightforward historical account, but it provides a feast for contemplation.