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Religion in Laos Today¹

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Laos is traditionally seen as a Buddhist country. At the last census in 1995, three million out of the then population of 4.6 million, or two thirds, described themselves as Buddhist, 60,000 as Christian and 5000 as belonging to other religions. The remaining 1.5 million, who did not identify their confession, should be classed as animists or spirit-worshippers. However, it is apparent that these figures on the number of people who profess a religion not native to Laos do not reflect the true situation in the country: their number is in all probability significantly larger than that given. A proportion of Christians and adherents of other religions, finding themselves amongst a Buddhist majority, simply considered it prudent not to disclose their true religious affiliation and declined to respond. According to an unpublished paper compiled by the Department of Religious Affairs of the National Construction Front (NCF), which regulates state relations with religious groups, in 1999 there were approximately 150,000 Christians, or 3 per cent of the 5 million-strong population.² The number of adherents of other religions is also higher than that indicated in surveys.

The last decade of the twentieth century was for Laos a period of significant change in various spheres of national life. In the second half of the 1980s the Lao leadership decided to alter the course of the country's development and presented a new policy of 'renewal' (*kanpianpeng mai*) to the nation. Initially these reforms affected only the economy, but then gradually extended to all other spheres of national life, including the spiritual. This change of direction in the country's social and economic development involved the transition from a socialist to a market economy; the opening up of the country to the outside world and the resulting influx of new lifestyles and western mass culture had a devastating effect on traditional ways of life and on Lao national culture in general. In the spiritual realm if not a spiritual vacuum then certainly a more 'open' ideological space developed. Lao society was faced with the question of the preservation not only of its culture, but also of its very national identity. Buddhism and its teachings provided one of the most important means available, with the values of patriotism and independence, to help the Lao nation withstand the influence of foreign ideologies and mass culture. Buddhism was enlisted in the defence of national culture, life and identity as a matter of course. In 1991 a Buddhist stupa replaced the red star and the hammer and sickle on the insignia of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and the word 'socialism' was removed from the motto of the state, symbolising this shift in spiritual values.

Grant Evans speaks of the mid-1980s in Laos as a period which saw the gradual

flowering of Buddhism, demonstrated in his opinion by the availability of significant funds for the restoration and construction of Buddhist monasteries.³ It would seem however that the external splendour and well-maintained appearance of religious buildings does not necessarily indicate that religion and its institutions are flourishing, nor does it mean that religion has been given a more significant role in the life of the nation. It is merely an indicator of the growing levels of prosperity in society, especially among the more well-off sections, who donate a proportion of their income to the religious community as a means of earning 'merit' for the next life.

In fact, according to my observations, the second half of the 1980s saw the Buddhist Sangha in a fairly precarious state, in terms both of its ideology and of its organisation. In the ideological sphere uncertainty reigned, a consequence of the fact that since 1976 the Sangha had constantly had to adapt to shifting political and social realities. Having barely established itself as a participant in the socialist transformation of society, the Sangha once again had to find a place in the spiritual life of a society now embarked on the construction of a market economy. It then had to develop a new theology which responded to the spirit of the times. In general the level of theological education among the Buddhist clergy was low. Few clergy had a deep and wide-ranging knowledge of Buddhist theology. During the first years of the republic many old rank-and-file monks either left the priesthood or emigrated. There were very few new entrants to the Sangha because of the absence of an organised system to prepare them. In organisational terms, the composition of the Sangha was unstable owing to a high degree of fluctuation in its membership.

The Lao Buddhist Association (LBA), numbering on average 18,000 members, keeps no record of clergy movements, but according to a reliable source there is an annual turnover of several thousand.⁴ Monks stay on average three to four years in the Sangha. There are few monks who stay more than ten years, who would ideally make up one third of the membership of the Sangha, and thus form its stable core. Because of this the monastic traditions and moral principles retained by a very small number of serving monks are being forgotten. As a result a stable environment capable of nurturing committed followers of Buddhist teachings is not being fostered. It should also be noted that Lao Buddhist monks are very young. No accurate information exists about the age profile of the Sangha, but according to our estimates at least three quarters of the Sangha are under the age of 25, and the majority of these use their time in the Sangha to gain an education and afterwards leave it at the first available opportunity.

Some observers tend to attribute this internal weakness of the Sangha to the unwarranted interference of the state in its spiritual life.⁵ However, this interpretation ignores the objective processes taking place in Lao society and in the world generally, above all the process of secularisation as a universal phenomenon. I have written about this elsewhere.⁶ The fact remains that the religiosity of Lao society and the attraction of Buddhism in particular are, albeit slowly, in decline. According to some authorities on religion in Laos, for example the former head of the Lao Sangha Khamtan Thepbuali, at present approximately half of Lao Buddhists are orthodox followers of Buddhism, who adhere strictly to the precepts of their religion and perform the required observances. The other half are Buddhists by tradition – in other words they no longer believe the Buddhist worldview, but observe some traditional Buddhist teachings and participate in certain ritual activities only. Moreover, the relationship between these two groups is gradually shifting in favour of the second. This is particularly striking in the attitudes of the younger generation to the monastic

life. Being a monk has now lost its prestige. Most novice monks leave the monastery when they have completed their studies and return to the secular world. In order to keep them in the monasteries the Sangha leadership and the secular authorities now require monks and novices to spend two to three years in a monastery on completion of their studies before they can return to the world. Nevertheless, in many temples, especially in the provinces, there are not enough monks, there is no one to conduct religious ceremonies and hundreds of monasteries in the country are derelict. Recently a former high-ranking monk Maha Bounthavi Vilaichak wrote that in an age of technological progress

Lao society has begun to relinquish religion and is becoming a society in which each person lives by himself ... The temple does not interest young men any more. They prefer to go to places of entertainment, which are in fact sources of degeneration for young people. Instead of being an institution for moral education on Buddhist principles the temple has now become just a place where rites are performed.⁷

Despite measures taken in the early 1990s the unsatisfactory situation in the Sangha has still not been fully resolved. This was partly alluded to at the Fourth Congress of the Sangha in April 1998. The late vicepresident of Laos Oudom Katinya, for example, noted in his speech to the congress that 'Buddhist teaching is in many respects being conducted in a banal and unimaginative way, divorced from the challenges of modern life'. He noted also that 'many monks are unable to explain the fundamental beliefs of Buddhism'; that religious discipline in the Sangha is lax, as a result of which in the country as a whole 'there is a steady decline in belief in Buddhism'; and that therefore 'there must be renewal in the Sangha in every domain – in its ideology, organisation and religious practice'.⁸

The last decade has been one of reform and of a reordering of the priorities of the Sangha; the process amounts to a renewal of the Sangha as a religious organisation first and foremost. In previous years the main functions of the Sangha had to all intents and purposes been socio-political in nature; now it has resumed the religious function as its first priority. It will concentrate on the promulgation of the Buddhist world outlook, on satisfying the needs of believers and teaching Buddhist ethics and morality. Of course this reordering of priorities does not mean that the Sangha is no longer concerned with the preservation of national culture, with health issues, education of the masses and so on, but these concerns, which are not part of its natural primary function, have simply taken second place. One of the clearest demonstrations of this shift in priorities has been the series of measures recently introduced by the Sangha and the secular authorities to raise the standard of theological education of the monastic community, to improve religious services and to create a strong core of clergy as the embodiment of particular values and morals. Above all this involves reform in the system of theological education, initiated by decree of the prime minister on 24 August 1996. As a result, the number of religious educational institutions had increased to 54 in 1998, of which 23 are preliminary level and 31 secondary. In the same year a theological academy was opened in Vientiane, as well as an institute for the training of teachers for religious schools. Around 5700 students (novice and lay) studied in these institutions in 1998; around 400 teachers studied at the teacher-training institute. Plans for the development of theological education envisage that over the next few years a secondary theological seminary will be opened in every region and remote villages will have a primary monastery school. These institutions will be established and financed by the Sangha in partnership with

the state, as well as through the donations of monks and laypeople. There are plans to establish a special school for young Buddhists.

A small number of monks and laypeople are being educated in foreign Buddhist institutions. In 1998 around 100 people were studying abroad, including 79 in Thailand, nine in Myanmar and a handful in India. Their living and tuition expenses are usually covered mainly by the host institution and partly by the students themselves.

In the theological seminaries the number of hours devoted to the study of purely religious disciplines has been increased, including the foundations of the Dharma, the life of the Buddha, the disciplinary code and study of the Pali language as that of the sacred texts. Theological seminaries and religious schools have begun to concentrate more on teaching monks the forms and rituals necessary for the conduct of religious services as a means of reinforcing the knowledge of Buddhist teachings in the minds of believers, and of spreading Buddhist teachings on morality and ethics. Monks are expected to know Buddhist rites and ceremonies and to be able to recite prayers and give sermons at various ceremonies. Two programmes of study have been devised: the technique of preaching (*thammkhatyk*) and the technique of meditation (*vipatsanakam*), the latter involving public sessions of self-perfection through meditation held outside the monastery. In 1996–97 alone, around 3000 people attended these sessions.

Monks now have access to a wide audience. They can appear on television and radio, in educational establishments, hospitals and so on.

In conjunction with these changes the organisation of the Sangha and its internal discipline are also being strengthened. A new statute passed at the last Congress has made it more difficult to enter the Sangha, in order to maintain its purity. A potential entrant to the Sangha has to have not only the permission of his parents but also the permission of the local authorities and a reference from the institution or organisation to which he belongs. To the external observer these requirements may appear to be undemocratic, but they are nevertheless considered essential in order to protect the Sangha from antisocial elements, for example from people on the run from the law, people linked to the criminal fraternity, drug addicts and alcoholics who undermine the authority of the Sangha by their behaviour. Moreover, the newly adopted statute recommends that the doctrinal and disciplinary committees be stricter towards those who have broken Canon Law and the 227 commandments for members of the Buddhist brotherhood. In serious cases, it recommends that individuals be expelled from the priesthood. Heads of monasteries must also ensure that meetings are held regularly within the monastic community.⁹

In organisational terms the Lao Sangha is now a single unit. Until the mid-1970s there were two sects: the traditional '*Mahanikai*', to which the majority of Buddhists in the country belonged, and the more recent '*Thammayut*', which was formed in the 1950s, influenced by a sect of the same name in Thailand, and which had a fairly small following. At the First Congress of Buddhists in Laos in 1976 the unity of the Lao Sangha was declared; but it is difficult to judge how unified it actually is. Judging by some indicators, for example the number of appeals for the preservation of unity and for the avoidance of heresy and divisions made in the concluding speech of the Council of the LBA at the Fourth Congress (1998), it may be assumed that some deeply-rooted dissident tendencies exist among the Buddhist community, the source of which, as before, springs from abroad.

Materials emanating from the Fourth Congress of the LBA as well as subsequent events in the religious life of the country indicate that in future the Sangha is set

to develop as a religious institution of considerable social significance. All the documents issued at the Congress place the dissemination of Buddhist teaching, the proper management of the Sangha, the teaching of Buddhist ethics and morality and the development of religious education at the top of the list of priorities. The obligations of the Sangha in relation to the preservation of national culture, education of the masses, health care and the environment now occupy second place.

Commenting on the growing role of the Buddhist Sangha in Laos, Evans suggests a possible 'rebuddhisisation' of the Lao state.¹⁰ It seems to me that this is not a realistic prospect. The process of secularisation in Laos, as in the world in general, is irreversible, and however significant the role of Buddhism in the social sphere, it is already impossible to envisage the country becoming a monarchist theocratic state. In the history of Laos, Buddhism has never been an independent socio-political movement and the clergy never had any pretensions to wielding state power. It is more likely that the Buddhist clergy will participate in the social and political changes taking place in the country through the means and methods available to them, as they have done over the last quarter century. A resolution of the Fourth Congress states that 'all organisations belonging to the LBA and their members must work together with laypeople in the protection and the development of the country'.¹¹ The report of the Central Council read at the Congress states that the task of the Sangha is 'to combine the religious with the national, to link Buddhist morality with the policies and programmes for socio-economic development devised by the state and the party'.¹² It can be anticipated, therefore, that the actual participation of the Sangha in the social and political life of the nation will consist in adapting the social provisions of Buddhist doctrine to the policy of renewal. The Sangha is likely also to demonstrate a consistency between the government programme for social and economic transformation and fundamental Buddhist precepts. This connection will inject state policies with a spiritual significance, with the result that they will be held in higher esteem by the population.

This prediction has been borne out by recent events. At a conference held in Vientiane from 14 to 16 November 2001, for example, the theme was how well the teachings, philosophy and morality of Buddhism fit with modern civilisation and Lao society; but it is not in fact clear how Buddhism can be brought into line with the Marxist teachings officially professed by the ruling LPRP.

Christianity in Laos is represented by two main denominations: the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches. The total number of Christians in Laos is about 150,000, of whom approximately half are Catholics and half Protestants. According to official data there are 245 Christian churches and prayer houses throughout the country, and some 400 clergy.

The Catholic Church first tried to establish itself in Laos in the seventeenth century, but failed to do so.¹³ It was more successful in the late nineteenth century after Laos was colonised by France. It currently has parishes in virtually every province. These are grouped into four dioceses headed by bishops appointed by the Vatican. The Catholic Church has several dozen churches and a cathedral in Vientiane. There are Catholic believers from all ethnic groups, but a large number are Khmu and Hmong.

The first Protestant clergyman is said to have appeared in Laos in the early twentieth century, but Protestant churches made their presence felt much later, after the declaration of independence in 1954. At that time Protestantism was introduced by American and European missionaries. The majority of Protestants belong to the 'Lao Evangelical Church'. This church has a regulated and strict structure and a

system of individual membership. It has branches functioning in nearly every province. The organisation is divided into various sections, including women's and youth sections, which in a number of regions compete for influence with the official state women's and youth organisations. The denomination has a number of church buildings, including two in Vientiane, professional schools, a hospital and sporting establishments. It is financed by individual contributions as well as through private donations and income from its commercial enterprises.

The other Protestant denomination is the Seventh Day Adventist Church of Laos, established in 1973. It conducts its missionary activities mainly in Vientiane, where it has a church. It has about one thousand members. On the whole its influence and authority are fairly insignificant.

The next religion in Laos by order of importance is the Baha'i faith. This faith was brought to Laos by Said, an Iranian businessman, who arrived in Laos on business in 1952 and established a charitable organisation in Vientiane. The real aim of this organisation was to spread the Baha'i faith. A conference of Baha'i believers took place in Vientiane in March 1994, which established the 'Society of Justice' (*'Khana lakthamma yutitham'*) and a national council of nine members. According to its statute, the aim of the society is to preach the values of love and mutual assistance. It has branches in five provinces and around 10,000 adherents. The society has founded several commercial organisations, which are the main source of funding for its activities.

The last officially recognised religion in Laos is Islam. It is the smallest, with only a few thousand adherents. There are two groups in Laos. The first is made up of Muslim immigrants from Pakistan and India who are permanent residents in Laos. They have a small mosque in Vientiane. They are not engaged in activities aimed at spreading their faith and winning new converts. The second Muslim group was apparently formed by ethnic Cham, who fled from the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and found refuge in Laos. This is now called the Lao Muslim Society, with its headquarters in Nongsavan village near Vientiane. It has a mosque on the site of a former Muslim school. The community is primarily made up of Cambodians (ethnic Cham), but there are a few Lao as well as foreign Muslim diplomats in Laos among its members. They are planning to build a main mosque. The society's activities are allegedly financed by sources in Muslim countries in South-East Asia and the Middle East.¹⁴

Until recently only the above-mentioned religious denominations could be considered socially important in Laos. Over the two last decades, however, a good number of religious groups of a Protestant persuasion (hereafter neoprotestants) have started operating throughout Laos. The Lao call all of them *phuak pha yesu*, Christians. At present there is a shortage of data on these groups.

The first group of this kind appeared in Laos in the 1950, but it was not until Laos flung its doors open to the outside world, and in particular after the adoption of the Constitution of 1991 which proclaimed freedom of religion, that such groups started multiplying. By the end of the twentieth century their number totalled approximately 250. The majority of these groups were established by so-called 'nongovernmental organisations with religious affiliations',¹⁵ an ambiguous and mysterious description. Subsequent events have generally shown that most of these groups have used 'humanitarian aid' as a pretext to get into Laos – the Lao government does not allow foreigners to conduct religious activity in the country – and that in parallel to implementing humanitarian programmes they have been busy with religious work. Their primary purpose is to recruit local people into their organisations, establish new religious groups or cells, found places of worship and thus set up a network in

various provinces. They work primarily in the regions inhabited by non-Lao national minorities such as the Khmu or Hmong. One reason may be that, as French Catholic missionaries and American Protestant pastors have told me, while Lao Buddhists are rather staunch adherents to their faith, members of national minorities, who are mostly spirit-worshippers, are more open to conversion. Another reason may be an intention to make a simultaneous appeal to religious and national identity. Religious leaders in Laos tell me that preaching among local people directly tends to be unproductive; the best technique is to seek out a few individuals, work with them until they become staunch in their new faith, and then give them the responsibility of proselytising their own people. The neoprotestants have also paid attention to groups such as former civil and military officials who went through 'reeducation camps' after 1975, Lao refugees abroad and other individuals who for one reason or another are dissatisfied with the current regime. These considerations account, at least partially, for the somewhat oppositional character of these newly-established religious groups.

The training of clergy for Laos has also started in religious institutions abroad, for example in the Philippines. Future students are recruited among Lao by holding out alluring prospects, and they are then conveyed clandestinely across the border without the agreement of the Lao authorities. Religious leaders from humanitarian organisations are not usually very scrupulous about the means they use. To recruit people they will offer gifts and money, promise material benefits or, conversely, hold up the threat of hell.

After their establishment these new religious groups, or at least their leaders, are maintained by donor humanitarian organisations until they can provide for themselves. Members of a neoprotestant group in Phongkheng village (Vientiane municipality), for instance, said in court that they received salaries and expenses from the American humanitarian organisation 'Partners in Progress', in return for which they 'sought out people for Bible study classes' in various provinces and rendered other services.¹⁶ The president of the Lao Buddhist Association Vichit Singharat told me that these humanitarian organisations sometimes pay as much as \$US 50 for one converted Lao. This kind of activity is a matter for the courts; but in this case the Lao government was rather forbearing; it did not pass any prison sentences and limited itself to expelling some individuals from the country.

It should of course be pointed out that the Lao authorities appreciate genuinely-motivated religious humanitarian work, and that Christian and other religious organisations do engage in such work, and are recognised for their contribution in the Lao media. A passage about non-Buddhist religions in a report compiled for internal use by the Department of Religious Affairs of the NCF reads:

For some time past various religious institutions have deserved a lot of merit for rendering useful humanitarian aid to Lao people of different nationalities living in remote mountain regions or in lowland valleys. Their diverse assistance includes financial help, a number of schools and hospitals, artesian wells, water-pipes, educational materials, sports equipment and so on. Recently the Protestant community granted 650,000 *kip* for a group of government officials to go for training in neighbouring countries in 1999–2000. Catholics in their turn succeeded in obtaining 1,032,950 dollars from the Vatican embassy to implement eight programmes aimed at the development of education and public health in 2001.¹⁷

Since 1975 the religious activities of Christian, particularly of neoprotestant, denominations has acquired a pronounced political tinge. This has not usually involved direct antigovernment propaganda but the sowing of tacit social disobedience, which Lao officials have labelled 'The Four Noes': don't listen to anybody, don't participate in anything, don't cooperate with anybody, and don't go along with anybody apart from your Lord (or your group leader who represents the Lord). In practical terms, these four 'noes' have meant refusing to serve in the army, refusing to participate in common social activity, refusing to work in local social organisations, refusing to join in local community meetings and so on, unless and until such involvement gains the consent of the leader. In late 2000 peasants of Naseng village (Savannakhet province) complained to me that the members of the religious group *Phaya tham ekhalat* (Independent Noble Truth) functioning in that village refused to repair roads and water-pipes in the village. At the same time the members of the group boasted of radio equipment which was allegedly bestowed on them by their God (but which had in fact been targeted humanitarian assistance), as if to remind their Buddhist countrymen that the latter, by contrast, were expected to give alms regularly to Buddha.

In the last decade of the twentieth century the scope for illegitimate religious activity by so-called humanitarian organisations was growing steadily. New unregistered religious groups with their preachers, places of worship and other property were appearing all over the country. In this situation the Lao authorities felt obliged to take measures to regulate the arbitrary activity of these neoprotestant organisations and to put a potentially precarious course of events under control. Afterwards events followed a classical pattern: the side which had provoked the conflict took it as a *casus belli* and unleashed an international campaign for the protection of religious rights in Laos; this gained momentum with every passing year. Western mass media, in the first place the US-sponsored 'Free Asia' radio stationed in neighbouring Thailand, some international organisations such as Amnesty International and Lao refugee organisations in America and Europe constantly accuse the Lao authorities of infringement of freedom of religion in Laos, of discrimination, persecution and harassment of Christians, of closing their churches and imprisonment of Christian clergy and laymen. For instance, on 9 September 2001 the Lao Human Rights Council Inc. in the United States declared that 'the communist Lao government has arrested and imprisoned more than 250 Hmong and Lao religious leaders, pastors and believers, and closed down more than 60 churches ... in Laos during 2000 and 2001'.¹⁸ In their turn, Lao officials and the Lao mass media have stated that such claims are groundless, slanderous allegations. They have said that the Lao authorities have not closed down Christian churches and that no one has been sentenced on religious charges. They admit that among imprisoned persons there have been some who have called themselves Christians, but they say that they have been charged not for their faith but for breaching the Criminal Code.

On the whole, this debate or sequence of mutual accusations lies in the domain of public relations rather than in the field of scholarly investigation. I shall confine myself to a few remarks. When speaking about closed churches – or, more accurately, worship houses – it is necessary to bear in mind the fact that these churches were by and large opened without the permission of the administrative authorities, and may therefore be legitimately closed down at any time. In this context the number of 60 closed churches looks rather small and speaks for the indulgence of the Lao administration. As to dozens of allegedly imprisoned Christians, it is probable that some judgments have been too severe, with the

definitions of 'breach of the peace', 'creating social turmoil', 'causing religious discord' and so on being interpreted too broadly or even unfairly. Each case needs to be scrutinised separately and on its own merits. Meanwhile it is also well known that many detained persons have been released after short talks, and that some have been acquitted or amnestied. Published materials show that most violations of religious rights have happened in rural areas. We may suspect that in some places the local administration has been overzealous in implementing control over religious organisations, going beyond the policy of the central government. Concerning 'the instruction to newly-converted Christians to renounce their faith' one Lao official has argued that they misused the right to proselytise, so we have a legitimate right to re-proselytise.

In late 2000 I visited Luangphrabang and Savannakhet provinces, including rural areas, to meet NCF officials responsible for religious affairs and the leaders of Evangelical, Adventist and Baha'i congregations, to attend their services, to talk to parishioners. Neither the Adventists nor the Bahai's had any problems with the authorities. Only the Evangelicals had made some complaints: that the authorities were prohibiting them from preaching and proselytising among national minorities, hindering them in their attempts to open new churches, and preventing them from publishing religious literature, including the Bible. Nothing was said about closing churches or imprisoning clergy. Of course my interlocutors were probably being cautious; but I believe that had there been current cases of gross abuse I would have had my attention brought to them one way or another.

To conclude this section let me cite the US State Department's report on human rights in Laos in 2000. Enumerating various cases of infringement of religious rights in Laos the authors nevertheless acknowledge that the 'Lao authorities generally tolerate diverse religious practices', that new churches 'generally are permitted to practise their new faith unhindered', that 'members of long established congregations have few problems in practising their faith', that 'the government permits major religious festivals of all established congregations without hindrance', that 'animists generally experience no interference by the government in their religious practices' and so on. The report thus indicates that the religious freedom situation in Laos is far from being as bad as it is portrayed in some mass media.

When one discusses the relations between the state and religious institutions in Laos one must bear in mind the fact that apart from the Constitution, which declares freedom of religion in the country, until recently there has been no other legal act specifying the rights and duties of religious and governmental organisations, of believers and officials. It is not yet clear, for instance, whether religious organisations must submit reports to the state organisations charged with religious affairs, and if so, what kind of report, and how often. Nor is there clarity about such a trifling matter as whether a believer has the right to put up a picture of Buddha or Christ in his office. Such a state of affairs naturally breeds misunderstandings and mutual reproaches. Now the gap has partly been filled. On 5 July this year the Lao prime minister signed a decree on the 'regulation and protection' of religious practice in Laos. It was published in the newspapers on 7 August. It reasserts party and state policy but clarifies many issues. It lays down fairly strict bounds for religious organisations and their activities. The decree assumes that specific questions can be settled at local level, but a good many questions still remain unanswered.

The above debate about the state of religious freedom in Laos constitutes a contemporary snapshot. We are looking at effects; but the roots of the current situation lie in history. Relations between the Lao state and the Christian churches in

Laos have always been rather tense and strained. There are several reasons for this.

First, both parties have had their ideological bias. Though Lao communists were never anticlerical and did not look upon religion as opium for the people – one finds hardly any contemporary Lao publications attacking religion as such – they were however very suspicious about western religions which were associated with colonialism. Meanwhile Lao Catholics and Protestants were always hostile to communism. They were convinced *a priori* that communists, regardless of their nationality, were the enemies of religious institutions. During the revolution and civil war Lao Christians, especially Catholics, opposed the Pathet Lao. All this is now in the past, but it has a continuing impact on relations and accounts at least partly for the current estrangement and suspicion between Lao official circles and the Christian churches in Laos.

Second, all the Christian denominations are foreign-born and affiliated with larger organisations abroad: the Catholic Church is subordinate to the Vatican through its nuncio in Bangkok; the Adventists are accountable directly to their union in Singapore and through it to their headquarters in the United States; the Evangelical Church is affiliated with its regional centre in Thailand, which coordinates the work of Evangelical churches in Indochina. The Lao government proceeds from the supposition that that Lao PDR is a sovereign state and that all religious organisations functioning on its territory are to abide strictly by Lao legislation (except in the realm of purely religious internal affairs). However, these institutions have in fact very often defied or ignored government regulations. This state of affairs naturally worries the Lao authorities, causing suspicion, uneasiness and tension between them and the religious confessions.

Third, Christianity, particularly Protestantism, with its liberal values and philosophy of individualism, is intrinsically dissonant with the traditional values of the Buddhist community as the basic unit of social organisation in Laos. The intrusion of alien religions leads to the disturbance of habitual ways of life, to unease and social tension.

The Lao authorities are against the arbitrary restructuring of the existing religious field. They refer to the historical practice of the kings of Laos and the Buddhist Sangha. Lao tribes which adhered to animistic beliefs settled in the Mekong valley at the beginning of the second millennium AD; shortly afterwards they adopted Buddhism from the Khmer, and proclaimed it the state religion in the middle of the fourteenth century. Since then however the Lao Sangha has not made systematic attempts to convert aboriginal peoples to Buddhism. Ethnic Lao and ethnic minorities which still practice animism have lived together for centuries in peace and harmony, at least from a religious point of view. Lao officialdom takes the view that all religious organisations should refrain from proselytising and direct their energies to rendering religious services and humanitarian assistance both to their parishioners and to the population at large.

Another issue which concerns the authorities is the use of compulsion in the dissemination of their faith by Christian churches, especially Protestant ones. This uneasiness is reflected in a resolution of the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party on religion (30 March 1992) which rules that no one has the right to force anyone to adopt or recant a given faith by such means as coercion, threats or inducements.¹⁹ Speaking on this problem, the head of the LBA, Maha Vichit Singhalat, told me in late 2000 that the Sangha did not fear competition from other religions and that Buddhism was not threatened by other religious doctrines. The main issue was that the coexistence of different faiths and even competition

between them must take place openly. Each religion should be able to attract new converts by demonstrating the advantages of its faith rather than by seeking to denigrate other faiths and using money, presents and other material inducements to win people over. It was important that the existence of different faiths work for the good of society as a whole: instead of being a source of division between people, religion should be a factor which unites them.

Buddhism is still the predominant religion in Laos, which can still be called a Buddhist country. However, it is clear from the above that Buddhism has now lost its monopoly in the religious sphere and that new groups have emerged which also want to occupy a place in the spiritual life of society. The existing religious organisations, as far as I am aware, all act independently of one another. However, a careful examination of the situation shows signs of a confrontation between the Buddhist faith, which enjoys the protection of the state, and other religions. The Buddhist Sangha, following the Buddhist principles of religious tolerance and rejection of exclusivity, has declared its willingness to cooperate with other religions. Thus the programme adopted at the Fourth Congress of the Sangha notes that the LBA should 'maintain links with other religious institutions in Laos in order to unite Buddhists and those of other faiths in the protection and development of the country'.¹⁶ The regulations of Christian churches also have similar provisions. However, as yet there is no evidence of cooperation between the different faiths. It would be more accurate to talk in terms of their alienation and isolation from one another.

The missionary and proselytising activity of the nontraditional, mainly Christian denominations in Laos has undoubtedly led to an increase in the number of their followers and to the evangelisation of a certain proportion of the population, resulting in a diversification of the religious life of the country. In the normal course of events, however, this is scarcely likely in the foreseeable future to result in a fundamental shift in the relative influences of the main religions in Laos. The experience of the past, in particular that of French Catholic missionaries who worked in the country for many years, shows that conversion of Buddhists or animists to a new faith is a long and uneven process. During the process of conversion an intermingling of beliefs often occurs, creating a mixture of religious practices and in some cases dual belief. This intermediate stage often lasts many years. In the religious perceptions of some ethnic groups in Laos, for example, the Buddhist pantheon coexists with the spirit world: they will communicate daily with the spirits and relate to the Buddhist gods only on feast days. Ethnic Lao, especially in rural areas, happily combine a belief in the spirits and in the Buddhist gods. Often one sees in one corner of a house a shrine to the Buddha and in another a shrine to the spirits.

The emergence of new religions will ultimately lead to the destruction of the accustomed coexistence of beliefs and their associated worldview among ethnic groups living in close proximity to each other. This may have very varied consequences, which is a cause of concern to Lao society. At present the nontraditional religions do not present a serious threat to Buddhism as their influence in society is relatively insignificant. It should be noted however that the nontraditional faiths, especially the neoprotestant groups, are very active, energetic and committed. They have significant financial resources and modern technology at their disposal. They conduct their activities taking into account the interests and demands of modern society. The Lao Evangelical Church is an example of this: cultural and social programmes reinforce its religious activities, thus presenting a very attractive image. Therefore it can be said with certainty that the influence of such churches will grow.

In the normal run of events, a shift in the role played by one religion compared to

another, or a shift in the relationship between religious groups, should not in itself present a threat. The danger is that internal or external forces may attempt to use the religious, or rather ethno-religious, factor for the furtherance of their political aims.

As far as I can judge from the Lao press and from my conversations in late 2001 with Lao officials responsible for religious affairs and other important individuals, the Lao administration is putting the emphasis on seeking agreement with all religious organisations and establishing a *modus vivendi* with them. Continuing evidence for this is provided by the adoption of the above-mentioned decree on 5 July 2002, by the now regular meetings between Lao officials and religious leaders, and by the conciliatory speech by one of the top Lao leaders, president of the NCF Sisavath Keobounphan, at the ceremony on 4 August when the decree was presented to representatives of all the religious organisations in Laos.

Notes and References

- ¹ This article is based mainly on materials collected by the author during his visits to Laos in 1999, 2000 and 2001, as well as on information and impressions gathered by the author in conversation with party, state and religious leaders, with official and unofficial persons involved in religious affairs, and with ordinary monks and novices. It updates, and should be read in conjunction with, the article by Lev Morev 'Religion, state and society in contemporary Laos', *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1998, pp. 31–38.
- ² *Sitseliphap nai kaansyathy ly bo syathy saasanaa ju nai si po po laaw*, unpublished reference paper on religious freedom in Laos compiled by the Department of Religious Affairs of the NCF, August 2001.
- ³ Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975* (Silkworm, Chiangmai, Thailand, 1998), p. 63.
- ⁴ According to LBA figures, in 1998 there were 6897 monks, 11,093 novices and 2823 working monasteries in Laos.
- ⁵ Martin Stuart-Fox, *Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State: the Making of Modern Laos* (White Lotus, Bangkok Cheney, 1996); Evans, *op. cit.*
- ⁶ L.N. Morev, 'Sekulyarizatsiya obshchestvennogo soznaniya v Laose', in *Religiya i sekulyarizatsiya na Vostoke* (Nauka, Moscow, 1993).
- ⁷ *Pasaason* (a daily party newspaper), 25 June 2002.
- ⁸ *Koongpasum jai phutaen phasong thua pathet thya thii IV (The Fourth Congress of the Lao Sangha)* (Vientiane, 1998), pp. 57–59.
- ⁹ *Thammanuun pokkhong song laaw (The Constitution of the Lao Sangha)* (Vientiane, 1998).
- ¹⁰ Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
- ¹¹ *Koongpasum ...*, p. 69.
- ¹² *ibid.*, p. 28.
- ¹³ Giovanni Filippo de Masini, *Relation nouvelle et curieuse des royaumes de Tonkin et de Lao* (1664; reprint with Lao translation, Research Committee for History and Literature, Vientiane, 1990).
- ¹⁴ Information on non-native confessions received from the Department of Religious Affairs of the NCF and from leaders of Evangelical, Adventist and Baha'i congregations in Vientiane.
- ¹⁵ Phrase taken from *Laos: Country Report on Human Rights – 2000* (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, 23 February 2001).
- ¹⁶ *Lao People's Democratic Republic: Religious Imprisonment*, Amnesty International website, 26 September 1998.
- ¹⁷ *Sitseliphap ...*
- ¹⁸ *Religious Persecutions in Laos* (press release), Lao Human Rights Council, 9 September 2002.

- ¹⁹ *Mati khong khana bolihaan ngaan suungkaang phak pasaason pativat laaw kiawkap banhaa saasanaa (The Resolution of the Central Committee on Religious Problems)* (Vientiane, 1992).

(Translated from the Russian by Suzanne Pattle)