



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

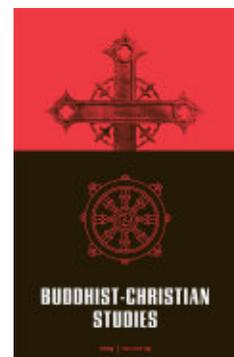
Keeping the Faith: Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads

Muck, Terry C., 1947-

Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 23, 2003, pp. 181-183 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: [10.1353/bcs.2003.0027](https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2003.0027)



 For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/bcs/summary/v023/23.1muck.html>

own teachers showed them the way beyond clinging to laws and doctrines by giving criteria to assess “their practical soteriological effectiveness” (24).

For a publication edited by Germans the book is finely produced and readable, though not without some awkward expressions and unconventional spellings. These are small blemishes indeed, however, in a collection that, despite its unevenness, offers the beginnings of a process of reception by Europeans, both Christian and Buddhist, of Jesus as seen by the “others” and of the Buddha as he could yet be seen.

John D’Arcy May
Irish School of Ecumenics
Trinity College Dublin

KEEPING THE FAITH: THAI BUDDHISM AT THE CROSSROADS. *By Sanitsuda Ekachai. Edited by Nick Wilgus.* Bangkok: Post Books, 2001. 192 pp.

Sanitsuda Ekachai, editorial columnist and features section editor of the *Bangkok Post*, writes this book in the Menckanian tradition of muckraking journalism. A collection of columns from the past decade, the book has an angry goal—the reform of a corrupt Thai Buddhist *sangha*. Somehow, however, the author manages to accomplish the task without an angry or bitter tone. One suspects that this is because she has the goods. In thirty-six short features and twenty-one even shorter editorials, Ekachai paints a damning picture of a corrupt Theravada Buddhist *sangha* that has lost touch with both its religious tradition and its lay constituency.

She presents overwhelming evidence of the corruption. She tells several well-publicized stories of sexual scandals involving *bhikkhus* and mentions a dozen more. She carefully tallies the possessions of rich *bhikkhus* and richer temples. She makes clear the unrepentant patriarchy of the authoritarian Buddhist hierarchy and reminds us of the un-Buddhist character of a *sangha* that will not allow the ordination of *bhikkhunis*. And she argues that the root cause of much of this drifting from Buddhist ideals is a buying into the consumerism that has gripped much of modern Thai culture.

This last point—consumerism—is important. If the book has a theme—always a tall order for a collection of articles—it is the economic enslavement of Thai culture and the *sangha* to capitalistic values. Of course, the West is the culprit here. Since Thailand, strictly speaking, has never been colonized, the West managed to corrupt Thailand (or Siam as some prefer) simply by being in the area. As one of Ekachai’s key informants, Sulak Sivaraksha succinctly put it, “Siam is culturally and intellectually colonized because the country identifies itself closely with the West” (161).

A close second as a theme, however, is patriarchy. Patriarchy, not Buddhism, is the root of the gender imbalance in the *sangha*. The Buddha embraced (a bit reluctantly to be sure) the order of *bhikkhunis* and made it clear his reluctance was an *upaya* or strategic matter, not a question of the spiritual status of women. Women are as able as men when Enlightenment is the question. Patriarchy is also at the root of Thailand's shameful sex industry—one in thirty women in Thailand is a prostitute. The culture is at fault here, a culture that sees women as objects rather than persons.

Sivaraksha ties consumerism and patriarchy together when he says, "In a consumer society, the seeking for endless sensory pleasures and possessions has become the ultimate quest while Buddhism teaches about letting go" (75). The combination of testosterone-blocking celibacy and *baht*-driven greed has been too much for the modern *bhikkhus* of Thailand.

Not all *bhikkhus*, however. Ekachai's book rises above the level of pure muckraking through the simple expedient of offering hope. She tells a dozen or more stories of enlightened (small "e") *bhikkhus* who are taking steps at reform. By "ordaining" (and thereby protecting) endangered trees in a forest. By teaching the *dhamma* instead of occultism. By showing economic restraint in the face of runaway rapaciousness. These are inspiring stories of *bhikkhus* named Buddhadasa, Dhammapitika, Udompatanakorn, Kutajitto, Supajarawat, Visalo, and Kabilsingh. Hope is personalized in these reformers.

Reading between the lines, one can imagine a response to Ekachai's overwhelming case: the traditional Thai *sangha* is organized to serve rural village folk. Although the traditional village still exists in Thailand, it is becoming an endangered species in the face of the urbanized juggernaut. The *sangha* simply hasn't discovered the keys to reaching a changed constituency. Reading between the lines, one suspects that the author would wholeheartedly agree with this defense. Only she wouldn't consider it a defense but a reason, and a well-known reason at that. Her rejoinder would be that the current leadership must know it is out of touch, but still refuses any move toward reform. Entrenched interests, both ecclesiological and economic, make sure any moves toward reform are stillborn.

As this book went to press, a new *Sangha* Bill meant to replace the 1962 *Sangha* Bill was being discussed in Thailand. One of Ekachai's last pieces (May 2001) was a critique of the new law that would change the way the *sangha* was run. Ostensibly a reform bill, the goal is to reduce corruption and moral laxity. Ekachai thinks that even if passed it would do neither.

In traditional Thai Buddhist cultures, *bhikkhus* performed the necessary social task of personifying the possibilities of living life in accordance with *dhamma*—*silā*, *samadhi*, and *panna*. If Ekachai's perceptions are anywhere close to being correct, the *sangha* has failed in that task, at least in the court of public opinion. The weight of that responsibility has shifted from the shoulders of *bhikkhus* to lay teachers of meditation such as India's S. N. Goenka. As Ekachai says of Goenka, "Lay people are turning to lay teachers rather than monks for their spiritual needs" (274).

In traditional Theravada Buddhist cultures, the task of reforming the *sangha* when the inevitable periods of decline set in fell to the monarchy. The reduced role and power of the monarch in modern Thailand make that an unlikely role today. It is ironic that in modern Thailand it appears that the only outside force with any chance of bringing reformist pressure on the *sangha* is the public media. Seen in that light, Sanitsuda Ekachai has usurped the kingly prerogative.

Terry C. Muck
Asbury Theological Seminary

ZEN GIFTS TO CHRISTIANS. *By Robert Kennedy.* New York: Continuum, 2000. 131 pp.

Though Robert Kennedy's recent book *Zen Gifts to Christians* (2000) is intended for Christian readers who may be "temperamentally inclined" (i) to learn about Zen to spiritually augment their lives, it also succeeds as a work that defines the Western Buddhist community and as an introductory text for those interested in Zen Buddhism. Drawing on his experiences as a Catholic priest and Zen master, Kennedy's work contributes much to the ideals expressed in the Second Vatican Council's conciliar decree *Nostra Aetate* (as well as the Thirty-fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus): to preserve and promote those universal elements of truth that manifest themselves in different cultures and societies, through dialogue and collaboration with followers of other religions. Kennedy achieves this monumental goal by organizing the book around the ten ox-herding pictures of Zen Buddhism (also known as the ten bulls) so as to better illustrate to Christians what Zen Buddhism has to offer through the narrative of spiritual growth common to all Zen Buddhists. Each ox-herding picture (or "bull") is elegantly expanded into a chapter detailing each step in the path of the spiritual quest. Kennedy richly supplements the lessons and ideas contained in each bull with references to Western poetry and prose, making the bulls more accessible to the reader by presenting the information in different ways.

For both Christian and non-Christian readers, Kennedy's introduction to Zen may come as somewhat of a surprise, because he begins with the lived components of Zen Buddhism: discipline and practice. Though Zen does have speculative features and theories (as evidenced by koans), it is primarily concrete in its approach. Unlike Christianity, Zen is also a physical skill: it must be attentively practiced for enlightenment to occur. As Kennedy notes, if it is practiced sporadically or by rote, the student cannot make any spiritual progress, thus destroying the goal of the exercise. Moreover, Kennedy indirectly echoes a Platonic critique when he warns the