

Review Article

Barend J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic: Revisiting a Classic Study of Religious Ceremonies in Thailand*¹

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Monks and Magic, first published in 1975 and now released in its fourth revised edition, has justifiably proved to be a book of enduring interest for the study of religion in Thailand. Although primarily based on research conducted nearly a half century ago, Terwiel's ethnographic study of religious ceremonies in the central Thai village of Wat Sanchao retains much of relevance for understanding contemporary religious practices. Perhaps the main reason for this is that the central question the book addresses – the nature of the relationship between Buddhism and magic – is as pertinent today as it was when *Monks and Magic* was first published.

As numerous scholars have noted in recent years, far from fading away under the forces of modernity as most twentieth century theories of religion predicted, magical practices (leaving aside difficulties in defining precisely what this means) are thriving in contemporary Thailand. Moreover, not only has interest in spirit mediumship, horoscopes, and other “non-Buddhist” religious forms remained as strong as ever, what might be called Buddhist magic continues to be widespread. The Thai religious scene is replete with numerous “magic monks” (*keji ajan*) with reputations for everything from healing to providing winning lottery numbers. The trade in amulets and other sacred objects made by, or in the image of, famous monks is booming. Interest in protective tattoos, often administered by monks, is high. Clearly many Thai Buddhists continue to see the Buddhist *sangha* more as a source of sacred power than the source of ethical teachings and moral guidance. Thus for these reasons, the question of how to understand the interface between institutional Buddhism and the range of “magical” beliefs and practices remains an important question for scholars of religion in Thailand (e.g. Jackson 1999; Kitiarsa 2005; McDaniel 2011).

In the context of this on-going interest, it is therefore timely that *Monks and Magic* has been republished. The subtitle of this edition promises to “revisit” the classic study, so it is worth asking what is new in the book. For the most part the changes from previous editions are minor. Terwiel has revised the language, added

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some pertinent recent references, and made additional comments in footnotes. He has also added Thai script for many local terms, which is a welcome addition.² The main substantive addition is in the form of a postscript. This bundles together some brief thoughts on contemporary religion, some details on how Terwiel came to choose his field site, and a mini photo essay on the transformations that have taken place in Wat Sanchao since he conducted his original research. I will discuss these additions below. But first it is necessary to do some of my own revisiting of Terwiel's arguments.

Based on primary fieldwork in the late 1960s and a number of subsequent visits over the years, Terwiel's study still stands as one of the most comprehensive and thorough treatments of village religion and ritual to date. Unusually for Western researchers at that time, Terwiel chose to ordain as a monk and spent about six months of his fieldwork in robes before leaving the *sangha* to complete the fieldwork as a layman. This combination of perspectives contributes to the richness of the study, which provides detailed insights into village life from both monastic and lay perspectives. Terwiel's time as a monk is particularly noticeable in the detail he gives to description and analysis of Buddhist rituals, many of which he himself performed on numerous occasions. This is reinforced by his knowledge of classical languages and of the Buddhist scriptures. Because of the attention to detail given to the material, *Monks and Magic* is invaluable as a reference book. If you want to understand the mechanics of amulet making, or the key elements of protective tattoos, or the meanings of many of the common chants used in Buddhist rites, this book provides a wealth of information.

The book is broadly structured around the typical life-cycle of villagers. Chapters thus deal in turn with rituals associated with birth and childhood, adolescence, entering and leaving the monkhood, marriage, building a home, and old age and death. Along the way there are detailed excursions into the nature of the different precepts taken by laymen, the multifarious nature of the pursuit of beneficial *karma*, and an overview of the annual ritual calendar centred on the monastery. It should be noted though that Terwiel's intention is not to provide a complete picture of *religious* life in the village. Instead, he focuses on the interface between Buddhism and the "magico-animistic" aspects of Thai religion. Or more accurately, it attempts to show the syncretism, the lack of distinction between these categories for the villagers he studied. For this reason, he acknowledges, the study glosses over certain dimensions of religious life that does not directly involve the *sangha* or other aspects of the Buddhist institutions. For example, there is not a great deal of attention given to

² Unfortunately, one or two unintended additions have also crept into the new edition. For example, there appears to have been some sort of mix-up with the typesetting and the last two paragraphs of chapter seven are also reproduced at the end of chapter six. I have no idea how this came about, but it does make for some head scratching when a discussion of marriage suddenly shifts to rules about house-building!

spirit medium traditions except insofar as they intersect with the activities of monks.

Terwiel's central argument is that Buddhism at Wat Sanchao is fundamentally syncretic and "magico-animistic". It is syncretic because villagers do not make a sharp distinction between Buddhism on the one hand and various kinds of "magical" practices on the other. It is magico-animistic because the primary function of the monkhood was therefore not the pursuit of the distant goal of *nibbana*, nor providing moral guidance to the laity. Thus from the point of view of villagers the core role of Buddhist monks and the rituals they perform is the production of beneficial power to aid in the achievement of worldly goals: protection from danger, good fortune, general well-being, and so forth. Even the pursuit of positive *karma* in order to ensure a positive rebirth is deemed by Terwiel to be a relatively distant motivation and only really a concern of more elderly villagers. For the most part, villagers are much more concerned with the beneficial power of the *sangha* in this world rather than the next.

Thus for Terwiel "the magical", in the village at least, is not something relatively marginal compared to "true" doctrinal Buddhism. On the contrary, it is at the centre of religious practice and it is therefore fundamental to understanding what village Buddhism is about. By taking this approach, Terwiel is able to challenge what might be called the "Buddhist bias" in studies of Thai religion and to reinterpret many aspects of village Buddhism through a magico-animistic lens. For example, he argues that the taking of the five precepts is less an expression of Buddhist ethics than a rite of purification designed to prepare the laity to access the beneficial power of the monks. Similarly, the main purpose of meditation by monks is not to aid them in their quest for enlightenment but to develop their power. This privileging of the magical explanations leads to interesting insights into some of the idiosyncrasies of Thai Buddhism, for example the strict rules about monks interacting with females and the resistance to including women as fully ordained members of the *sangha*. For Terwiel, these factors cannot just be explained in terms of Buddhist doctrine. Instead, if one recognises that the primary function of the monks is to produce beneficial power, and that women, particularly those who are menstruating, are considered dangerous to the production of this power, these restrictions begin to make more sense.

It is worth asking what Terwiel was trying to achieve by taking this approach. As he himself argues, he sought to challenge what he saw as the two prevailing approaches towards understanding the relationship between Buddhism and local traditions. On the one hand were the "syncretists", who considered Buddhism and other religious traditions as irrevocably blended together. On the other hand were "compartmentalists", who saw religious life divided into different strata of distinct traditions. While syncretists generally attempted to treat religious life as a harmonious whole, compartmentalists distinguished between the elite Great Tradition of Buddhism and various historical "accretions". For the latter it was theoretically possible, and often desirable, for Buddhism to be purified of its "superstitious"

elements, a perspective that coincided with elite attempts to rationalise and modernise religion. The problem with both these approaches, according to Terwiel, is that they attempt to characterise Thai religion as a whole. Instead, he argues, the different models hold true for different parts of the population and he introduces a two-tier model to account for this. In the cities, especially among the more educated, a compartmentalised perspective prevails, with people more or less aware of the distinction between orthodox, doctrinal Buddhism and other religious forms. By contrast, Terwiel argues, such distinctions are not made in village religion.

Terwiel goes on to argue that the distinction he is making is *essential* rather than gradational. That is, there is a “*fundamental* discrepancy between the principles underlying the religion of the farmers and the axioms of that of the highly educated classes” (p.4, emphasis added). These are two distinct species of religion: that of the farming villager is “basically magico-animistic”, while members of the elite religious adherents have an “intellectual appreciation of Buddhism” (ibid.). Thus, while the elite may be aware of discrepancies between the “Great Tradition” and various “accretions”, the villager does not, instead experiencing religious practices as part of an undifferentiated whole. In order to properly capture the character of village religious life, therefore, Terwiel refrains from making a conceptual distinction between “real” Buddhism and “popular religion”. Instead, his main goal becomes to show how the symbols, rituals and institutions of Buddhism serve the essentially magical interpretations and needs of the villagers. It is important to note though that Terwiel does not claim that urbanites do not participate in animistic practices, just that it was possible to make an analytical distinction between different religious traditions in the urban case.

Thus, while many other scholars of the day were concerned with creating categorical distinctions between Buddhism and supernaturalism, or between different “levels” of Buddhism such as Spiro’s (1967) typology of *nibbanic*, *karmatic*, and *apotropaic* Buddhism -- Terwiel tries to stay true to what he sees as the villager, or emic, perspective, in which such distinctions are not made. This is for me one of the more admirable aspects of *Monks and Magic*. Terwiel is committed to not imposing an external analytical model. He wants to understand how Buddhism is actually practised rather than imposing his own normative framework. In this sense it is possible to see *Monks and Magic* as a precursor to Justin McDaniel’s (2011) recent work *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*. McDaniel is also concerned with the “magic” question and seeks to prioritise emic understandings over analytical models that impose distinctions between “Buddhism” and “magic”, or between “elite” and “popular” religion. Like McDaniel, Terwiel also argues that scholars have exaggerated the extent of the state’s rationalisation and standardisation of Buddhism. However, it is also worth noting one of the key points in which these two studies differ: while Terwiel posited a fundamental difference between village and urban educated Buddhism, McDaniel does not make this distinction at all.

I think this difference in approaches is telling and says something about the changing assumptions made by scholars of Thai religion over the last thirty years. While Terwiel obviously felt it necessary to make a sharp distinction between rural and urban Buddhism, developments over the last thirty years have, I think, challenged the sustainability of this argument. On the one hand Thailand's peasants have become much more educated and sophisticated, as the rise of the "red shirts" as a political force has demonstrated. On the other hand, there has been a growing prominence of urban spirit cults and other forms of supernaturalism, including cults popular among the middle class, such as those of Rama V or Kuan Im. Furthermore, as Tambiah's (1984) study of the "cult of amulets" demonstrates, it is the *interactions* between mostly urban patrons and mostly rural monks that have produced and sustained this particular form of Buddhist magic. These developments suggest that, at least nowadays, there are more continuities than differences between urban and rural religious forms.

Turning to the postscript, it is precisely on these sorts of issues that I was hoping Terwiel would revisit. I would have been very interested to read whether he felt his argument needed revision based on developments in recent decades, or if he felt that his two-tier model was still valid. However, the postscript does not discuss these aspects of his argument. Instead, Terwiel makes some observations about contemporary aspects of Thai religion and how they support his general argument that the idiosyncrasies of Thai Buddhism provide evidence of the magico-animistic substrata of local beliefs with which it has blended. For example, the fact that "merit" (*bun*) is seen not only as affecting *karmic* inheritance, but is also conceived of as a sort of substance that emanates from monks and other magically efficacious (*saksit*) objects, he argues, reflects indigenous notions of power. Likewise, he notes the ongoing "preoccupation with small protective, luck-bringing, shielding objects" which he sees as an "unusual regional phenomenon" (p.270). He also reiterates his argument that the practices of temporary ordination as evidence of local pre-Buddhist beliefs or institutions, including the interesting hypothesis that the Buddhist monastery has blended with a pre-Buddhist institution of a "men's house" (p.271). Terwiel also discusses the ongoing debate about female ordination, again suggesting that indigenous notions of power and female pollution help to explain widespread resistance to this development. In the process he adds some fascinating nuggets of information, such as the fact that in the early 1970's he interviewed Thailand's then only *bhikkhuni*, Voramai Kabilsingh, the mother of the country's currently most prominent female monastic, Dhammananda Bhikkuni.

However, while interesting, these observations are kept very brief and not really developed. Furthermore, some of these observations also introduce a certain tension with aspects of Terwiel's original argument, particularly his dichotomization of village and urban Buddhism. For example, to illustrate the ongoing fascination with amulets he makes reference to a 2009 newspaper report which mentions then

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva sporting two famous amulets. But Abhisit is the epitome of the highly educated, cosmopolitan and elite Thai whom Terwiel would place on the opposite side from magico-animistic Buddhism. Granted, Terwiel never argued that urban educated Buddhists do not involve themselves in magico-animistic activities. But nevertheless this example would suggest that there is a lot more continuity between urban and rural Buddhism than Terwiel acknowledges.

A similar tension can also be seen in the book's final statement:

In the modern world the Buddhist monastery remains a quiet haven, it retains its reflective atmosphere and remains a refuge where the hectic world is left behind. The inhabitants of Wat Sanchao still remind the community that the human span of life is short and that in contrast to those who pursue the acquisition of wealth or power there are those who find fulfilment in renouncing the mundane world (pp. 281–2).

I find this image curious in the context of the book's main argument. This statement presents a rather orthodox notion of the role of the monastery: it reminds of the impermanence of all things, of the renunciation of the material world. This would seem to contradict the key idea that village-based Buddhism is non-compartmentalised and “basically magico-animistic” – i.e. concerned with worldly matters – in nature.

Although these points might be taken as criticisms I think they point, paradoxically, to the strength of *Monks and Magic*, and to one of the reasons why the book has continued to retain its relevance. In the original study Terwiel was careful to distinguish between village and urban Buddhism; his observations about magico-animism could only, strictly speaking, be applied to the village context. One could speculate that in the context of the 1970's there was both more social distance between the city and the country and also more investment on the part of both scholars and Thai elites in the modernist notion that Buddhism could be purified of its “superstitious accretions”. But as Terwiel's more recent observations imply, these distinctions are no longer so critical and the relationship between monks and magic is something that continues to be relevant for understanding the nature of Thai Buddhism in general.

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