STRUCTURE AND HISTORY IN THE STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM AND POLITICAL ORDER

1. Introduction

A new book by S. J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*, 1 deserves close attention by scholars concerned with the relationship between Theravāda Buddhism and political order. Tambiah has attempted a sweeping synthesis of existing knowledge regarding the structure of the relationship between the Sangha and traditional polity in the Thai states which were the antecedents of modern Thailand; he has sought to relate this synthesis to the structure of Sangha/polity relations which appear in early Buddhist writings, in the reign of King Asoka in India and subsequently in the history of Śri Lanka; and he has endeavored to show in what ways the traditional relationship has been transformed or has persisted in contemporary Thailand. In this latter connection, he has presented new findings, based on research which he carried out on the role of the Sangha in urban Thailand. *En passant*, he has advanced a number of stimulating ideas and reflections which will certainly provoke further research.

Tambiah began this study with research on the contemporary Sangha in urban Thailand:

[1] In 1971 I began wide-ranging field work in Bangkok, studying closely four urban monasteries and visiting others (including some in provincial towns), inquiring into the organization of the monks' universities, particularly Mahachulalongkorn, and the careers of their administrator monks and monk-students; interviewing officials at the Department of Religious Affairs and collecting whatever official documents I could... 2

In this book, Tambiah attempts to place his field research "against a historical backdrop" in which he depicts the antecedents to the contemporary relationship between Sangha and polity in Thailand. He was led to confront the general question of the "religion's connection with so-

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1 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, No. 15), 1976; hereafter this book will be cited as WCWR.

2 WCWR, p. 3; see also pp. 279-281 and 330-332 for discussion of the characteristics of the urban monasteries which Tambiah studied.
ciety as a whole, especially in society's aspect as a polity” 3 with reference not only to contemporary Thailand, but also to the Thai states that were forebears of the modern nation and to paradigms established in Sri Lanka and ancient India.

In undertaking his excursus into macrosociological analysis, Tambiah employs a perspective whereby he considers the phenomena studied collectively as a “total social fact”. This perspective can be seen as the most recent and perhaps the most sophisticated statement of a type of structuralism which has been developed by a number of British anthropologists, the most notable of whom being Sir Edmund Leach. Yet, for all its sophistication, I believe this approach to be fundamentally inadequate for interpreting the historical patterns of relationship between Buddhism and polity which constitute the subject matter of Tambiah's inquiry.

2. **History, Totalization and Dialectic in Tambiah's Approach**

Tambiah's earlier study of the relationship between Buddhism and society focussed on what he termed “ritual complexes” which were manifest in the religious practices of villagers in northeastern Thailand. In *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* 4 he attempted to present the religion of a northeastern Thai village “as a synchronic, ordered scheme of collective representations”. While he claimed that he also related this village religious system to “the institutional context and social structure of the contemporary villagers” and “to the grand Buddhist literary and historical tradition”, 5 he strongly emphasized the synchronic structure as he worked it out from his observations of, and inquiries about, rituals performed in the village. At the end of that book, however, he did raise the question of how village Buddhism relates to “the religious tradition presented in the literary texts”. 6 While he did not develop any systematic answer to this question, he set forth a position on how this question might be answered:

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4 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970; hereafter this work will be cited as BSC.
