

Book Review

Rory Mackenzi: New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke

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New Buddhist Movements in Thailand provides some comprehensive coverages of both Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke, which have emerged as two most visible reformist Buddhist movements during the country's political turbulent time of 1970s. Drawing on works by key theorists on the new religious movement phenomena like Roy Willis, Bryan Wilson, and Lance Cousins, Rory argues that Wat Phra Dhammakaya fits well with the highly progressive fundamentalist and millenarian typologies of new religious movement "due to its strong focus on meditation and the belief that some members have in their leader a saviour figure" (preface), whereas Santi Asoke is "best described as an ascetic/prophetic, utopian movement with legalistic tendencies" (Ibid.). Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke reflect two possibly extreme forms of how Thai Buddhism has responded to the highly materialist and consumerist Thai society. The former represents a mega form of prosperity Buddhism through its famous meditation technique and remarkable business organization, while the latter emphasizes its Buddhist "anti-consumerist, anti-capitalist world view" (p. 187) and collective morality of self-sufficient communities through strict disciplinary works.

Rory introduces a relatively fresh theoretical approach to the studies of Thai Buddhism. With his phenomenological approach, he can avoid the redundancy of submerging Buddhist movements under some familiar themes like reformist or urban-middle class religiosities, Sangha-state tensions, crises of authority and

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modernity, Thai Buddhist construction of gender, and prosperity religion. However, what Rory cannot avoid is his questionable positionality, shaping by emic-etic dualism, and rigid theoretical orientation traps (typological comparisons). For me, these two points are the most serious flaws of the book.

First, it is a nearly impossible mission to identify, separate, and assume a full emic or etic stance, let alone a juxtaposition between the two with the author's assumed neutrality. In the academic discourses of the twenty-first century, Rory's position as a value-free observer, distancing himself from the subject he studies while interpreting views from the insiders and outsiders, is apparently questionable and insensitive. He cannot simply hide away his author/researcher's selfhood and prejudice.

Second, the book's analytical modes based on typological characterization and comparison of the movements fail to produce some nuanced or sophisticated narratives. Rory obviously encountered certain degree of difficulties in terms of getting access to the sources of information during his fieldworks because both movements have survived their controversial histories by developing some strict lines separating between insiders and outsiders through their off-limit and cult-like mechanisms. His narrative is not structured by or deeply embedded in his experience in the field.

Finally, the book does not critically engage with the current stage of the sociology of religion or the studies of Thai Buddhism. It confirms rather than advances existing conceptual understandings of new religious movements. The emphases on questionnaire and secondary sources do not help enhancing his critical ethnographic inquiries.

Some shortcomings containing in this book are rather critical. I found Rory's usage of the terms *amnat* (power), *ittipon* (influence), *parami* (moral stature or charisma) a little bit off the mark. I do not think the general Thai public as well as members of both movements would employ the first two terms to describe their religious and spiritual leaders and other monks. They are sets of human qualities mostly reserved for and traditionally assigned to the realm of mundane, especially politics and economy. To say that the abbot of Wat Phra

Dhammakaya is a person with *amnat and ithiphon* (I follow a transcription rules sanctioned by Thailand's Royal Academy) is definitely a negative or derogative statement. Of course, some critics to the movements use these terms, but they are at least not normative terms employed by members of the movements. In addition, Rory's elaboration of the Thai thought on "community culture" (*watthanatham chumchon*) is inadequate. The concepts of community and culture mean vastly different things in its original thought comparing to Santi Asoke's vision. The other key shortcoming is the book does not adopt a standard transcription system of the Thai terminologies. Spelling of Thai-language terms is very inconsistent. Also, the book is not thoroughly edited, and thus, requires some further copy-editing and proof-reading.

This book is the revised version of Rory's doctoral dissertation with some additional updates. Its style and prose are rather technical. Its organization is constrained by the dissertation's standard presentation. Nonetheless, the book has some merit in its systematic representations of two prominent new Buddhist movements in Thailand. It should be useful to be included in the reading list for scholars and readers who are interested in the current state of Thai Buddhism as well as in Southeast Asia's new religious movements.