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**ASCENDANT DOCTRINE AND
RESURGENT MAGIC IN CAPITAL-
IST SOUTHEAST ASIA
PARADOX AND POLARISATION AS 21ST
CENTURY CULTURAL LOGIC**



6

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ASCENDANT DOCTRINE AND RESURGENT MAGIC IN CAPITALIST SOUTHEAST ASIA

PARADOX AND POLARISATION AS
21ST CENTURY CULTURAL LOGIC

It pertains to the essence of becoming to move and pull in both directions at once. Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense of direction; but paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time.

Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 2001, 3; Cited by Kostantinos Retsikas 2012, xiii

ABSTRACT In contemporary Southeast Asia the fields of religious practice and adherence present the apparent paradox of a parallel efflorescence of radically opposing trends. Syncretistic, ritual-based magic and spirit mediumship are flourishing in many localities, while anti-supernatural doctrinal accounts of Buddhism and Islam are also influential in the societies in which these respective religions are influential. Despite claims by some of their respective proponents to adhere to historical tradition, these contrasting trends are both intimately associated with the modern world of commodified, market-based media and scientific technologies. Reflecting on a range of studies of post-Cold War religious expression, I present initial hypotheses on how orthopractic ritual and syncretism, on the one hand, and doctrinally orthodox fundamentalism, on the other, both emerge from the same matrix of techno-scientific, capitalist modernity. I argue that 20th century social theory fails to account for contemporary forms of religious expression and that contemporary religious diversification in Southeast Asia reflects a broader cultural logic of paradox and polarisation pervading early 21st century global modernity. I consider the diverse impacts of neoliberal capitalism, mass media and modernising state power as concrete forces underpinning religious efflorescence and divergence in both magical and fundamentalist directions. I conclude that in developing frameworks of analysis that adequately account for the multiple directions of religious change visible in this century we need “to be cognizant of the complexity of the world, to be accountable to its paradoxes” (Comaroff & Kim 2011, 176).

KEYWORDS: Southeast Asia, Religion, Magic, Supernatural, Fundamentalism, Paradox, Neoliberalism, Media, State Power

INTRODUCTION

In terms of key 20th century theories of religion and modernity the period since the end of the Cold War has produced a spectrum of counter-intuitive results. The international resurgence of diverse forms of religiosity since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the adoption of market-based

economic policies by China, Vietnam and other now nominally socialist societies does not only challenge the secularisation thesis. The simultaneous flourishing of spirit mediumship, faith healing, and magic in some parts of Southeast Asia and the spread of text-based, doctrinalist



fundamentalism in other localities in the region also challenges the view that a disenchantment of the world is the end point of rational modernity. As Niels Mulder wrote in 1996,

We find fundamentalism, reform, new sects and new interpretations, religious reflection of all sorts; but also a resurgence of magic, mediumship, faith healing, esotericism. All are flourishing and vying with each other to attract the devotee in Southeast Asia at present (Mulder 1996, 25).

In Thailand, from the late nineteenth century, modernist state projects based on totalising, essentialist constructs of "Thai culture", "Thai religion", "the Thai nation", and "the Thai people" were invoked to suppress local identities, cultures, and languages, as well as to critique syncretic magical religiosity.¹ Within these modernising projects, folk religion was typically labeled as "superstition" or "black magic", and was devalued in the name of promoting reformist versions of Theravada Buddhism (see Jackson 1989, 2003). However, since the 1980s, so-called "superstition" has reasserted its presence in the centres of Thai cultural life and political power, in the form of cults of magically empowered amulets (Tambiah 1984, Jackson 1999a), a growing prominence of Chinese religious ritual and symbolism in the lives of ethnic Thais (Nidhi 1994, Jackson 1999b), a resurgence in diverse forms of spirit mediumship, and cults of revered kings and historical figures (Jackson 1999b, Stengs 2009).

Justin McDaniel argues that, "These competing forces in modern Thailand – centralisation and standardisation versus expansion and creativity – are not necessarily something that needs to be resolved by the scholar. Indeed, I do not believe they can be." (McDaniel 2011, 159) I agree that these divergent religious processes, and more broadly the paradoxes of 21st century modernity, cannot be resolved in terms of established theories of religion and society. However, the social reality of an apparently paradoxical situation in early 21st century Southeast Asia religious cultures – of ritual-based supernaturalism and doctrine-centred religion both assuming increasing prominence – is a phenomenon that demands serious attention, and poses pressing questions for studies of religion and, indeed, for contemporary social science as a whole.

Challenges for Southeast Asian Religious Studies

However, as a whole, the field of religious studies has yet to direct attention to the question of why magic and anti-magical doctrinalism are both assuming prominence in Southeast Asian religious cultures. To a large extent Southeast Asian religious studies is divided into specialised sub-fields of inquiry that reflect the empirical division between ascendant doctrinalism and resurgent magic that we find on the ground in the region.

While Southeast Asian religion has long been known for its complex syncretisation and hybridisation of world religions with indigenous supernatural rituals and beliefs, studies of religion in the region is divided between scholars who, on the one hand, tend to specialise in studies of often politically inflected doctrinalism and, on the other hand, those who focus their research interests on forms of supernaturalism and popular ritual. These two sub-fields of Southeast Asian religious studies are not currently engaged in sustained dialogue. This situation is not the fault of individual researchers. In recent decades, the speed of change in the forms taken by both world religions and supernaturalism in the region has meant that most scholars of religion have, of necessity, focused their research time and resources on mapping the rapidly shifting contours of one or other dimension of Southeast Asian religious life. However, we do now have an extensive body of empirically grounded research on post-Cold War religious expression and this gives us the opportunity to begin to reflect on what is happening to the total domain of religious life in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asian religiosities are trending in both doctrinal and magical directions, sometimes in the same society, and these apparently divergent directions of religious change emerge out of the same complex matrix of sociological, political, class, economic and ideological conditions. For religious studies, and indeed for social analysis as a whole, to develop an account of how both these conditions are emerging at the same time in the same societies the specialised sub-fields of inquiry into ascendant doctrinalism and resurgent magic in Southeast Asia will need to be brought together and their respective findings critically assessed and synthesised.

In this paper I draw on a range of sources to propose a series of conjectures and initial working hypotheses as starting points for a more integrated approach to investigating how and why two forms of religious expression that are often

¹ Here I follow Raymond Lee in viewing magic as "the ritualistic means of world mastery" (Lee 2010, p. 182).



seen to be diametrically opposed, if not mutually exclusive, are both becoming more prominent. In the first section I argue that we need a radically revised account of modernity – one based on an understanding of paradox as producing a polarisation of both intellectual positions and directions of sociological change – as an analytical frame for studying the divergent diversification of Southeast Asian religiosities. I argue that time and again across the spectrum of human inquiry and social existence the 21st century presents us with theoretical results and empirical conditions of life that confound the expectations of 20th century views of modernity. The systematic application of reason has not led to certainty, but rather to a view of uncertainty as foundational, both to humanity knowledge of reality and, some maintain, even to the fundamental the nature of reality itself.

Paradox is not only the condition of contemporary religious life in Southeast Asia. Paradox pervades many different fields of contemporary life and thought, including the mathematically based “hard” sciences, and the revelation of paradox repeatedly incites radically opposing responses in each domain – whether epistemological or sociological – in which it becomes apparent. The counterintuitive and unanticipated result that paradox and irreducible uncertainty have been revealed to be the end points of the Enlightenment quest for certain knowledge has immediate implications for social theory, because this situation systematically incites two, radically polarised responses. On the one hand, we find an embrace or at least tolerance of the irreducible ambiguities and uncertainties of 21st century life and thought, and cultural strategies of negotiating and living with multiplicity and incommensurability. That is, in some quarters we find acceptance that 20th century expectations were misplaced and we need to adjust our thinking and practice to learn to live with paradox and radical uncertainty. On the other hand, we find trenchant resistance to ambiguity through an assertion of faith in the reality of transcendently based certainty. That is, we also find vehement rejection of paradox and fundamental uncertainty based on claims that this theoretical result must be incomplete or plain wrong, and that social conditions of uncertainty must be resolved by a forced imposition of order, often by drawing on notions of absolute or divinely revealed truth.

Polarisation of views, interpretations and opinions in response to paradox and ambiguity is found across the entirety of 21st century life and thought and, I contend, emerges out of the cur-

rent intellectual, discursive and material conditions of modernity. Indeed, paradox and concomitant polarisation can be considered to be a structuring principle or cultural logic of the early 21st century. Resurgent supernaturalism, on the one hand, and ascendant doctrinalism, on the other, are religious forms that respectively embody these radically counterposed responses to the structural ambiguities of 21st century life and thought. At the broader level, the simultaneous emergence of both magic and doctrinalism in Southeast Asia reflects the general condition of the early 21st century global modernity.

In the second section of this paper I move from a philosophical account of paradox as systematically producing interpretational, affective and sociological polarisation to consider three sets of concrete forces that are at work in producing divergent developments in Southeast Asian religiosity. I begin by summarising studies that outline the ways that contemporary forms of neoliberal capitalism may, under conditions that still largely remain to be specified, be productive of either re-enchanted magicality or rationalised doctrinalism. As Weber argued, capitalism and religion are indeed intertwined, and the further development of global capitalism has been revealed to be as much a force for the re-enchantment of the world as for rationalised disenchantment. For much of the 20th century, Weber was read as theorist for whom, as Raymond Lee puts it, “the modern world was considered a highly rationalized one where actions were guided in systematic and calculable terms” (Lee 2010, 181). However, more recently, the failure of the secularisation thesis and the resurgence of supernatural ritual has led a growing number of analysts to revisit Weber, in particular, to consider aspects of his thought that were previously overlooked or under-emphasised in a search for a theory of modernity, or postmodernity, and re-enchantment. Nicholas Gane argues that “rationality or rationalization can only be taken as central themes of Weber’s work if one ignores the significance of his early writings” (Gane 2002, 6). Lee explores Weber’s studies on charisma and magic for insights on possible ways to imagine modernity in terms of re-enchantment, “By perusing some of Weber’s writings on charisma and magic, it may be plausible to argue for an interpretation of his work that envisages the restoration of meaning in a re-enchanted world.” (Lee 2010, 182) In contrast, Gane traces echoes of Weber in the works of Lyotard, Foucault and Baudrillard in order to locate an account of re-enchantment in the context of postmodern theory. Lee contends that Weber in fact presented a theory of modernity as being



constituted by “opposing forces” (Lee 2010, 189), and that “Weber’s view of futurity was dialectical as he focused on a rationalized future as well as on a future that could slip through the iron grip of rationality.” (Lee 2010, 181) In the second section of this paper I consider studies that may help us specify the conditions under which neoliberalism may lead to one or other of the alternative religious trends of supernaturalism or doctrinalism. I conclude by reviewing analyses that argue new media are forces for re-enchantment as well as studies that reveal the differential effects of modernising state power as producing religious divergence in some parts of Southeast Asia.

PARADOX AND POLARISATION AS 21ST CENTURY CULTURAL LOGIC

MATHEMATICS AS MODEL FOR PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL THEORY

Before considering the concrete forces that may be leading to the simultaneous emergence of divergent religious trends in Southeast Asia let me digress briefly to consider the divergent philosophical responses to paradoxes that mark the fields of particle physics and mathematics. The markedly different interpretations of the paradoxes that have been revealed to lie at the heart of all mathematically based scientific analysis provide something of a model for the radically opposed responses to the paradoxes that mark 21st century cultural life, including religion. Mathematics has long been a source of metaphors that scholars in the humanities and social sciences have drawn on in developing theories of society, culture and thought. Philosopher Simon Duffy (2009) notes that Hegel drew on the methods of differential calculus to support the development of his dialectical logic, and Hegelian dialectics has, of course, been highly influential in much of the subsequent history of Western philosophy from Marxian dialectical materialism to the anti-Hegelian critiques of poststructuralism. Duffy shows, for example, how Gilles Deleuze redeploys mathematical problematics as philosophical problematics as one of his strategies in engaging the history of philosophy and, in particular, in his critique of Hegel and the development of an alternative to Hegel’s dialectical logic. Duffy contends that for Deleuze there is a continuum between literary, mathematical and philosophical invention. The excursion into mathematical physics and pure mathematics in this section will soon bring us back to the question of how we are to under-

stand the paradoxes of 21st century religious expression in Southeast Asia, for, I contend, the paradoxes of religion in Southeast Asia are one concrete regional instance of a broader cultural logic at work in the early 21st century form of global modernity.

MODERNITY ISN’T WHAT WE THOUGHT IT WAS

The Case of Particle Physics

In particle physics the theories of quantum mechanics that replaced classical Newtonian physics in the early 20th century are based on probabilities and indeterminacy. In quantum mechanics the uncertainty principle – sometimes called the Heisenberg principle after Werner Heisenberg who first posited this principle in 1927 – proposes that there is a fundamental limit to the precision with which certain pairs of physical properties of a particle, such as its position (x) and its momentum (p), can be known simultaneously. For instance, the more precisely the position of a given fundamental particle, such as an electron, is determined, the less precisely its momentum can be known, and vice versa.

There are radically diverging philosophical responses among scientists to this uncertainty. While all particle physicists accept the results of the probabilistic mathematical equations of quantum mechanics, there are deep philosophical divisions over what these equations mean and what the ultimate nature of reality is. The divide is between those, on the one hand, who argue that quantum theory reveals reality itself to be based on probabilities rather than fixed certainties, and those, on the other hand, who reject abandoning the centuries-long Western philosophical quest for certainty and argue that, despite its successes, quantum theory cannot represent ultimate reality.

The first group of scientists points out that quantum mechanics is one of the most successful theories ever devised. No experiment undertaken to date has contradicted the mathematically based predictions of quantum theory. What is more, quantum theory is applied in a diverse range of technologies, from lasers to transistors and computer chips that are the foundations of everyday life in modern societies. The first group of scientists argues that this compelling experimental and applied technological evidence indicates that we need to accept the paradoxical conclusion that, at the micro-level, quantum reality is probabilistic and does not conform to our everyday, macro-level perceptions of the universe as



being based upon certain and determinable values.

However, the second group of scientists argues that quantum uncertainty is only apparent and at a deeper level, which we have yet to understand, the universe is indeed based upon certain foundations. As Jessica Griggs notes, “Accepting that uncertainty exists not due to a lack of knowledge but thanks to a fundamental law doesn’t sit well with some physicists.” (Griggs 2012, 8) This latter group retains faith in the philosophical quest for certain knowledge and argues that science needs to probe deeper than the levels currently revealed by quantum theory to reveal an ultimate bedrock of certainty upon which, they maintain, reality must surely be based. But, let me emphasise, this view is not based upon any currently available experimental evidence and is more a statement of philosophical faith than an empirically supported position.

The Case of the Foundations of Mathematics

The philosophy of mathematics is also marked by strong disagreement on how we should interpret the power of some fields of mathematics to guide the production of empirically powerful scientific theory, such as quantum mechanics. Eugene Wigner (1960) famously termed this “the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences”. On the one hand, one group, the Platonists, argues that mathematics reflects the actual structure of reality and that ultimate reality is indeed mathematical. On the other hand, an opposing school of the philosophy of mathematics argues that mathematics is a product of the human mind and its regularities work more like powerful metaphors than actual reflections of reality. Writing in support of this second position, mathematician Ian Stewart contends, “Human mathematics is more closely linked to our particular physiology, experiences, and psychological preferences than we imagine. It is parochial, not universal.” (Stewart 2006, 30) In a similar vein, theoretical physicist Lee Smolin contends, “We should see mathematical laws as tools rather than mystical mirrors of nature.” (Smolin 2013, 31) This second school points out that while some fields of abstruse mathematics have proved to be amazingly successful in developing empirically powerful theories, including the counter-intuitive probability-based theories of quantum mechanics, many other fields of mathematical inquiry have yet to demonstrate to have any correlates in

the workings of the known universe. Some Platonists respond that perhaps the forms of mathematics that have no known empirical correlates in our universe represent the working of the forms of reality in the other universes that are predicted in some versions of string theory, which attempts to bring together Einstein’s macro-level theories of gravity with the micro-level theories of quantum mechanics. As cosmologist Brian Greene observes, “In its furthest incarnation, the ‘ultimate multiverse’, every possible universe allowed by mathematics corresponds to a real universe. Taken to this extreme, mathematics *is* reality.” (Greene 2013, 40) Physicist and cosmologist Max Tegmark (2014) argues for this view in his book *Our Mathematical Universe: My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality*, and Mark Buchanan summarises Tegmark’s argument in a recent review as follows,

Tegmark argues that reality isn’t simply described by mathematics, as most physicists readily accept, but that it is, in fact, mathematical. Furthermore, he believes that the mathematics of our universe is just one of an infinity of conceivable mathematical structures. He goes on to wonder: if this mathematical structure is a universe, why not all the others? And so he makes a bold claim – that all other mathematical structures should also exist physically as further parallel universes (Buchanan 2014, 47).

PARADOX AS INCITEMENT TO POLARISATION

What do these unresolved philosophical divisions in theoretical physics and mathematics have to do with the study of religion in Southeast Asia, or indeed any other part of the world, in the 21st century? I suggest that these two cases reflect the existence of deep fractures in our understanding of modernity in all its forms, including scientific modernity as well as modern forms of religion. If the 18th and 19th centuries were an era of faith in reason’s ability to lead to certain knowledge, then the 20th century was the era in which that faith was lost when many forms of relativism, or at least the logical limits of the Enlightenment quest for certain knowledge, were revealed across a wide range of fields of inquiry. From the probabilistic view of our knowledge of reality in Niels Bohr’s Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory, to Kurt Gödel’s 1931 proof of the logical incompleteness of all complex mathematical systems² – which demolished Bertrand Russell and

² Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, presented in his 1931 paper “On Formally Undecidable Propositions of *Principia*

Mathematica and Related Systems”, demonstrated that no formal theory can capture the whole of mathematics and prove



Gottlob Frege's attempts to establish certain foundations for mathematics – to poststructuralist and deconstructionist critiques of Euro-American philosophy and social theory, across the 20th century more and more accounts of the existence of limits to the quest for rationally based certainty emerged within widely different fields of inquiry in both the sciences and humanities. Now, in the early 21st century, we are still in the very early stages of appreciating the full intellectual, sociological and indeed political implications of the array of paradoxes and uncertainties that were arrived at in the 20th century through the systematic application of the methods of rational inquiry formalised in the Enlightenment.

The uncertainties that mark 21st century thought have not emerged from any retreat from reason. On the contrary, they have emerged from a deeper understanding of the inescapable paradoxes inherent within, and the limits of what, since the Enlightenment, we understand as rational inquiry. The power and reliability of our scientific technologies continue to expand and develop. But the technological successes of our mathematically based scientific civilisation are built upon a rationally developed theoretical framework in which probabilities and uncertainties are foundational and inescapable. We have ever more power over the material universe, but we are faced with what appear to be ineluctable uncertainties about what our empirically most powerful theories actually mean. Indeed, the scientific and mathematical communities are deeply divided over what our technologically most successful theories tell us about the nature of the universe over which we have ever growing power.

I am not suggesting that there is a direct relation between quantum theory or the philosophy of mathematics and the resurgence of religious doctrinalism alongside magic, spirit mediumship and supernatural ritual in Southeast Asia. I merely point out that many fields of intellectual inquiry and cultural life are now marked by paradox and uncertainty, and that the unanticipated and often unwanted paradoxes and uncertainties of 21st century life and thought repeatedly invoke radically opposing responses. On the one hand

are those who, admittedly often begrudgingly, accept that this paradox is constitutive of the human condition – both epistemologically and empirically. On the other hand are those who vehemently resist this view and assert that certainty can be found in both human knowledge and objective reality. Now, in the early 21st century, we are struggling to find ways to understand and live with the vast array of uncertainties that have been revealed to be the unexpected destinations of the Enlightenment quest for rational certainty.

In an article on the social impact of complexity theory subtitled “Emergent Interfaces between the Natural Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences”, sociologist Helga Nowotny argues that “[There is] a remarkable coincidence between the development of more open systems of knowledge production and the growth of complexity in society – and the increase of uncertainty in both.” (Nowotny 2005, 16) And in our collective social and cultural responses to the uncertainties that emerge from the complexity of contemporary life Nowotny contends that,

[W]e are engaged in a contradictory process when encountering, analysing and dealing with complexity. We face opposite tendencies that indicate an in-built dynamic, if not a race, between the increase of complexity and its reduction (Nowotny 2005, 15)

We find precisely these contradictory divisions – between an embrace of expanding complexity and seeking to escape or reduce complexity to a small number of certain principles – in the field of contemporary religion, and also in our understanding of what these divisions mean. While resurgent magic often embraces market complexity in negotiating neoliberal economic precarity, fundamentalism often resists the uncertainties of these conditions. As in physics and mathematics, the flow of modernity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has produced counter-intuitive results. Rather than proving to be an iron cage of bureaucratic reason leading to ever more disenchantment of magical world views, and in which secular power assigns religious institutions to increasingly subsidiary roles, we find both a resurgence of magical rituals, on the one hand, and of

to be logically consistent. That is, true mathematical statements exist which cannot be proved within any formal set of axioms, and so are undecidable. His proof was based on a complex development of the implications for mathematics of paradoxical statements of the form: “This statement is not true”. Bertrand Russell had attempted resolve certain paradoxes in mathematical thought in a quest to establish mathematics on irrefutably certain axiomatic foundations. In radical contrast, Gödel revealed that paradox is inescapable and complete axiomatisation of mathematics is impossible. After Gödel, the absolute certainty or validity of mathematics could no

longer be claimed. As historian of mathematics Morris Kline notes, “This result, that there are limitations on what can be achieved by axiomatisation, contrasts sharply with the late 19th century view that mathematics is coextensive with the collection of axiomatised branches. Gödel's result dealt a deathblow to comprehensive axiomatisation.... The one distinguishing feature of mathematics that it might have claimed in this [20th] century, the absolute certainty or validity of its results, could no longer be claimed” (Kline 1980, pp. 263-4).



movements to enhance the power of doctrinal interpretations of religion over state administration and bureaucratic structures, on the other. And these opposed religious trends – syncretistic ritual-based magic, on the one hand, and anti-magic, text-based doctrinal accounts of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, Judaism, on the other hand – are sometimes found in the same society.

The simultaneous rise of new forms of orthopractic supernaturalism alongside anti-supernatural movements of orthodox fundamentalism is one more example of the apparently contradictory responses to modernity that we find repeated, time and again, across the breadth of contemporary social life and intellectual inquiry. On the one hand, resurgent orthopractic magic embraces the complexity of the modern world in an almost ecstatic syncretism, or perhaps hybridisation (Pattana 2013), of diverse symbolisms. On the other hand, orthodox fundamentalism resists the relativistic blurring of religio-cultural boundaries to reassert faith in a revealed truth that is believed to be recorded in foundational texts. Ritual-based orthopractic magic and text-based doctrinal orthodoxy represent diametrically opposing religious responses to the same complex matrix of social, intellectual, economic and technological modernity, with the former embracing the intensification of the complexity of the modern world and the latter seeking to reduce complexity and its concomitant uncertainties by asserting singular principles of faith.

Modern or Postmodern?

Should we call this situation modern or postmodern? A decade ago, I would have said that we have entered a postmodern era that represents an intellectual and sociological break from the patterns of modernity, and in previous work I wrote of what I then termed the “postmodernisation of Thai Buddhism” (Jackson 1999a). However, I am no longer sure that we have indeed passed a transition point from modernity into postmodernity. If the simultaneous emergence of both magic and fundamentalism out of the conditions of 21st century scientific capitalism confounds our predictions of the forms and directions of modern social evolution, then perhaps this means that previously we had a mistaken view of modernity. Perhaps the diverse and apparently contradictory religious resurgences we see today in Southeast Asia and elsewhere are not postmodern. Rather, perhaps they reflect the coming into focus of the actual paradoxical faces of a modernity that we have been living in all along but whose complex,

multiple features we failed to recognise, or refused to acknowledge, because of the dominance of Enlightenment faith in the power and possibilities of reason.

Lee’s exploration of charisma and magic in Weber’s work leads him to view the German sociologist’s account of modernity not, as often represented in the past, as a singular unilinear movement towards rationalisation and disenchantment, but rather as inherently dialectical and complex,

[C]harisma and magic are not simply anachronisms in the context of social futures being shaped by the forces of disenchantment. If we look a little beyond Weber’s work on rationality and ask why he bothered with charisma and magic, then it may be possible to detect an underlying sense of the dialectical in his attempt to describe the complexities of the modern world. (Lee 2010, 191)

For Lee, Weber presents us with a view in which “the disenchanted horizon of the modern world was always open to irrational forces that could reconfigure the past as new meanings for the future.” (Lee 2010, 182) Perhaps then views of modernity as rational, ordered and predictable should be regarded as an approximation, just as, since Einstein, we now view Newtonian mechanics as having provided approximations to the laws of motion. Perhaps postmodernity is not a sociological or cultural break with modernity, but rather an epistemologically more accurate view of what modernity has always been, just as Einstein’s relativistic physics provided a more accurate account of motion, gravity, space and time than Newton’s theories. With the collapse of the grand narrative of reason as progress towards certainty perhaps we are now able to see more accurately the paradoxical and relativist contours of the modernity that we have in fact been inhabiting for the past couple of centuries.

This perspective raises a question of analysis and interpretation for studies of “resurgent supernaturalism” in Southeast Asia. Namely, are we seeing an actual intensification of supernaturalism and a sociological expansion of magic in Southeast Asia? Or is it rather that the modernist gaze of religious studies is collapsing, and this different analytical perspective now allows us to see more clearly the supernaturalism that was always present in modernising Southeast Asia but which a rationalist outlook led us to ignore, overlook or fail to see? To be more precise, is the widely reported resurgence of supernaturalism in Southeast Asia actual or apparent?

In addressing similar questions in European religious studies some analysts, such as Wouter



Hanegraaff (2011), have focused on how forms of magical belief and ritual have survived within modern social formations, even if until recently they may have been overlooked or largely ignored. This line of analysis sees magic as surviving within “the interstices of modernity” (Lee 2010, 186), and Lee describes this perspective as viewing re-enchantment as a “de-closeting” of magic, “When the powers of disenchantment recede, magic emerges if only because it no longer faces the disparagement of the rationalized public.” (Lee 2010, 186) However, recent research in Southeast Asia clearly indicates that many of new supernatural cults in the region are not mere survivals of ancient “traditions”, but rather are novel forms of religious belief and practice. This shows that we also need to think of magic not merely as surviving within “the interstices of modernity”, but rather as emerging and being produced from the conditions of modernity itself.

Lee’s excavation of Weber’s work for intimations of a theory of modern re-enchantment, and Gane’s exploration of echoes of Weber’s ideas in Lyotard, Foucault, and Baudrillard for an account of re-enchantment in terms of theories of post-modernity, both remain at an abstract level and do not engage the empirical richness of actual forms of 21st century religious expression. In the remainder of this paper I wish to consider religious resurgence and re-enchantment more concretely, by asking what recent research on religious expression in Southeast Asia and elsewhere tells us about the actual forces at work within early 21st century modernity that are productive of renewed forms both of magicality and doctrinalism.

LINEAGES OF 21ST CENTURY SOUTHEAST ASIAN MAGIC AND FUNDAMENTALISM: NEOLIBERALISM, MEDIA AND STATE POWER

We can view the parallel rise of new forms of magical religiosity alongside doctrinal fundamentalism in Southeast Asia as aspects or faces of religious trends that reflect a general cultural logic of paradox and polarisation pervading early 21st century modernity. This is one frame of reference and an analytical perspective within which we may perhaps begin to understand the contemporary situation as something other than an aberration or deviation from 20th century expectations. There is an urgent need for a body of ideas and concepts that permits us to see the social and cultural contours of the contemporary moment outside the restrictive blinkers of 20th century theories of modernity and religion.

However, religion is much more than a merely discursive phenomenon or a cultural logic. Religion is a concrete form of social life and emerges from, and is part of, the material conditions of social existence. What are the processes that are leading to these radically opposed religious responses to global modernity in Southeast Asia? More precisely, how can both these forms of religious expression be emerging in parallel from the same conditions of global modernity in the region?

I take as a starting point and an empirical given in this inquiry the fact that, despite claims by some followers that contemporary religious movements represent a return to ancient tradition, both resurgent supernaturalism and ascendant fundamentalism in fact emerge from, rely upon, and are intimately part of the modern world of market-based, commodified scientific technologies. Contemporary magic and fundamentalisms both emerge from the same matrix of social, cultural, technological, scientific, mathematical, and capitalist modernity. As Arif Dirlik states, contemporary religious trends “point not to the past but, taking a detour through the past, to an alternative future” (Dirlik 2005, 6). The modernity and contemporaneity of both 21st century magic and fundamentalism cannot be emphasised too strongly, because it was the great failure of 20th century theory to mistakenly imagine the supernatural as being in opposition to the modern, rather than seeing these two as intimately imbricated phenomena.

From this analytical starting point, I now consider three key domains of social life that have been revealed as intersecting with religious expression in contemporary Southeast Asia: capitalism, the media and forms of state power. Different scholars of religion have focused on each of these domains in their respective analyses of post-Cold War religious change, and in this section I summarise their findings in a first attempt to consider how capitalism, media and state power are working, whether singly or together, to influence the direction of religious change in Southeast Asia. However, the pace of social change in the forms of social reality has exceeded our capacity to appreciate the dynamics of its underlying processes and moving forces. To date, we have only a series of partial perspectives that focus on one or other of the multiple processes at work in influencing the directions of religious change. Just as the two sub-fields of studies of Southeast Asian fundamentalisms and supernaturalism need come into dialogue, so also the analyses of the multiple impacts of the market, new media and modernising state power need to be



brought together and articulated if we are to understand the full panoply of processes underpinning the divergent diversification of religious expression in the region. Only by detailing the complex intersections of the multiple forms of economic, media and political power operating over religion in specific locations and concrete instances can we begin to understand how they may produce different outcomes in different settings. In the remainder of this paper I summarise some of the recent focused studies as prelude to a future project of bringing these analyses together into something approaching a coherent picture.

NEOLIBERAL GLOBALISATION AND DIVERGENT RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

Precurity and Radical Theoretical and Social Destabilisation

To bring the discussion of the polarised religious responses to the conditions of 21st century modernity to a more concrete level I begin by considering the radically opposing responses to the uncertainties and paradoxes of 21st century capitalism. All forms of economic management – whether neoliberalism, Keynesian interventionism, or state socialism – have proved at some point to lead to economic instability and uncertainty, if not outright economic collapse in certain conditions. At the very least, neoliberal capitalism has led to an inescapably precarious social existence, and “precurity” and “precaritisation” have become keywords in Euro-American critical social theory since the onset of the 2008 Euro-American economic crisis. In different writings Jean Comaroff (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999, 2000) has traced the rise of both supernatural “occult economies” and the magic of prosperity gospels, on the one hand, and fundamentalism, on the other hand, to the “radically ambiguous” (Comaroff & Kim 2011) impacts of neoliberal globalisation. She traces the polarisations of 21st century politics to the universal condition of precarity produced under neoliberal globalisation,

There [...] seems to be more and more appeal, in our late-liberal world, of the idea of politics as a matter of line drawing, of establishing loyalty and commitment by means of establishing the dualism of friend and enemy, rather than the idea of politics as the building of participatory forms from above and from below. This, in

my view is, is a consequence of the manner in which translocal forces – above all the force of ever more liberalised capital – have undermined the capacity of modernist nation-states to embody sovereignty, to control the operation of their economies, monopolise the means of force, to police borders, and to engage the loyalty of the citizen-subjects. This has undermined the legitimacy of liberal democratic politics – indeed of modernist politics in general (Comaroff & Kim 2011, 167–8).³

[T]he sources of sovereignty have become radically destabilized – whether we are talking about the power that underwrites currencies, or the conditions that stabilise the meaning of language [...] - whatever we have assumed underlies such authority in its modern form has become radically ambiguous [...] (Comaroff & Kim 2011, 170).

In an earlier study written with her husband John Comaroff, Jean Comaroff argued that the radical destabilisations resulting from the global triumph of capitalism after the end of the Cold War have raised “a number of conundrums for our understanding of history at the end of the [20th] century” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000, 291). The Comaroffs trace the rise of social conditions that appear paradoxical in terms of 20th century social theory to the distinctive forms of neoliberal capitalism, an economic form that they say leads to the present moment being a time of, “the conjuncture of the strange and the familiar, of stasis and metamorphosis, [which] plays tricks on our perceptions, our positions, our praxis. These conjunctures appear at once to endorse and to erode our understanding of the lineaments of modernity”. (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000, 293)

Arif Dirlik draws upon Marxian views of capitalism as an economic system structured by inherent contradictions to also trace the emergence of paradox and polarization to the hegemonic dominance of neoliberalism. Dirlik views globalisation as “the incorporation of societies globally into a capitalist modernity”, a process that he sees as having “has complicated further contradictions between and within societies, including a fundamental contradiction between a seemingly irresistible modernity and past legacies that ... draw renewed vitality from the very globalizing process” (Dirlik 2005, 4). More particularly, he argues that post-Cold War globalisation has produced “new kinds of contradictions” that differentiate it from the period of 20th century “Eurocentric modernity”, which he describes as the era

³ Note that these quotes, and others from the same article cited here, are from an interview David Kyuman Kim conducted with Jean Comaroff. While the article citation is for

“Comaroff and Kim”, all the quotes here are Jean Comaroff’s responses to David Kim’s questions.



when liberal capitalism competed with socialism. He sees post-Cold War neoliberal global modernity as leading to “the universalization of the contradictions of capitalist modernity, not just between societies, but, more importantly, within them” (Dirlik 2005, 7). Dirlik uses the Marxian notion of contradiction. However, his analysis also points to the central theme of this paper, namely, the seemingly paradoxical emergence of radically polarised forms of social life out of the conditions of 21st century capitalist modernity. As Dirlik states, “Global modernity unifies and divides the globe in new ways. It does not do to emphasise one or the other” (Dirlik 2005, 6).

WHERE DOES 21ST CENTURY FUNDAMENTALISM COME FROM?

THE COLLAPSE OF THE LEFT AND THE RISE OF FUNDAMENTALISMS

Jean Comaroff views the rise of fundamentalisms as one response to the uncertainties and ambiguities of neoliberalism, which she states incite a “reaching for clearer, seemingly certain sovereigns, theologies, divinities” (Comaroff & Kim 2011, 170). For her, neoliberal precarisation sets “in motion efforts to recover a sense of lost tradition, certain sorts of sovereign force (whether by way of fascism or theology), certain fundamental truths that all assert that ‘... this is the original text, this is the unambiguous source of power.’ And revelation serves well here: an authority that comes from somewhere else that is undeniable. I think that is the issue that lies behind the re-enchantment of our times, the hunger for the sublime” (Comaroff & Kim 2011, 171).

More specifically, ascendant fundamentalism can also be seen as emerging from the ashes of the global collapse of the Left. The victory of capitalism over centrally planned socialisms and the now global hegemony of the market as the central organising principle of social and cultural life were marked by an intellectual crisis in the West in critical views of modernity. While this was largely an intellectual and cultural crisis in the West, the victory of global capitalism produced material political and economic crises in many former socialist societies, notably in Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union. As Comaroff notes, the collapse of grand narratives has been a global phenomenon undermining the previously dominant forms of social analysis in both the capitalist West and the formerly socialist East,

Modernist social theory had a confident telos, and a vision of the future – mechanical or otherwise. But this has been severely compromised in our late-modern world. Whether it be Marxist scholarship or modernisation theory, a secular sense of futurity has been dramatically undermined (Comaroff & Kim 2011, 172).

Dirlik provides a more concrete perspective of the intersection of political-economic and intellectual changes over the past three decades,

The decline and fall of socialism in the course of the 1980s opened the way to the globalisation of capital. It also eliminated socialism as a crucial obstacle to cultural appropriations – and, therefore, to the proliferation of modernities, which now find expression in the fragmentation of a single modernity into multiple and alternative modernities. Questioning of Eurocentric teleology in either the capitalist or socialist guise has revealed modernity in its full historicity, and ‘geohistorical’ diversity [...] (Dirlik 2005, 5).

The growth of politically inflected and at times intensely nationalist varieties of religious doctrinalism or fundamentalism is one of the consequences of the collapse of the revolutionary grand narratives of the Left. Politically revolutionary projects that were formerly articulated in Marxist-inflected terms are now at times expressed through the moralising discourses of religious fundamentalism. As Dirlik observes, fundamentalisms “have taken over from a now defunct socialism the task of speaking for those oppressed or cast aside by a capitalist modernity and pointing to different possibilities for the future” (Dirlik 2005, 6).

In the mid-decades of the twentieth century, Marxist-inspired theory was the foundation of anti-colonialist independence movements and trenchant critiques of capitalism and neo-imperialism. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the capitalist-turn of now nominally socialist China, Vietnam and Laos, and the end of revolutionary Communist insurgencies in countries such as Thailand, varieties of religious doctrinalism have become the new ideological bases for critiques of American neo-imperialism, Western cultural imperialism and more broadly of neoliberal globalisation.



WHERE DOES 21ST CENTURY MAGIC COME FROM?

NEOLIBERAL OCCULT ECONOMIES AND SUPERNATURAL PROSPERITY RELIGIONS

In the 20th century, secular socialist regimes exercised power to keep religion out of the political domain and limit communal conflict. But with the collapse of these regimes in multi-ethnic societies, and the rise of religion as an ideology through which to articulate anti-Western and nationalist aspirations, communal violence has at times occurred, as in the former Yugoslavia. However, there have been diverse responses to the end of the grand narratives of modernity, and social factionalism and fractionation are not the only outcomes of 21st century religious trends. In some parts of Southeast Asia the dominance of market-based socio-economic structures has provided the basis for an efflorescence of commodified forms of religious expression, sometimes doctrinal (such as Christian prosperity gospels) but often taking the form of syncretic supernatural ritualism. The hybridity of Southeast Asian supernaturalisms exhibit a markedly contrasting cultural logic to the exclusionary expulsions and binary self/other logic of fundamentalist, purificatory religio-nationalism.

Indeed, the rise of supernatural and magical movements is perhaps the most unexpected aspect of the post-Cold War global resurgence of religiosity. According to Weberian theory, modernity leads to a rationalisation of social life and the disenchantment of magical views of the world. As Antônio Flávio Pierucci writes in a review of the secularisation thesis,

For Weber, the disenchantment of the world (Entzauberung der Welt) takes place precisely in more religious societies, and it is an essentially religious process, because it is the ethical religions that provide the elimination of magic as a means of salvation.... Which is why Weber more than once adds the adjective religious: 'religious disenchantment of the world [die religiöse Entzauberung der Welt]' (Pierucci 2000, 136, emphasis in original).

According to this account, the doctrinalism that we see in many contemporary fundamentalist movements should be leading to an even greater elimination of magic from the world. Yet in fact we see the opposite, at least in parts of Southeast Asia such as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. We are seeing the rise of doctrinalism and also of magic. What is going on here?

As Jean Comaroff notes, “The prosperity gospels that currently are so appealing in many parts of the world bear the impact of a cult of salvation through the market.... [I]f market futures often sound redemptive, faith-based language also bears the imprint of the market. Weber’s interplay of Christianity and capitalism continues in our late-modern age” (Comaroff & Kim 2011, 172). However, while religion and capitalism are indeed intertwined, analyses emerging from critical anthropology and cultural studies point to a radically different relationship between modernity and religion from that proposed by Weber. In these revised accounts neoliberal capitalism and new media – phenomena central to all 21st century social formations – are viewed as inciting rather than undermining magical forms of religiosity. These accounts propose that the experience of precarity or uncertainty that is a pervasive feature of globalising finance capitalism, and the auraticising or halo-producing effects of digital media technologies, are both contributing to the transnational resurgence of supernatural religion. I consider the impact of new media in the next section.

In the describing “messianic, millennial capitalism” that Jean and John Comaroff describe as “present[ing] itself as a gospel of salvation” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000, 292) they highlight, “the exuberant spread of innovative occult practices and money magic, pyramid schemes, and prosperity gospels; the enchantments, that is, of a decidedly neoliberal economy” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000, 292). Scientific theory and the technologies it has spawned, as well as the economic processes that market these technologies and the media that represent and advertise them to us, are all marked by complexity, precarity, and an apparent inability to predict their direction or future. The Comaroffs argue that new forms of market-based enchantment, which they call “occult economies” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999), have emerged under neoliberalism because, “Once legible processes – the workings of power, the distribution of wealth, the meaning of politics and national belonging – have become opaque, even spectral” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000, 305). In this context, “the occult becomes an ever more appropriate, semantically saturated metaphor for our times” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000, 318).

The popular supernaturalism and prosperity religions that emerged in tandem with 1990s neoliberalism were paralleled by a religion-like faith in the market amongst the ideologues of finance capital. Magical capitalism is not a mere persistence of premodern “superstition”. Rather, it is a refraction through local cultural metaphors



of the beliefs of capitalism's ruling elites, for whom neoliberalism, at least until the onset of the most recent Euro-American economic crisis, was "a gospel of salvation". In Thailand the cult of the spirit of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), who ruled from 1868 to 1910, is one of the most ubiquitous of Thailand's new prosperity movements and receives tacit official support (Jackson 2009, Stengs 2009). Comaroff & Comaroff observe that, "appeals to the occult in pursuit of the secrets of capital generally rely on local cultural technologies: on vernacular modes of divination or oracular consultation" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000, 317). Thailand's royalist prosperity religions are one such local cultural technology deployed in an occult pursuit of the secrets of capital.

MEDIA AS TECHNOLOGIES OF ENCHANTMENT

While, in different publications, Jean Comaroff traces both the fundamentalist and magical forms of 21st century religiosity to the impact of neoliberalism, she does not make it clear under what conditions neoliberalism incites a renewed syncretic magicity that embraces the market or in what situations it leads to doctrinalist fundamentalism. There is a need for context-specific analyses of the differential impacts of 21st century capitalism on religion. One key factor missing from Comaroff's work is the impact of new media on religious life for, as cultural studies scholar Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay notes of India, "Mass-media have made the gods more real, not less" (Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay 2006, 288).

In an article titled "Religion and/as Media", Jeremy Stolow observes that media "have become central to ... the imagined worlds that constitute the sacred in the global present" (Stolow 2005, 123). Stolow contends that the "religious – that is to say, the transcendental, enchanting, thaumaturgical, uncanny, haunting – powers of media technologies themselves" (Stolow 2005, 124) induce a "reactivation of aura" (Stolow 2005, 127). In a similar vein, Pattana Kitiarsa has argued that the mass media have played important roles in fostering new religious phenomena in Thailand,

[T]he mass media is the most decisive catalyst for religious hybridisation. The heavy religious content and coverage in the popular media have shaped the public's beliefs and practices in the direction of a more prosperity-oriented religion (Pattana 2005, 486).

In words that echo Michael Taussig's (1997, 250) reflections on "sympathetic magic in a post-colonial age" in his book *The Magic of the State*, Rosalind Morris describes how in Thailand the proliferation of new forms of imaging technology

has reincited a "primordial sacrality" rather than contributing to a decay of sacredness. Morris is correct to link the resurgence of spirit mediumship in Thailand with the rise of capitalism and marketised lifestyles, on the one hand, and the explosive growth of technologies of image reproduction and mass communications, on the other. In his book *Jesus in Disneyland* David Lyon (2000) identifies these same phenomena as driving forces in popular religious resurgence in the United States in the 1990s. Like Lyon and Taussig, Morris argues that the massive scale of imaging technologies produced by a pervasively consumerist, market-centred culture distorts established patterns of representation and creates seemingly non-rational, magic-like effects as rational modes of analysis are swamped by a surfeit of promiscuously circulating images. It is here, Morris argues, that we find,

a reinvestment in the power of appearances. This is where the magic returns.... The logic of appearances has changed.... In the age of mechanical reproduction, every empiricist project, every attempt to render the world a mere object of representation, seems haunted by its opposite (Morris 2000, 238–9).

This situation is far from being unique to Thailand. In describing the mediatisation of Hindu mythology in contemporary India, Mukhopadhyay observes,

The aura of ritual has given way to ... technologies of enchantment ... This enchantment is not predicated on what Marxists call the "fetishism" of the commodity, it is rather a matter of commoditisation of the fetish (Mukhopadhyay 2006, 288, emphasis in original).

While highly local in their symbolic form, Thai and Indian prosperity cults are not a phenomenon unique to Asian societies. They are one instance of global-level processes in which new media and the commodification of everyday life have transformed all cultures, Western and non-Western. In introducing a special issue of the journal *Theory, Culture and Society* on the theme of "Cultural Theory and its Futures", Couze Venn argues that in all image-based capitalist cultures, there is a movement away from "signification and meaning" towards "communication and affect" (Venn 2007, 51), where affect denotes a diffuse and impersonal stratum characterised by the experience of intensity. While Venn restricts analysis to the West and does not consider religion, his analysis nonetheless helps us understand the rise of orthopractic, that is, ritual or performance-based



magic, such as spirit mediumship, in which intense experience is given greater significance than doctrinal interpretation or expressions of faith or belief. Western popular culture today is just as fixated on intensity, experience and affect as any séance of a Southeast Asian spirit medium. To summarise, the surfeit of commodified images that form the visual cultural ocean of contemporary mediated societies produces forms re-enchantment in which quests for affect and intense experience often take precedence over the search for meaning or truth. In this cultural setting, ritual participation may become more important than belief, and much of contemporary mass mediated popular culture follows a cultural logic more similar to orthopractic supernatural religion than to text-based forms of orthodoxy.

MODERNISING STATE POWER AND ALTERNATIVE DIRECTIONS OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

A further factor missing from Jean Comaroff's analyses of the dual rise of both magic and fundamentalism is the impact of state power on religious life in Southeast Asia. At different moments in the modern history of Thailand state power has privileged different religious tendencies. From the late 19th century to the 1990s, state power was exercised to regularise Theravada Buddhism while exhibiting a benign neglect and comparative disinterest in Chinese and Brahmanical religiosity. However, since the 2000s, state agencies in Thailand have become complicit in further promoting the supernaturalism that emerged in the shadow of the nationalist project of reconfiguring Thai Buddhism as a modern religion.

Imperialist Religious Studies, Modernising State Power and Religious Diversification

Tatsuki Kataoka's study of Chinese temples and religious syncretism in Thailand provides insights into how local responses to Western imperialism have influenced the subsequent direction of religious change in Southeast Asia, both towards doctrinal orthodoxy in some situations and also in the direction of supernatural syncretism and hybridity in other contexts. Kataoka argues that,

Southeast Asian religions have had to be reinvented in the course of modernisation and state-building.... [E]xisting religious traditions, in accordance with state regulation based on Western standards of religion, have faced growing pressure to fashion themselves so as to fulfill the definition as 'one of many religions' in the sense demanded by the field of comparative

religion. An assumption that one religion stands for one society (state or ethnic group) on equal terms has enabled comparative studies of Southeast Asian religions. However, little attention has been paid to this assumption (Kataoka 2012a, 361).

Western academic definitions of what should be regarded or counted as a "religion", and colonial-era analyses of typologies of "civilisations" in terms of this definition of religion, led Siam to extend state monitoring, supervision and control over the ritual domains that, in response to the power imbued in these Eurocentric categories, subsequently came to be defined as "Thai Buddhism". As part of the effort to create a state recognised as "civilised" (Thai: *siwilai*, see Thongchai 2000, Jackson and Harrison, 2010) within European discourses of imperialism, Siam's modernising elites defined some domains of the pre-existing field of religious life as falling within the scope of a new category labeled *satsana* or "religion", which conformed to then-current European notions of religion-cum-civilisation. However, this created a division in Thai religious life, with many forms of ritual and belief falling outside of the new official category of *satsana*/religion and being labeled as "belief" (*khwa-m-cheua*) or "faith" (*sattha*). Since the late 19th century, official Thai discourse has distinguished between *satsana*, effectively monastery-based Theravada Buddhism, which has been brought under the jurisdiction of the Department of Religious Affairs (*krom kan-satsana*) within the secular bureaucracy, and non-Buddhist belief and faith, which, if administered at all by the state, come under the separate jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior.

Kataoka shows that those domains of religious life that have come under the supervision of the Department of Religious Affairs have been subject to procedural and doctrinal standardisation. In contrast, the forms of "belief" and "faith" that fall outside the Western-influenced definition of *satsana*, while at times required to register their sites of worship with the Ministry of the Interior, have had no state supervision of or intervention in their rituals, teachings or organisation, and have been free to engage in diverse forms of syncretism. Kataoka focuses on the situation of Chinese temples and Chinese ritual expression, but his analysis equally holds for the many Brahmanical shrines in Thailand. In Thailand Brahmanical shrines and Chinese temples are both called *san jao* ("pavilions of the lords"), in contrast to Buddhist monasteries, which are called *wat*. And neither Chinese temples nor shrines for Brahmanical deities are recognised as "religions"



places” (*satsana-sathan*) by the Department of Religious Affairs.

Kataoka argues that the imposition of the Western-influenced categorical distinction between religious expressions labeled as *satsana* (religion) and those called *khwam-cheua* (belief) or *sattha* (faith), and the different forms and intensity of modernising state power exercised over these two domains, has produced a paradoxical situation,

[While] the followers of Chinese temples claim to be Buddhists in official statistics, ... the official status of their temples, with their very syncretic pantheons, is ‘non-religious’. Chinese temples, which have been ignored by the state’s administrators of religion, demonstrate the gap between the official definition of Buddhism and the religion itself (Kataoka 2012a, 362).

Kataoka contends that the contemporary “vitality and energy of the religious landscape of Thailand” (Kataoka 2012b, 483) emerges from the fact that the modernising state has had no interest in supervising or controlling religious activities that fall outside the definition of *satsana*. While there is now considerable secular bureaucratic oversight of Buddhist monasteries – including the formal registration of Buddhist monks, the setting of the curriculum of Buddhist universities, and the awarding of honorific titles to Buddhist monks – there is no state intervention or control of the ritual practice or teachings propagated at Brahmanical shrines or Chinese temples. Kataoka notes that since Chinese temples, and here I would also add Brahmanical shrines, “are not recognised as representing religion, they are not forced [by state policy] to select any one institutionalised religion through which to ‘purify’ their pantheons. This contributes to the persistence of indiscriminative syncretism in the grassroots practices of Thai Buddhism.” (Kataoka 2012b, 482) This situation is beneficial for Chinese temples in Thailand, as they do have not to compete with state Buddhism and are able to engage in “indiscriminate syncretic worship [which] is also latently sanctioned [by state authorities]” (Kataoka 2012b, 461). I consider state complicity in supporting post-Cold War supernaturalism in the next section.

In summary, in Thailand the standardisation of Theravada Buddhist doctrine and ritual practice, and an intensified syncretisation of Chinese and Brahmanical religious expression, have both emerged as effects of modernising state power, which created categorical and bureaucratic divisions between official *satsana*/religion and popular belief and faith.

State Complicity in The Mediatisation of Thai Royal Charisma

Kataoka argues that in the 20th century religious syncretism and supernaturalism emerged in the shadows of modernising state power concerned to construct an image of Thai Buddhism as a religion that could be viewed on the world stage as a basis for recognition of Thailand as a “civilised” society. However, more recently, organs of the Thai state have become more directly involved in actively promoting non-Buddhist supernaturalism.

The market-driven, technologically based return of magic-like effects in the society’s urban centres discussed above has had political implications, for these influences, amongst others, have “enhanced and extended the auratic power of the monarch” (Morris 2000, 246). Historian Nithi Auesrivongse (1994) has described this phenomenon in the form of the national cult of the spirit of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868-1910) mentioned above, and I have considered the closely related emerging cult of the current monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) (Jackson 2009). The resacralisation of the monarchy is indeed part of the return of magic in Thailand, but in this instance conservative political agendas have also had an important role, playing upon the supernatural charisma of the King to bolster authoritarianism. As Rosalind Morris argues, imaging technologies have produced a highly visual culture flooded with print and electronic images, which have “enhanced and extended the auratic power of the monarch” (Morris 2000, 246), contributing to the rehabilitation of the symbolisms of “absolute theologico-political power” (Morris 1998, 370).

The discourse of “god-king” (*deva-rāja*) has been given new life in Thailand by visual media and the spectralisation of life under neoliberalism, which together have produced a regime of representation that contributes to the auraticisation of King Bhumibol (Jackson 2009). These technologies of enchantment have permitted some of Thailand’s prosperity religions to be harnessed to a conservative nationalist agenda and, together with the country’s strictly policed *lèse-majesté* law (see Ivarsson & Isager 2010), have institutionalised a commodified and mass-mediated ideology of magico-divine royal power that has worked to legitimate King Bhumibol’s progressive accumulation of political influence across his long reign. However, as a qualification to this analysis it should be added that at the time of writing some media commentators are observing that the intensely polarised and at times violent political tensions that have riven Thailand



since the military coup of September 2006 have started to erode the mediated charisma of the now ailing King Bhumibol.

CONCLUSION

The diverse and diverging trends of religious change in recent decades have taken almost everyone by surprise. In Southeast Asia most scholars of religion have been preoccupied with simply mapping the empirical contours of the various new supernatural and doctrinal movements. Post-Cold War social reality has outpaced our capacity to develop analyses that fully account for what is happening in the religious cultures of the region. Different studies have theorised the respective impacts of capitalism, new media and state power on religious thought and practice. We now have a wide range of detailed empirical studies and focused reflective analyses that permit us to begin to ask broader, comparative questions of what is taking place across the full spread of 21st century religious expression in Southeast Asia. As Jean Comaroff states, in critically drawing upon,

assessing and synthesising the research now at our disposal the key principle that should guide us in our reflections and analyses is the need “to be cognizant of the complexity of the world, to be accountable to its paradoxes” (Comaroff & Kim 2011, 176).

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