TEACHING JUDAISM IN THAILAND

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From 1980 through mid-1984 I taught Judaism in Bangkok, Thailand, at Mahidol University, to graduate students, all of whom were Buddhist. They studied Judaism as one of the required subjects in a graduate program of comparative religion that requires them also to study the other major religious traditions.

When I asked students why they were studying comparative religion, they gave a variety of answers -- to learn how other religions foster happiness and peace and to bring these ideas into Thai society for its improvement, to promote tolerance among people, or to seek truth or understand "religion" or, most interesting to me, a Buddhist idea or "acquiring merit" (*dai kusol*),[1] that we elevate or purify ourselves a little whenever we vanquish a portion of our ignorance. As for myself, I wanted to leave my book-lined office and see a part of Asia, to meet people whose culture and religion are very different from my own, and to gain a new perspective upon the Judaism I had been studying in Los Angeles.

In this essay I shall describe what occurred as my students and I attempted to vanquish a little of our ignorance. I begin by sketching the world of thought out of which my students looked at Judaism, and then describe a little of what they saw in the Judaism they studied -- both their initial perceptions and later ideas. The rest of the essay, intended as commentary on these perceptions, considers questions that arose in the pursuit of cross-cultural understandings. I shall explore in detail one of the specific problems that complicated my students' perceptions of Judaism -- the problem of understanding "holiness" in Judaism; and shall then discuss my role in Thailand as an interpreter of a foreign religion.

1

My students during my first two years at Mahidol were fourteen graduates whose ages ranged mainly from 22 to 32. They always behaved toward me with kindness and respect, treating me as their *khru* (revered teacher). When teachers enter the classroom, students make the gesture of respect called a *wai*, bowing their heads while holding their hands, palms pressed together, before their faces. It is the shy affectionate smiles of my students that I remember, their thoughtful solicitude toward me, and the modesty and trust with which they spoke their views.

As much as possible in this essay, I allow the students to speak through their own words, which I copied either from papers they wrote or notes I made in classroom or office. They have granted me their (amused) permission to do so and have read

1 My transliteration of Thai words follow a hybrid system adapted to the English alphabet, indicating neither tones nor length of vowels. Consonants are transliterated generally in line with Mary Hass' phonetic system used in her *Thai-English Students' Dictionary* (Palo Alto: 1964); but vowels are written in accord with one of the many systems in practical use in Thailand. Personal names appear in the form used by the individual concerned. Usually (but not in the case of *kusol*) I transliterate according to sound rather than spelling.

everything I have written about them. I alter only their grammar on occasion to make their English read more smoothly.

Let us listen first to some rather personal statements they wrote in response to two questions about their religious values.

> "I am a Buddhist; I pay respect to the Buddha. . . . I believe in the result of virtue, that it will bring me success in life, and when I die, I shall be reborn in a better status."
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> "I pay respect to the image of the Buddha and everything that is related to him, such as his relics, his words in the Tipitaka, and his disciples. . . . I say a prayer before going to bed. I sacrifice food to my ancestors on special days many times a year. I give food to the monks in the mornings."
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> "The story of the Buddha is very important to me, because Lord Buddha is the primary example for me to follow. . . . He knows and understands the meaning of life and how to reach Nirvana."
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> "As a Buddhist my highest reverence is for the Triple Gem, *Ratanattaya* -- that is, the Buddha, the Dhamma [his teachings], and the Sangha [the monastic order]. . . . In my house there are many Buddha-images, a set of Tipitaka, and images of some reverend monks. The stories of the Buddha and his disciples are the guideposts in my life. These stories tell me how I should live and what is the goal of life. They inspire me when I encounter obstacles."
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> "I follow the basic Dhamma by not doing evil, by increasing good, and purifying my mind, in order to receive happiness in my life. . . . For example, I do good by giving money to the poor, offering food to monks, following the Precepts, trying to mediate whenever it is possible, and listening to explanations of the doctrine. For purifying my mind, I try not to cause suffering to others, and I try to excuse anyone who makes me unhappy so that I do not keep sins in my mind. . . . Before I go to bed, I always chant in Pali the words, `Praise to the Buddha, the Holy One, Perfect in Wisdom.'"

Then there were two students who expressed a more questioning attitude toward parts of Buddhist doctrine.

> "I am a Buddhist, but I am hardly religious. . . . I do help people whom I think deserve pity: giving money to some needy person, taking care of children or old people. Is that called `doing good'? I am not sure. . . . The story of the Buddha is not the most important to me because his life is different from mine, an ordinary woman. . . . I have some hope of reaching Nirvana in the very far future [after many rebirths]. But my own business is the most important concern in my life."
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> "My highest concern may be safety, nirvana, social status, or whatever is suitable for me . . . depending on reasoning, time, place, and necessity. One night my mother, who died eighteen years ago, inhabited my father in order to visit her children . . . and to perform the wedding ceremony for me. This event is strange but true; I did not know it was possible."

These sentences open up to us significant aspects of the religious world of my students. Thoughts, experiences, and symbols such as these were in their minds as they studied Judaism.

The particular interpretations of Buddhist tradition that my students voiced, in the sentences just cited and in their ideas to be presented later, may be said to reflect the general worldview of middle-class urbanites with a formal education. I hasten to add, however, that even among the fourteen students in my courses, there was a considerable divergence of opinion. Several students,

for example, thought of Nirvana as their life's goal, while most said this was impractical and suitable only for monks. A number of students had been influenced in their articulation of Buddhist doctrine by the famous Thai monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, whose contemporary reformulations of Buddhist tradition are popular among university students (Twan, a student from my first year of teaching, had already lived for a time at Buddhadasa's hermitage, and a student from my fourth year was eventually ordained by Buddhadasa); other students preferred more traditional interpretations. Some students wore amulets, one was an experienced astrologer, another sought help from a brahman god; but most expressed skepticism toward these practices. A few students took a stance intentionally outside of Buddhist doctrine and practice.

"Reformed Buddhist worldview" is a phrase that the anthropologist Charles Keyes uses to identify the distinctive views of the Thai middle class. He uses the word "Reformed" because he traces the origin of these views to the educational reforms enacted by King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn in the nineteenth century, which replaced the traditional Thai cosmology with one more in accord with Western science. Keyes suggests as its other "salient features" the tendencies to interpret kamma with an emphasis on moral action in the present and its future consequences (rather than the past as a determinant of the present) and to extend the means of "making merit" beyond its traditional religious setting and into the realm of daily life.[2]

Specifically, the adoption of a reformed science-oriented worldview means the rejection of the classical Indian mythology, with its many worlds, gods, and orders of beings, which structured the traditional Thai worldview, in the form seen most clearly in the fourteenth-century text, *Traiphum Phraruang*. Rejected also are the cosmos and cultus of powerful gods and spirits deriving from indigenous traditions, and indeed nearly all parts of what I shall later discuss as the realm of "the *saksit*" in Thai popular religion. Thus, one of the assumptions underlying many of my students' ideas found in this essay is that Buddhist doctrines are fully consistent with Western science; another related assumption is that they can all be tested rigorously by reason and experience. In regard to other religions, the students are concerned mainly with the religion's effectiveness in alleviating suffering and fostering moral behavior; and to students, suffering is the foremost problem of life.

Many of the rituals and symbols of my students' religion, as well as important doctrines, have appeared already in their writings, but a sense of its wholeness remains to be suggested. The central symbols, then, of their religion seem to be the Buddha together with Kamma (i.e., Karma) seen as a law of existence (and some students have told me that they think more often about Kamma than about the Buddha). The Buddha holds significance to them as an extraordinary sage who sought and discovered the most important truth about life (Dhamma), truth that can alleviate suffering.

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2. Charles Keyes, "Ethnology and Anthropological Interpretation in the Study of Thailand," *The Study of Thailand*, ed. Eliezer Ayal, Southeast Asia Series No. 54 (Athens, Ohio: 1978), 35-36. B. J. Terwiel briefly compares the Buddhism of the Thai middle-class with that of a farming community in central Thailand, in *Monks and Magic* (Copenhagen: 1975), 274-75. For further discussion of the reforms of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn, see S. J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Cambridge: 1976), 200-29, 405-06, in which he identifies as major strands of the reformation "intellectualism" (the devaluation of "superstitious" ritual), "rationalism" (correlating and reconciling Buddhist doctrine with "positive science as advocated by the West"), scripturalism, and euhemerism (including a rejection of the Traiphum).

Students often speak of suffering and problems on the one hand, contrasted to happiness and peace on the other. Suffering is alleviated basically by moral behavior, unpossessiveness (detachment) and contentment, a calm mind, and a realization of the inherent impermanence and incompleteness of life. Kamma holds significance as an essential structure of life, its moral nature, a force sustaining moral behavior; bad behavior inexorably results in bad Kamma, variously conceived as internal, interpersonal, social, or material suffering. Nibbana (i.e., Nirvana) has no important role in the life of most of my students, although it might be said to be present indirectly in the detachment and calm mind which all the students seek. When I asked them what as the most important teaching of Buddhism, they would most often answer with a sentence from the Dhammapada (183): "To do good, to refrain from evil, and to purify the mind." (This sentence appears twice in the students' writing included in this essay.) I was struck throughout by the lighthearted tone, the gentleness and modesty, with which all of this was expressed.

2

Judaism is hardly known at all in Thailand. When I say "Jewish religion" (*sasana yiw*) to people outside the university, they are totally puzzled, although they are familiar with *sasana i-salam* (Islam) and *sasana khrit* (Christianity). In comparative religion courses (of which there are a growing number), Judaism, if even mentioned, is described as the foundation of Christianity, and so is relegated to the "Old Testament." This is how Judaism was taught at Mahidol University by a Catholic priest before my arrival. Jews, on the other hand, have a definite reputation in Thailand -- mixed partly of the greedy Shylock of *Merchant of Venice*, the translation of which all Thai school children are required to read, and partly of Einstein, Entebbe, Moshe Dayan, and Israelis turning deserts into farmlands. In the Thai language, the word for "Jew" is synonymous with "miserly, greedy," and my students expected me to behave that way. Yet many Thai admire Israelis for their courage, cleverness, and austerity, and upon my arrival at Mahidol, a number of people asked me to explain how Judaism had made Israel strong and enabled American Jews to acquire so much wealth and political power. News of Israel's invasion of Lebanon, however, resulted in a worse impression of "the Jewish state" and "the Jewish army" -- as the Thai-language newspapers call them.

In my course on the History of Judaism, I lectured first on the biblical and rabbinic history of the religion, and then presented traditional Judaism in its classical rabbinic and prayerbook forms, and finally, the modern history and modifications of those structures. In the second semester I participated in a seminar in which five religions were studied in relation to five philosophical categories -- human nature, salvation/liberation, ultimate reality, knowledge, and religious life (more naturally a Buddhist sequence than Judaic).

If my students knew nothing of Judaism, they had nevertheless acquired a familiarity, however vague, with Muslim and Christian doctrines, and had encountered Christian missionaries. Presented then with Judaism, they tended to place it in the same category, so that their previously-formed impressions of Islam and Christianity influenced their responses to Judaism.

Thus, when toward the beginning of my course, while we were studying the Bible, I asked students what the word "God" meant to them, they were fully prepared with answers. The topic

was clearly not new to them. One student told me she considered God to be "very nonsense," because the law of Kamma explains life fully without God. Another student, Arastum, asserted that God is a socially-conditioned construct, functioning mainly to lend authority to laws and moral codes. Twan said that he thought of God as nature, the totality of the universe. I asked him, "When the Bible says that God spoke to Abraham, what does that mean to you?" Twan replied, "It means that Abraham learned from nature." Finally, Voradej, the student with the greatest formal knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and literature (and later to become a monk and professor), said that Buddhists simply have no need for "the gods" and should rely only upon themselves for salvation, as the Buddha taught. My second group of students expressed similar ideas but preferred psychological interpretations. One student, for example, asserted that what people call God is really a consciousness of the good and real; she added, somewhat inconsistently, that the prophets had discovered goodness and reality, which is Dhamma, but identified it with the will of God in order to gain acceptance.

It was also during the initial stages of the course that the students presented me in their papers with some intriguing interpretations of Jewish literature. I had asked them to explain a number of rabbinic sayings in *Pirqei Avot* (Chapters of the Fathers, a part of the Mishnah). Twan chose to interpret the statement attributed to Antigonos of Sokho, "Do not be like servants who serve the Master [God] for the sake of a reward." He explained this as a definition of the true meaning of generosity (*dana* in Pali, *than* in Thai -- one of the five Ennobling Virtues): "Giving without taking back (rewards) is the real merit" -- *thanamai*, merit gained through giving. Siriwan, from a later group of students, explained the same dictum of Antigonos in this way: "Do God's will carefree about the result," thereby alluding to the value of detachment from the fruits of one's actions.

Voradej chose *Avot* 2.13, the story of Yohanan ben Zakkai sending his students to find "the best path for a person to follow," the preferred answer being *lev tov*, a good heart. "Rabbi Yohanan," wrote Voradej in his delightful scholastic style, "taught that a good heart was the essence of all good actions. Action and words are manifestations of mind. A man with a good mind is a generous man." This story from *Avot* thus bears resemblance to a Buddhist teaching to which many Thai refer, that the mind is the most important determinant of behavior and experience, and hence must be purified in order that life be seen truly and suffering reduced. In the student newsletter, Voradej chose two statements from *Avot* to translate, one of which was Ben Zoma's dictum (4.1) containing the words, "Who is [truly] strong? He who conquers his passions (*yizro*)" -- easily a Buddhist teaching. (Indeed, compare the Dhammapada 103-104.)

Arastum interpreted a group of statements attributed to Hillel (*Avot* 2.5). "Do not be sure of yourself until the day of your death" meant to her that we cannot depend on anything in life because "everything is changing all the time," is impermanent, *anicca*.

Finally, Sriphen recognized the law of Kamma in Hillel's words addressed to a skull floating in the water: "Because you drowned others, others have drowned you; and in the end, those who drowned you will themselves be drowned" (2.7).

These interpretations are fascinating examples of the probably universal tendency to perceive the foreign through the familiar -- perhaps the central theme of this essay.

In a later lesson, after explaining as best I could the process of *midrash*, the characteristic rabbinic method of discovering new meaning in scripture, I asked the students to write *midrash* of their own that would be personally meaningful to them. Here are some examples, then, of Thai *midrash*:

On Leviticus 19:14, "You shall not curse the deaf or put an obstacle before the blind," Parichart wrote, "Everyone possesses his own karma. The deaf and blind are so because of past actions. Good Buddhists will not add to the pain of these people -- which would bring bad Karma. Instead, we should let the example of their suffering encourage us to follow the teachings of the Buddha."

On Leviticus 7:26-27, "You shall eat no blood whatever, whether of bird or animal. . . . Whoever eats any blood will be cut off from his people," Twan, after correctly explaining the literal meaning, offered two exegeses. "Do not," he wrote, "earn your living on the suffering of others, whether of birds or animals, including man" (referring to right livelihood, *samma ajiva*, which means not to earn a living from trade in weapons, slavery, liquor, drugs, or meats), and then he added a political interpretation: "If you exploit the poor [birds and animals] too much, you will be overthrown [cut off] by the people, as with the Shah of Iran."

Arastum, combining exegesis with overt comparison, suggested a similarity between the Buddhist path to Nibbana and the "hill of the Lord" in Psalm 24:3-4: "Who will ascend the hill of the Lord . . . ? He who has clean hands and a pure heart." She wrote, "We must avoid bad thoughts and bad action, and if we do, we shall see God. God in this meaning is a condition, the condition without evil in our mind. `The hill of the Lord' means the way to attain this condition. Nirvana in Buddhism is also a condition, one attained by doing good, not doing bad, and purifying the mind, because everything changes continuously and passes away. To have a pure mind is to understand this condition of no-self profoundly and to get rid of passion, which is caused by clinging to `self.' In Judaism a pure heart means no evil mind, which is different from the pure heart or mind of Buddhism."

The same student, always a copious writer, offered a political exegesis of the same verse. "`Clean hands and a pure heart,'" she wrote, "mean that politicians and officials in Thailand must have good action and good thought. They should not use intrigue, corruption, or murder, or use their power in the wrong way, to raise their rank and salary. . . . The way to higher rank and salary that is the way of God comes from goodness and nor from doing evil."

The preceding comments and writings of the students come from the early weeks of the first course I taught on the history of Judaism. Then at the end of this course, I used part of the final exam to ask students to name those aspects of Judaism that they thought were the most difficult for a Thai to understand. The answers to this question, based on a greater familiarity with the subject, give the clearest indication of what Judaism looked like within the cultural setting of urban Thailand.

Almost all the students said that the Jewish interest in God was difficult to understand. Voradej explained this by the absence among Thai Buddhists of any similar "concept" and interest in it. The closest belief, he said, is the belief in *thewada* (*devata* in Pali), powerful superhuman beings consisting of "soul and subtle body" who enjoy more pleasure than human beings do, but also suffer pain

and fight among themselves. Thai people turn to *thewada* for help in solving practical problems such as illness, misfortune, or evil spells.[3] As an example of *thewada* Voradej named the famous Four-Faced Brahma whose image is located at the Erawan Hotel (although other Thai classify Brahma as a *thep*, implying a god higher than a *thewada*). Many people come to this powerful image to ask the god for help, in return for which they promise to give wooden elephants, pay for ceremonial dance performances, or make donations to a hospital fund. Voradej was suggesting that it is this kind of god that enters the minds of Thai Buddhists when they hear Jews, Muslims, and Christians speak of their god.

Another student offered the same observation, and when I asked him how the God of Judaism differs, he replied that the god in Judaism has unlimited power, whereas the Brahmanical gods are limited. Apparently, then, this student himself thought of the God of Judaism basically in the image of a magnified *thewada*. Two other students described God similarly, as "the greatest," having "great power," "enormous power."

Another difficult aspect of Judaism, according to the students, was the meaning that Torah, as revelation, has for Jews. For Theravada Buddhists, the important knowledge in life is Dhamma, which is knowledge about the structure of reality and how to alleviate suffering and attain Nibbana. Some Thai Buddhists, such as Buddhadasa and Phra Rajavaramuni, use the English word "nature" in reference to the reality known through Dhamma, often implying a distinction between "natural" and "supernatural." Most of my students defined "natural" in a manner not very different from Western positive science. They would say that Dhamma was discovered by the Buddha through observation and reasoning "within nature." Hence, as Voradej phrased it, truth for Buddhists "is not revealed but discovered," and so the notion that truth should come from beyond "nature" seemed strange. Furthermore, whereas Dhamma is knowledge of the laws of reality, "it seems peculiar to a Thai for a Being to make a law [Torah] apart from reality."

Earlier in the course I had asked students to compare Dhamma with Torah, and the chief difference upon which the students focused was in the source of knowledge -- that Dhamma comes from within the "natural" world and Torah from outside, from a God that they conceived as being supernatural. From this distinction flowed all others. Torah appeared to be a law imposed upon human life which Jews were compelled (unnaturally) to obey, whereas Dhamma was knowledge and a way of life which people would choose out of a natural concern to lessen suffering. Several students expressed the opinion that Jews obey Torah out of faith, but Buddhists follow Dhamma out of rational examination and decision. "Buddhists feel respect for the Dhamma because it is the best way to live . . . but Jews and Christians feel respect for their scriptures because the scriptures are the word of God, which they must have faith in." Thus Buddhists learn Dhamma "by wisdom" (that is, rational thought), whereas "Jews study Torah by faith" and "should not criticize or hesitate to believe." Twan, the author of this last statement, goes on to cite the Kalamas Sutta, which to him means that "the Buddhist feels free to doubt until it is clear enough to accept or believe. This is what I feel is quite different from

3. Voradej is describing semi-divine beings which are part of the classical Indian or Brahmanical cosmology that remains a central feature of popular religion in Thailand. This realm of "the *saksit*," within which *thewada* belong, will be discussed further in Part 3.

religions that have God."[4] The students remain convinced throughout the course that knowledge of God could never derive from rational inquiry, personal prayer, or historical experience.

Two Jewish doctrines identified as being troublesome were those of election and Israel's covenant with God. I had had the students read a portion of Henri Dumery's *Phenomenology of Religion*, in which these doctrines are interpreted as expressions of a historical mode of perceiving "the Absolute" whereby particularistic Jewish history acquires a universalistic function as a medium of revelation for the benefit of humankind.[5] But a number of students continued to hear the doctrines as expressions of an attitude of national superiority or egoism (of which the students disapproved) or even, according to Nanta, a deep love for ancestors (of which she approves). Many of the Thai I have met are proud of their tolerance toward other religions, and my students will assert that all religions are good for those who practice them, or that all religions teach ultimately the same truths. Hence, for one people to claim that its prophets and history reveal truths in a special way, more fully than do other religions, is to be intolerably "biased," as on student put it.

The laws of the Torah appeared "strict" to many students, and they had trouble finding any value in the harsh life that they imagined in Judaism. According to Nongyao, Buddhists have no strict obligatory laws; people practice Dhamma because it appears good or useful to them, and disobedience is consequently not a sin. Nongyao concluded, therefore, that Buddhists have more freedom than Jews; she said that Buddhists could, for example, kill an animal if they had good reasons, even though this transgressed one of the fundamental Five Precepts.

I had interpreted Jewish ritual as symbolical acts of connecting one's life with God. Voradej thought that Thai people would consider all these ritual actions a difficult way of life, asking, "Why would anyone try always to connect his life to God's will?" According to Voradej, "most Thai live without a sense of connection with the Dhamma or anything sacred," and so they would ask a similar question about the life of a Buddhist monk. "But a pious Buddhist would understand the Jewish attempt at sanctification." (Here Voradej draws a distinction between those Thai who feel little interest in Buddhism and those who are "pious Buddhists," supposing the two groups to react differently toward traditional Judaism.)

Two of the students thought that the Jewish interest in history as a realm of sacred events was difficult to understand because, they said, history, except for the life of the Buddha, was not important to Buddhists.

We return, finally, to the subject of "faith," which the students had mentioned in connection with Torah. Three of them told me that the importance of faith in Judaism made the religion difficult for Buddhists to understand, since faith, they claimed, was unimportant in Buddhism. Twan defined "faith" as a belief that

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4. Twan's idea echoes the thought of Buddhadasa, with whom he studied. In *Buddhadhamma for Students*, Buddhadasa says, also in reference to the Kalamas Sutta, "In Buddhism we are taught not to believe anyone, not to believe anything, without having seen clearly for ourselves that it is so" (Bangkok: 1966, p. 15). Relevant also is the following statement in Buddhadasa's *Christianity and Buddhism* comparing these religions: "Buddhism tends to be `pannadhika,' the path with the wisdom-factor predominant, . . . Christianity tends to be `saddhadhika,' the path where trust or faith predominates" (Bangkok: 1968, pp. 12-13). This idea seems to be reflected in what Amnat and Sumadhya will say later about faith in Judaism.

5. Henry Dumery, *Phenomenology and Religion* (Los Angeles: 1975), Chap. 2.

cannot be proved through reason and experience. The problem was that "if I know that God doesn't exist, how can I understand Judaism?" Twan's solution was to "begin by imagining faith, such as the belief in God, and then I can understand the rest of Judaism." Upon being questioned, Twan acknowledged that faith may be part of Buddhism, but faith comes at the end, after a person has tested the truth of the Dhamma, whereas in Judaism faith must precede all else, since the basic doctrines cannot be proved. Sumadhya expressed the same idea of the precedence of faith in Judaism: "first come obedience, worship, and faith, and then activity follows." Amnat, too, pointed to faith as an essential difference between the two religions. "Buddhists," he wrote, "have a rational religion, and Judaism is a traditional religion, emphasizing faith and obedience. First Jews believe, and then they find reasons." According to Sumadhya, knowledge in Judaism is "sacred," deriving from God, but knowledge in Buddhism is "rational," deriving from insight: "If you prove the Dhamma is real, you follow it."

I myself had never used the word "faith" in speaking of Judaism, and I occasionally argued against the students' conclusions. In the second semester I wrote a brief essay in which I questioned the validity of their definition of faith. I argued that by their definition, every religion is "faith," including Buddhism, because it too is based on certain fundamental assumptions or interpretations of reality which are unprovable or precede reason and experience. I therefore suggested that the term "faith" be applied only to the act of holding beliefs which are consciously thought to oppose, surpass, or be undemonstrated by reason and normal experience.[6] For most Jews over the span of Jewish history, the relationship with God was not based on faith because they did not consider their knowledge of ultimate things to be particularly unreasonable or problematic.

In response to this essay, the students, led by Voradej, assured me that they considered faith an admirable quality in Judaism, and they asserted that faith has an important role in Buddhism. The first act of Buddhists, before they can even begin to follow the path of purification and insight, is an act of faith, *saddha*, in which they accept as true, unproven, the reality of the Buddha's enlightenment and the law of Kamma. Later, after practising Dhamma and reflecting upon it, Buddhists will be able to prove through their own experience the truth of these foundational assumptions which had initially been accepted on faith.

Thus the students had adopted my definition of faith and then set it neatly into their former picture of a fully demonstrable Buddhism and an unattested Judaism! Perhaps they are right.

Contrary to the other students, Parichart asserted that Judaism would not be difficult for Thai people to understand. She based this opinion upon her belief that many Thai people have "compromised" by embracing parts of non-Buddhist religions -- particularly Brahmanism and the cultus of local spirits. These religions, and not Buddhism, provide an adequate basis for understanding the role of God in Judaism. As Parichart explains it, many Thai people think there are supernatural powers that control

6. The only example from the students' readings that fits this definition of faith came from an article by Abraham Heschel, "On Prayer," in which he spoke of "my faith that God in His silence still listens to a cry." Prayer for Heschel is an act of praise for a silent God which both is necessitated by and also somehow transcends the horrible evils of the world and our own inability to respond in measure. From *Understanding Prayer*, ed. Jakob Petuchowski (New York: 1972), 69-83.

events within limited localities. The God of Judaism resembles these gods and spirits except that he is "transcendent and unlimited" in his "power to create and act." I asked Parichart to explain further the differences between the local gods revered in Thailand and the god revered in Judaism. "There are many gods," she replied, "but they do not reveal the truth about life. They want offerings of incense and flowers. Only if people make an offering will the gods help them. But in Judaism there is only one god. He reveals his will. He is connected with everything in human life. He does not want offerings; he wants practice in accord with Torah." Then I challenged Parichart to prove to me that the God of Judaism is not difficult to understand, and she added the following thoughts: "God rules over all nations. He chose Israel, revealed his will to Abraham and Israel. According to Dumery, God wants Israel to represent and spread Judaism to all the world. God is righteous: he punishes the wicked and rewards the good. God is the supreme authority. He is creator and redeemer. He saves mankind, as in the history of Israel, and he will send the Messiah."

Such, then, are some of the replies given to my question. The students expressed these opinions after having read selections from many of the standard introductory texts in Judaic Studies at that time (writings of Neusner, Steinberg, Lipmn, Werblowsky, Donin, and Kaufman, to name a few), as well as numerous prayers from the prayerbook and a few selections from the classical literature; the students, then, were speaking out of a knowledge of Judaism, although their understanding of it can be faulted. The student writings cited from the beginning of the course, especially the *midrash*, emphasized similarities between Judaism and Buddhism, whereas the opinions cited from the end of the course, because of the nature of the question -- what in Judaism is difficult to understand? -- necessarily stressed differences. Although the answers may sound critical of Judaism, such was not their intent; rather, it was I who had elicited these responses in order to understand my students' perceptions.

One particular student, Mrs. Nanta, after reading the foregoing opinions expressed by other students, voiced her concern lest I and my readers interpret them as criticism. A kind and sincere woman of middle age, pious and observant in her Buddhism, Mrs. Nanta is an instructor who was preparing to introduce a comparative religion curriculum at her teachers' college in a neighboring province. She wanted to assure me that she believes that all religions are good; and she also thought she understood why Jews revere God, which she conceives as an abstract phenomenon like Kamma: "God is there, we feel God, but we cannot describe him fully." This experience of God seems to her to be related to the good or bad feelings experienced by people in consequence of the good or bad actions they have performed. Buddhists call these feelings "Kamma" and Jews "God" (and so the feelings are not merely psychological as in the concept of conscience, but actual effects of moral action).

Mrs. Nanta's attempt to understand Jewish experiences of God resulted in transforming them into her own experience of the effect of Kamma, which, I think, touches only one aspect of what God has meant to Jews. Her intention, nevertheless, was to grant as much reality to Jewish experiences of God as she grants to her own experience of Kamma. ("Kamma is abstract; we feel it but we can't tell exactly what it is.") And for Mrs. Nanta, the experience of Kamma has ultimate significance for her life.

You may have been struck by a comparison that Sumadhya made between Torah and Dhamma. Torah, she said, was "sacred," since it came from God; Dhamma, however, was "rational," having been discovered through human insight. Earlier in the semester, during a discussion in my office, Arastum had claimed even further that nothing in Buddhism is sacred, because Buddhism is part of the everyday world and available to all people. Torah, on the other hand, was sacred, because it came from outside the ordinary world. I countered with my best rationalist definitions of "sacred," suggesting that Lord Buddha was extraordinary in some way, perhaps in his wisdom, and reminding her that she performs a *krab* (a gesture of respect, kneeling to touch head to floor three times) before addressing a monk. "Doesn't this mean that you consider the monk sacred?" Arastum replied that the Buddha was an ordinary man who merely had more wisdom than other people, and that monks are ordinary men, too, and hence not holy. "Buddhists respect all these," she said, "but we do not think they are sacred."

I recount this incident because it led to what became for me a lesson in the linguistic complexities -- but also cultural and personal -- in trying to speak and understand across cultures. It became a lesson in the deflective, skewing effect that language has upon our perception of the foreign.

After my conversation with Arastum I noticed that some of the other students concurred with the way she categorized Buddhism and Judaism and that, furthermore, they put Islam and Christianity into the same category as Judaism, the category of religions of "sacred things." I noticed also that the students used the word "sacred" in speaking of amulets and the shrine of the Erawan Brahma, and this was my clue. After a little investigation I realized that the students had been relying upon their dictionaries' translation of the English "sacred" into the Thai word, *saksit*. *Saksit* applies principally to special objects and beings that are thought to exert an extraordinary power, such as images of Brahman gods, certain Buddha images, and spirits residing in particular trees and locales. These are *saksit* because they exert a power that protects or otherwise affects human life by mysterious means. *Saksit* thus denotes the quality of possessing such power.[7]

Hence, if the students looked at Judaism as a religion of *saksit* phenomena -- because God is not wholly of the ordinary world, Torah comes from God, Jews pray constantly to God, and Jewish history tells of extraordinary events -- then the students would see the Torah as an object of power and Jewish life as primarily a pursuit of power. Indeed, Sriphen once wrote, "The goal of living with God is to gain the sudden advantage. Isn't this a characteristic of magic, not religion?"[8] Sriphen apparently saw much of Jewish life, in contrast to her notion of Buddhism, as a

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7. The word *saksit* has one minor, though complicating, meaning which applies only to the grounds of a temple. In this meaning *saksit* has the sense of "inviolable," not to be violated by profane actions such as cursing or sexual activity. This sense of the word, rather close to the English "sacred" in one of its meanings, could not, however, be the sense in which my students were using the word, since they did not apply it to anything Buddhist. See *New Model Thai-English Dictionary*, Desk ed., compiled So Sethaputra (Bangkok: 1980), 382.

8. Sriphen's idea of magic was based on a definition of it that I had presented as a prevalent one, namely, the attempt to use supernatural power to affect immediate events in human history. The students had also read Yehezkel Kaufman's tendentious characterization of the "pagan cultus" as "fundamentally magical," defining magic with an emphasis on its "automatic" quality and its source in a realm higher than the gods. "The Biblical Age," *Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People*, ed. Leo Schwarz (New York: 1967), 8-10.

pursuit of "magical" power, aptly defined as "the sudden advantage," and I think she had in mind certain petitionary prayers from the prayerbook, as well as Jacob Neusner's persuasive demonstration in *The Way of Torah* of the importance of messianic redemption as a fundamental orientation of traditional Jewish ritual, prayer, and study.

Allow me to elaborate a little on the meaning of this word *saksit* by which the students characterized Judaism.[9] As the word is popularly used in everyday Thai life, at least in Bangkok, it can apply to both objects and persons. One object that is considered *saksit mak* (very *saksit*) is an image of a giant named Thaohiran, built by King Rama VI after seeing the giant in a dream. At the completion of the image, the spirit of the giant was invited to dwell within the image, so that the image is the actual dwelling place of the giant and not merely a symbol. Today it is located on the grounds of Phra Mongkut Hospital, and patients regularly come to it (or him) asking to be healed. A few of the many other objects in Bangkok that are very *saksit* are the Emerald Buddha, the City Pillar, the Erawan Brahma, and the spirit-house of the brother of Rama V. (A spirit house is a miniature house or temple where the spirit-lord of a locale dwells and is offered food and flowers by human beings.) In each case, the object is thought to be the actual dwelling place of a powerful spirit, and the spirit's presence is what makes the object *saksit*. But even a simple tree may become *saksit* if people think a spirit lives in it, and then its grounds become a place for revering the spirit and asking the spirit's help.

As for *saksit* persons, one example is the now-deceased Acharya Khlai, a monk who lived in southern Thailand. It is said that he could bring rain, heal the sick, tell the future, and protect people from injury. He chanted mantras over coins and gave them to people for protection against all evils. One of the lecturers at Mahidol wore on a chain around her neck the image of another *saksit* monk, and when she was involved in a serious automobile accident and escaped with only a minor cut, some of her friends concluded that the image had saved her life. If a person wants, however, to gain access to greater power than a monk can offer, or wants to obtain illicit results (since monks and gods do not accede to immoral requests), the person can turn to a *Mor Sa-ne*, a "doctor of charms," or to a *Mor Phi*, a "doctor of ghosts." The former offers spells and potions, while the latter "cultivates" ghosts and sends them on errands of destruction against a client's enemies.[10]

This brief and over-simple picture of *saksit* phenomena provides at least a rough indication of what was in the minds of my students when they associated the word *saksit* with Judaism. Most

9. The word *saksit* (in this form transliterated according to its sound) is spelled fully as *saktisitthi*. This compound form derives from two very old words, *sakti*, meaning "power," and *sitthi*, meaning in this connection "just or valid power." The former word is distantly related to the Latin *sanctus* through the Sanskrit *sakti*, here meaning probably "honor or dignity bestowed by inner or divine power." (For this information I relied upon the kind assistance of Acharya Boon Ketutassa and Dr. Supadr Panyadeep, professors of Buddhism at Mahidol University.) Many of the *saksit* elements of Thai religion originate, like the word itself, from India, but some parts do not, originating instead from indigenous and Chinese traditions. Chap. 2 of *Everyday Life in Thailand* (Bangkok: 1979) by Niels Mulder provides an introduction, though a scornful one, to the phenomenology and cultus of "the *saksit*" as it is found in the larger towns of Thailand.

10. Most of this information about *saksit* phenomena was provided by Acharya Ratree Maruktat, lecturer in Thai history at Mahidol (and since, sadly, deceased), who interviewed numerous people in Bangkok and the central provinces in connection with a research project studying religious attitudes. Walapa Wongchalard, an officer then of the Ministry of Education, also lent valuable assistance throughout my discussion of Thai culture in this part of the essay.

of my students, however, do not believe that *saksit* objects and people actually have the powers reputed to them, and my students generally consider *saksit* power to be "supernatural" and the belief in its reality to be superstitious and irrational.[11] Yet a few of my students did seek help from *saksit* power. One of them, for example, sought the help of the Erawan Brahma in passing my exam, offering him in return three dozen boiled eggs (and then performed unexpectedly well on the exam). Some of the students from my third year of teaching brought to class an array of amulets, some very expensive, when they sat for a difficult English exam. Nevertheless, most of my students continue to adhere basically to the worldview of orthodox Western science, and even those who seek help from *saksit* power express doubts about its reality.

I was already acquainted with the word *saksit* when I learned that my students were applying it to Torah and Sabbath as a translation of the English adjective "holy." My reaction was immediately to reject this translation and to draw a sharp line between Judaism and all *saksit* things. I did this thinking the question merited little reflection, and feeling certain that *kedushah* (the Hebrew word for "holiness") had no primary connection with power. But there was another reason for my reaction, a reason which I recognized only much later. I can see now that I felt a definite distaste for *saksit* objects and practices (yet distaste mixed with fascination), and I simply did not want my own religion placed in the same category. Occasionally, over the semester, I did point to certain parallels between the Brahmanical gods and the god of Judaism, but I took pains also to distinguish the Jewish experience of God and to argue that there was more to this god than the enormous power that students saw foremost in him; and Parichart, in her words recorded in the second part of this article, drew the kinds of distinctions that I had hoped the students would draw (even though most did not). Furthermore, I did not want the students dismissing Judaism in the way they dismissed the cults of *saksit* power for being eerie and "supernatural." If they were going to relate Judaism to phenomena in their own environment, as seemed inevitable, I preferred that they compare Judaism first with the disciplines and moral teachings of Buddhism.

In such a way, personal feelings affect translation. I shall say more about this later, but want first to explore further the relationship between *kedushah* and the *saksit*. What do I reply to the next Thai student who asks me, "Is holy like *saksit*"? The question is difficult to answer not only because I must understand what the word *saksit* means to the student, but also because *kadosh* (holy) itself has varying meanings and references that defy any simple generalization.

Since *saksit* refers foremost to wondrous power, I must first ask what connection *kedushah* bears to power -- and power not so much in the broad sense underlying G. van der Leeuw's conception of religion according to which everything religious is "man seeking power in life,"[12] but power in the specific sense of "wondrous

11. At least several students consider *saksit* practices to be "unbuddhist." Parichart, who spoke pejoratively of "the gods revered in Thailand," also wrote the following remarks: "Doctrinal Buddhism does not teach people to supplicate saksit powers. Since . . . people receive reward and punishment from their own actions, it is not necessary to supplicate spirits. Buddhists should keep the true treasures as their refuge -- the Buddha, the Truth, and the Brotherhood of Noble Ones, which offer release from all suffering and give real peace and happiness." This is a clear expression of the Buddhist reformation initiated in the nineteenth century. Cf. the monk cited in Tambiah (1976), 428: "No external power can deliver a man."

12. *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York, 1963), II, 681.

works." In the traditional Jewish prayerbook, to which I limit my discussion here, *kedushah* clearly has no primary reference to power (which has its own term, *gevurah*). The *kedushah* of God, in accord with the word's cultic context, refers foremost to God's being utterly apart from and beyond the ordinary things of life (in the sense of Otto's term, "wholly Other"), as in Ex. 15:11, Isa. 6:3, and the Kaddish prayer, all of these appearing prominently in the prayerbook. Holiness is also a positive ascription, speaking not merely of transcendence but of transcendent worth totally beyond all human ability to praise, as we find particularly in the Kaddish and the Kedushah, and in the Titbarakh and Atah Kadosh, which tell of angels, themselves holy and pure, declaring the higher holiness of God.[13]

Nevertheless, *kedushah*, though not itself power, is often connected or associated with power in important ways -- *kedushah* being perhaps revealed or manifested, or perhaps upheld, through God's power. The Mikhamokha prayer, which is Ex. 15:11, connects God's holiness with his wondrous acts of redemption, *oseh feleh* (performing wonders) -- both in redeeming Israel from Egypt and, by association with the Ezrat Avoteinu that precedes it, in daily acts of raising the lowly, freeing the captive, and helping the poor. These redemptive acts manifest a high and glorious power, and elicit from the congregation awe and praise: "Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praiseworthy deeds, performing wonders?" Indeed, numerous prayers connect God's holiness with his majesty, glory, and greatness;[14] whatever else these words mean, they suggest also a kingly, awesome power.

On the other hand, perhaps as often in the prayerbook, holiness is associated with the commandments of the Torah, particularly the Sabbath, through which both Israel and God are sanctified. God sanctifies Israel by giving them holy commandments to fulfill; Israel sanctifies God by declaring his holiness and obeying his commandments.[15] The holiness of Sabbath, Torah, and Israel seems to have no direct association with any immediate practical power, and primarily suggests being connected with or dedicated to God, holiness therein assuming qualities of purity, righteousness, and being set apart.[16] Yet power is still involved in the holiness of the commandments, since the

13. Titbarakh, p. 73, and Atah Kadosh, end of the Kedushah, 85 and 201, *Hasiddur Hashalem*, trans. Philip Birnbaum (New York: 1949).

14. Kaddish; Yishtabah, 69; El Barukh, 71; Et Shem Ha'el, 74; Ahavah Rabbah, 75; Kedushah, 85; Elohai Nesor, 95; the Targum paraphrase of Isa. 6:3: "holy upon earth: his work of might," 131. In the Bible God's holiness is often associated with awesome power, as in Ps. 77:13-14, 99:3, 111:9; or, as in Ex. 19:12-24, Num. 4:15-20, and 1 Sam. 6:19, with power to punish those who violate the holiness of objects and places dedicated to him. Even though holiness clearly extends to righteous actions outside the cult, there is often a connection with God's power to punish the violators and redeem the upholders of his holiness: Lev. 19:14 and 32, Ps. 24:3-5, Isa. 5:15-16, and Amos 2:6-7.

15. *Atah Kidashta*, 267; Num. 15:40, p. 77; Magen Avot (MA), 273-75; Kiddushim for Sabbath and Festivals; Havdalah; and the frequent phrase, *asher kidshanu b'misvotav*, "who sanctified us by his commandments."

16. I once set off a surprisingly lively debate among my students by writing the words "holy life" on the chalkboard (in association with Ex. 19:5-6, mentioning "a holy people," *goi kadosh*) and asking the students to translate into Thai. The point at issue was whether the word *saksit* properly translated "holy" in this context, and the obvious problem was that a holy life does not imply the possession of wondrous powers, while it does mean a life lived in obedience to God, who Himself exerts wondrous power. The debate continued even during lunch after the class ended.

congregation may hope, as in a prayer from the Tahanun, that by leading a holy life they may arouse God's mercy, out of which he may protect and finally redeem the congregation.[17] Inquiring into the human response to God's holiness, we discover several kinds: awe or reverence (*yir'ah*), praise, joy, blessings, and sanctification of God.[18]

In rabbinic literature, as shown in the studies of Solomon Schechter and George F. Moore, *kedushah* refers particularly to separateness from all that is impure, wicked, and profane. *Kiddush Ha-Shem*, sanctifying God's name, is a rabbinic phrase denoting human actions that bear witness to God's holiness with exceptional devotion, as in extraordinary deeds of charity and in martyrdom for the sake of the holy commandments; no power is involved. But in two tannaitic midrashim cited by Moore (II 102-103), the Sifre Deuteronomy and the Mekhilta, God (in the words of the former) "works miracles and does mighty works for the purpose of hallowing his holy name in the world"; God's holiness, according to this, is demonstrated through the manifestation of his extraordinary power.[19]

The word *saksit*, however, refers foremost to power. But since people feel "awe" toward *saksit* beings (*yamkreng* and *khaoropyamkreng*, words not used with non-*saksit* Buddhist phenomena), the word *saksit* carries with it the connotation of this special conduct setting the *saksit* apart from the rest of life. It is in this connotation of *saksit*, and in the power surrounding God's *kedushah*, holiness, that the two words intersect. Moreover, the power exerted by *saksit* beings can be called "redemptive," since it aids and protects devotees; and, with the higher of the *saksit* beings, it is often a moral power -- so that *saksit* shares these associations, too, with *kadosh*, "holy."

Most devotees of *saksit* beings, however, do not see them as being utterly apart from the profane, or of highest worth; highest worth, together with goodness and purity, and perhaps also a sense of "otherness," are located far more in Buddhist institutions oriented primarily toward Dhamma than in institutions, both within and without the temples, centering primarily on *saksit* beings --

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17. For example, in Shomer Goi Kadosh, of the Tahanun, p. 105, the congregation asks God to preserve them so that they may continue to sanctify Him: "Guardian of a holy people . . . let not a holy people perish, who sanctify you with the threefold sanctification." But also in the Tahanun, the congregation acknowledges that they are unworthy of redemption and so must plead for God's mercy: their holiness alone will not secure redemption. Sabbath, Torah, and Israel are related to power also in another way, one clearly related to the meaning of *saksit*: they point to three central acts in sacred history, the creation, revelation, and redemption, all of which involve manifestations of divine power.

18. Awe: Ex. 15:11; Third Benediction of New Year's Amidah; Et Shem Ha'el, in weekday Shahrit, p. 73. Praise: Kaddish; Kedushah; Ps. 99:9, p. 53; Hakol Yedokha, Shahrit Shabbat, 338; Le'el Asher Shabbat (LAS), 339-41. Joy: intro. to Mikhahmokha; MA. Blessings and sanctification: Kaddish; Kedushah; Vetiggaleh, 121; Ps. 145:21, p. 59; LAS. The object of these responses, however, is not exclusively holiness, since holiness is not usually separated distinctly from other characteristics of God.

19. Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York, 1909), 199-218. George F. Moore, *Judaism* (New York, 1927), I 61, 461; II 101-111. For comparison with *saksit* monks in Thailand, I should like to draw attention also to the many rabbis and holy men to whom rabbinic literature attributed extraordinary powers -- such asH oni Ha-Me`aggel, whose prayers brought rain,H anina b. Dosa, whose prayers cured illness (Moore, II 235-6), R. Shim`on b. Yohai, who could kill men just by casting his eyes on them (b. Shabb. 34a, Midr. Kohelet on Ecc. 8:1), and the wonder-working Babylonian rabbis mentioned by Neusner in *History of the Jews of Babylonia* (Leiden, 1965-70), esp. IV 353-62. Whether the powers exhibited by these men is related to any holiness attributed to them, however, remains to be investigated.

although for most Thai the division between the two orientations does not seem to be so sharp as my students believe it to be.

This difference in Thai attitudes toward *saksit* and non-*saksit* Buddhist objects is an important issue for the comparison of the terms *saksit* and *kadosh*, but it was a difficult question to investigate. It was the problem for me of determining what a foreign culture reveres most highly. The persons I questioned, my "informants" if you will, at the university and also outside it, were certain that most "people" feel differently toward the two realms, but this difference was hard to put into words. My informants all agreed that the Buddha and Sangha are "higher" than *saksit* beings, but higher in what way? Acharya Ratree Maruktat, whose account is fairly representative of what others told me, phrased the difference in this manner: the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are *sasana* (in this context: teaching, truth, religion) whereas the Brahma is not *sasana*. People respect the Erawan Brahma, she explained, only in relation to receiving his help, and because he is powerful and may punish disrespect; in contrast, people respect Lord Buddha "sincerely (*cingcai*), without respecting anything" in return, "because he is Lord Buddha."[20] Everyone must go to the temples to make merit; and one is "not a good Thai, not a good person," if one does not *wai* a Buddha-image. But whether to *wai* the Brahma or go to him for help is a matter of individual and practical decision. Another acquaintance asserted that the Buddha is "high and pure," but *saksit* beings are useful or dangerous, and most people have little feeling about them. Niels Mulder, a sociologist who spent three years interviewing people in the city of Chiengmai, generally agrees with these observations.[21] All this leads me to think that the term *saksit*, though it connotes awe due to wondrous power, misses important aspects of the Hebrew term *kedushah*, and that some of those other aspects are to be found in expressions of reverence for the Buddha and Buddhist institutions.

What I have discovered, in brief, is this -- that while there is no single word or phrase related to non-*saksit* Buddhist institutions that captures those aspects of *kedushah* missed by the word *saksit* (how could there be when the cultures are so different?), there nevertheless exist complex clusters of words, symbols, and gestures that express reverence toward Buddhist symbols and institutions, as well as toward gods and royalty, and, though certainly not "equivalent" to *kedushah*, serve some of the functions of sanctification, the recognition and distinction of the sacred. I am thus asserting that these expressions of reverence point to a realm in Thai life that in certain contexts could properly reflect the term "sacred" as broadly used by Mircea Eliade in his essays of comparative religion. Yet, though reverence is indeed one of the several responses to "holiness" found in the Jewish prayerbook, I am not implying that what is revered in Thailand is "equivalent" to the "holiness" described in the prayerbook.

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20. I add that many Thai do consider Lord Buddha to be *saksit*, having power to help them, and that they pray (*bon ban*) to him for direct practical help. The question is whether they would continue to revere him even if they did not want his help.

21. Mulder concluded, with a certain disdain, that attitudes of devotion and piety are generally absent in relation to *saksit* power "because relationships are mechanical and thus superficial" (*Everyday Life in Thailand* 34-35). I myself, however, cannot help feeling that the people whom I see making a *wai* as they pass an image or spirit-house, or praying (in the way of *bon ban*) to *saksit* beings at temples and especially hospitals, express a serious and sincere reverence for the god or spirit. The relationship does not seem "mechanical" although I cannot judge its "depth," a difficult quality to define.

Among these expressions of reverence, there is, to begin with, a series of words that all indicate acts and feelings of reverence, each word varying, however, in intensity of feeling, associated images, and the objects revered. Here are a few of the most important such words: *khaorop*, to regard highly, revere; *bucha* (*puja* in Pali), to show reverence outwardly through offerings such as flowers; *khaoropbucha*, a compound word applying to many persons as its object -- Lord Buddha, the king, parents -- but not usually to *saksit* objects; *thun*, *thert*, and *thertthun*, to put someone above oneself, look up to, hold in high esteem, applied generally to living persons; *sakkara*, to worship, make a pilgrimage to, pay homage to by offering incense and flowers -- used only with religious objects and places, including *saksit* objects; *khaoropsakkara* and *sakkarabucha*, to worship and revere, used especially with Buddha-images and relics as the object, but also with the higher gods; and *khaoroptherthunbucha*, part of the royal vocabulary, used only in reference to royalty. *Wai* and *krab* are two specific gestures for showing respect, and as words have the meaning, "to respect" and "revere." In relation to *saksit* beings, the most frequent words are *naptheu*, meaning "to respect" or "believe in" (which applies also to a great many other objects, including *sasana*, a particular religion), and *krabwaibucha*, referring particularly to the specific actions of expressing respect for *saksit* beings; both *naptheu* and *krabwaibucha* are weaker than *khaorop*. With all these words, the prefix *na* may be added to indicate that someone is "worthy of" worship, reverence, and so forth. This group of words ascribes great worth to its objects and tends to set them apart from ordinary things in life, especially since most of the words are Pali or Sanskrit, although the division between the revered and the ordinary seems a rather gradual one.

Next, there is a series of words which, when placed before the names of people and objects, indicate great respect, importance, or distinction. A few of these words (in their Thai and not Pali form) are *phra*, *phraracha*, *phracao*, *somdet*, and *si* (*sri*). The prefix *phra*, for example, is placed before the names of Buddhism's Triple Gem (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha): *Phraphuttacao* ("Reverend" or "Excellent" Lord Buddha), *Phratham*, and *Phrasong*. *Phra*, from the Pali word *vara*, is associated in particular with monks, royalty, gods, and objects of veneration, as in *Phra*, a monk (*bhikkhu*), *Phraboromthat*, a relic of the Buddha, *Phrabiyamharat*, "Reverend Beloved Great King," an appellation of King Rama V, and *Phraphumcaothi*, a guardian spirit-lord of a locale. The word *phra* always indicates great worth and radical distinction from the ordinary, creating a boundary between its object and the rest of the world.

Finally, the Thai language also contains a set of Pali and Sanskrit words which are used in place of key words in ordinary language when speaking of or addressing monks, and also a further order of Pali and Sanskrit words, even higher, for speaking of Lord Buddha, Thai royalty, and the highest gods. These separate orders of vocabulary likewise set their objects apart from ordinary life, treating them thereby as a distinct order of existence meriting great reverence.

Thus, it is in this direction, of the complex forms by which Thai language expresses reverence for Buddhist institutions, royalty, and the highest gods, that I would seek language which points to some of the meanings of *kadosh* missed by *saksit* and which serves some of the functions of sanctification.

I must nevertheless note that this comparison is limited solely to the relationship between the *kadosh* of the Jewish

prayerbook and the *saksit* of popular Thai culture, a question arising out of a practical question in teaching. My comparison therefore does not deal with corresponding levels of religious expression in the two cultures: I did not compare the Jewish prayerbook with Thai classical literature, religious treatises, or mantras and prayers, which might convey a more serious attitude toward the gods; nor did I compare Thai popular religiosity with the popular religiosity of Jewish cultures of the past, which might exhibit a sense of *kedushah* different from the prayerbook's and would be found to involve demons, dark forces of evil, powerful Masters of the Good Name, and spirits and angels, all of which are related to holiness in one way or another.

If a Thai student were again to ask whether *kadosh* is like *saksit* and I were to reply, "Yes, in some ways," and then suggest that she or he also consider certain ways by which the Thai language expresses reverence for objects that are not *saksit* -- I would do so not because I advocate cross-cultural "translation" as such; it distorts the religion being translated, wrenching things out of their context. I nevertheless think there is a usefulness in cross-cultural comparisons at certain points in one's study -- to suggest by broad analogy the general direction of a foreign expression, to discover one's own involvement at home in many of the forms and feelings one sees abroad, and to integrate into one's own life the knowledge one gains in studying others. I, as one example, was forced to try to integrate the word *saksit*, with all its uncompliant foreignness, into my understanding of *kedushah*. I think that this is part of what understanding means: it joins the foreign with what is nearest at hand.

The reality of the differences, however, was what impressed me most in my groping inquiry into the Thai language. I discovered anew how wilful and refractive a language can be in speaking of experiences outside its realm of cultural history, and how subtle, varied, eloquent, and richly allusioned it can be in speaking of its own culture. Every word has its particular cultural reference: *saksit* referring to local gods and spirits, *sakkarabucha* to the offering of flowers before an image, and the elevated royal vocabulary to the king, Lord Buddha, and the gods (thus classed together). Clearly, the *kadosh*, the "holy," of the Jewish prayerbook, with its own specific context and allusions, often opposed to those of the Thai expressions, cannot mean what any of those expressions mean. As I was teaching my courses on Judaism, my students were mentally translating every word I spoke into Thai with all its specific cultural references; and this no doubt reinforced their tendency to assimilate Judaism into Kamma-oriented Buddhism and institutions of *saksit* powers, as appears in their writings and conversations earlier recorded.

Yet, though these differences are real, both the Buddhist and the Judaic traditions claim a validity that crosses cultural boundaries. What the Buddha taught is meant to apply to all human beings, of any society, any language; and the God of the Jewish prayerbook, though revealing himself first to Israel, rules over and sustains all his creation and may be served and sanctified everywhere, by all peoples. This implies that what is revered now in only one culture is intended to be known and understood by all; and this in turn justifies the attempt to penetrate into the in-turned forms of a foreign religion in the hope of reaching insights which extend beyond that culture and into our own and open a space even in the familiar predisposing words of our language.

I have asked myself why I first dismissed the possibility of a connection between *kedushah* and power; and part of the answer apparently lies in my own reluctance to attribute any real power to God. I likewise discount the claims made for the miraculous powers of *saksit* beings. Hence, in these respects, my own worldview turns out to bear resemblance to that of my students. I was trying, moreover, to present fairly a religious tradition that my students viewed as being a rather blind faith in "the supernatural"; yet I myself, though rejecting the students' definition of faith, personally doubted Judaism's traditional sources of knowledge. I, a hesitantly secular Jew, was speaking about traditional Judaism, and speaking to people who had rejected the traditional cosmology of their own religion in exchange for a Western scientific cosmology. The differences, therefore, were not only those between Jewish and Thai cultures, Jewish and Buddhist religions, but also between religious and secular standpoints, traditional and science-oriented cosmologies.

From the particular problem of speaking about "holiness" with Thai students, I should like now to discuss more generally my role of interpreting Judaism in Thailand.

I thought that in order to say something useful about Judaism, I would have to learn about the values and thinking of my students, as well as gain at least a little knowledge about Thailand and Pali Buddhism. I therefore read books and did a lot of listening to my students. I asked them about their religion and asked them to draw comparisons with the subjects we were studying. Looking for their reactions as I spoke or we studied a text, I began to notice which subjects aroused nods of agreement and which turned them politely silent; and I began to recognize recurrent phrases, words, and ideas.

Not surprisingly, I noticed that those elements of Judaism that elicited the nods of agreement were the ones that seemed outwardly to resemble Buddhist doctrines (such as Kamma, *anicca*, *karuna*) and to concur with Western science. The students were drawn also to texts dealing with the inner life, practical wisdom, and ethics, and to anything evidencing universal concerns and tolerance for other religions. My students preferred to look at Judaism as a series of concepts and techniques, which is basically the way Buddhism was presented to them -- as a philosophy of life with arguments for its usefulness. In the eyes of my students, concepts were a higher form of religion than symbols, myths, and rituals, which seemed materialistic and coarse by comparison. Thus, my particular method of presenting Judaism -- as history experienced and interpreted, as a fundamental symbol-structure revealed most fully in liturgy and ritual -- probably reinforced the students' impression of a Judaism that was magical, tradition-bound, and not open to reason. When I told the creation-story in Genesis, two of my students made jokes about what they saw as its curious illogic. The Yoser prayer from Jewish liturgy elicited further amusement. The relevant sentences from the prayer declare, "In mercy You give light to the world and to those who dwell on it; in Your goodness You renew the work of creation every day, continuously." Hearing this, a student in my first class said, "Poor God! He must be tired. He has to create day and create night all the time!" The same prayer drew open scorn from a student in a later class, who said, with unusual candor, "This is absurd. How can God create the world every day? Everyone knows that the world follows laws of nature. The world is impermanent. It always

changes." (To which I replied, "This is why God must sustain the world at all times"; and a student also defended the prayer. I must add that my students would never show disrespect toward people praying, and were simply expressing their first reactions, knowing I wanted them to speak candidly.) Had I omitted the Yoser prayer from the course, I think my students would have missed something essential to their understanding. If they study it, however, how does one deal with the great gap between the world of the prayer and that of the students?

As I look back at the lectures I gave during the first semester of my teaching, I notice a shift in the way I interpreted Judaism. While arguing for the validity of symbolic expression and historical particularity, my interpretations nevertheless became gradually more conceptual. I introduced naturalistic, abstract statements from Maimonides, and broad structural reformulations from the Kabbalah -- which I clearly labeled as interpretations. For example, after first presenting Jewish eschatology in the form of future history told through traditional language, during which the students waited patiently for the end, I then added the Lurianic reformulation in terms of the fragmentation and reunification of existence; and then I saw heads nodding with "understanding" and perhaps also with relief at having discovered a meaning to this peculiar account of human destiny. With this kind of encouragement from my audience, I continued to interpret allegorically and conceptually, and give greater attention to the aspects of Judaism that attracted the students. Thus, the image of Judaism that gradually emerged was a rather rationalistic, abstract, and universal one, playing down the miraculous and particularistic, and playing up the ethical. In short, the Judaism of my interpretations (though not the texts I used) verged toward early twentieth-century Reform Judaism, which indeed shared important values with the "Reform Buddhist worldview" of my students.

In the second semester, in the course on Comparative Topics, I attempted a more fundamental and direct interpretation of Judaism, seeking to present it through categories that made more sense to the students while trying also to ground it in classical and traditional texts. I analyzed the biblical and rabbinic images of human nature (just as Buddhist teachers begin with the problems of human nature), and then proposed that Torah (as *halakhah*, a system of ritual law) and prayer comprised a path of salvation comparable to, though obviously not the same as, the Buddhist path of discipline, purification, and insight. The Jewish path, I further suggested, leads its followers toward the right relationship with God and society, an ontological and social/moral "fulfillment. This experiment produced a possibly more meaningful picture of Judaism, but one which resulted in the removal from life, again, of the power and redemptive action of God.[22]

Many of my reactions to my situation teaching in Thailand were personal and idiosyncratic; I mention them nevertheless in hope that they may bear some allegorization or application for others (or at least serve as texts to someone's sermon). I began sometimes to think of my teaching as a battle with the students, a struggle for power -- and after all, interpretation and understanding do involve power: whose interpretation prevails and what are the practical consequences? What does an interpretation do to the

22. The "path-model" of Judaism left neither room nor role for the independent action of God breaking in upon life to call and to redeem, even before a person has taken the first step upon the path. *Halakhah*, as its etymology suggests, is in a certain sense a path -- but it is a path in response to God, not in search of God, as an analogy with the Buddhist Eightfold Path might imply.

subject interpreted? What happens to that subject when it becomes part of someone's "knowledge," someone's "comparison of religions"? I also felt isolated during my first year: nearly all my acquaintances were Thai, and the most important people in my life were my students. The Thai were the majority; I was trying to discover ways of living among them and participating in their life while meeting my own needs. My Californian habits appeared to them, and made me feel by comparison, coarse and self-centered. My friends were proud of their culture and wanted me to enjoy it too. In addition, I was the first Jew whom most of my friends and students had met; as I saw my behavior becoming the basis for general judgments about Jews, I felt compelled reluctantly to behave with those judgments in mind.

Then, with my students, I had the impression of everything they heard or read about Judaism being fitted into their own pre-given words, perceptions, values, and thoughts, so that Judaism was blunted and neutralized -- was assimilated to Buddhist concepts and Thai cultural forms, relegated to Brahman "superstition," or explained away by categories such as faith, the supernatural, or family loyalty. The students seemed to me to feel unbudgeably certain of what Judaism meant, and I felt equally certain that Judaism was something different. I kept looking for ways to push past what seemed like deflective barriers, so that this alien religion could enter and be known, make sense, be respected for itself. (Was I confusing the religion with my self?) While I felt frustrated at meeting repeatedly with locked gates, I continued nevertheless to be drawn to the company of such gentle, charming, and good-humored gate-keepers. To a certain extent, I felt the inferior one in the relationship with my students: it was I who had to explain to them, and it was their response that was important. On the other hand, I seemed myself to be acting like the superior, thinking I was the one who "understood" Judaism, and they the ones who must work to understand and interpret; their mistakes confirmed me in my higher position. I owned the system, empowered by the knowledge at my disposal and my Western academic values to referee the students' attempts to penetrate its maze. And had I myself, with all my reading and listening, and my own analyzing and sorting out, ever penetrated very far into the religion of my students or of their greatest teachers?

I should like now to conclude with a few reflections about the endeavor in general of trying to understand the religions of others. Specifically, my reflections deal with the one region or moment of understanding that I noticed most while in Thailand -- the stage in which we tend to perceive the foreign through forms familiar to us in our own experience, probably a universal and necessary first response to the foreign. Seen from this perspective, looking across cultures, a basic problematic or dialectic arises in I think all attempts to "understand" the other. I hope that my comments may carry some relevance to other students of religion, even though they define the manner and goals of understanding differently than I do. Understanding, one of the most fundamental categories in the study of religions as well as in religious life itself, has been the subject of much discussion and many definitions -- although in any form, it will always remain something of a mystery, like revelation and enlightenment. Here I want only to speak casually about what impressed me in this one practical situation in which a group of Thai students attempted to "understand" Judaism.

Many of my students, as they readily told me, were never able to imagine the existence and action of god in the form

described by the traditional Jewish prayerbook. Mrs. Nanta, for example, told me that she could understand Judaism only through her own ideas as a Buddhist and a Thai. Thus, as the reader may recall, she thought that the experience of God must resemble her own experience of Kamma. Likewise, when she studied the election of Israel and the yearning of Jews for Zion, she thought that God was also the name that Jews give to their feelings of love for family, people, and homeland; and she meant to imply not the slightest disapproval by this. Other students saw God as an infinitely magnified *thewada*, as a consciousness of the laws of goodness and reality that are Dhamma, as astrological fate, a social construct for enforcing order, Kamma, and so forth.

Judaism as a whole was in this way sorted into the concepts of Kamma, merit, purification, taking refuge, showing reverence, and precepts; or it was relegated to the realm of the *saksit*, or explained away as "faith" and "superstition." I spoke earlier of my impression that the students were taking everything they learned about Judaism and remolding it into what they already knew or felt, or were fitting it into their previously-held explanation of the world. (I am exaggerating somewhat and omitting individual differences among the students, and I also mean no criticism by my observations. I myself was involved as co-conspirator. Rather, I see their reactions as an allegory for what most of us do when first confronted with the foreign.) I do not claim that these translations of Jewish into Thai forms are entirely devoid of insight; some of the comparisons, as with *saksit* forms and with Kamma, merit further examination. But I do question whether such translations deserve to be called "understanding," because at the very least, understanding of a foreign religion must be understanding of something "out there," outside the student's own cultural and personal world, outside what the student knew before she or he tried to understand. I am reminded of the way that Buddhist terminology was first translated into Chinese: *Dharma* became the *Tao*, *Nirvana* became *wu-wei* (non-action), and *sila* (precepts) became *hsiao-hsun* (filial submission).[23] The foreign had thereby lost much of its distinction from the familiar.

Yet on the other hand, it seems to me, understanding must also be personal in some way. The foreign religion must "make sense," reveal meaning, to the student in her or his world, even as the student disagrees with that meaning. I do not know how anyone studying a foreign religion could construct a new mind purified of all associations, experiences, categories, and language of the culture in which she or he lives; and even if it were possible, I see no value in any such self-enclosed, vacuumized perception of a foreign religion -- and especially religion. It leads nowhere. It is cut off from life. That is why understanding must, I think, imply interpretation, connections between "them" and "us," between persons, cultures, histories, and languages.

This, then, is the problematic or dialectic inherent in understanding. Understanding cannot consist in a religion's mere translation into the pre-given forms of another religion and culture (and its sciences and methodologies), canceling out all distinctions; but understanding also cannot consist in an objectivistic repetition unchanged of what the religion already does in its own foreign language and culture. Or, applied to my situation: if students translate the Jewish experience of chosenness into ancestor worship, or God into astrological fate -- they have not understood

23. Ben-Ami Sharfstein et. al., *Philosophy East/Philosophy West* (New York, 1978), 43-44.

(or have not done so sufficiently); and if they merely repeat what the prayerbook says, unable to use their own words or connect the subject somehow to their own lives -- they still have not understood. Either extreme implies a relationship of the form of Buber's "I-It," with "It" being either a reflection of myself and hence not a relationship with other people, or "It" being a blank object, hanging "out there," meaningless to me. The goal of understanding, therefore, is not so much one of finding a middle ground between two extremes, as it is of bringing together two necessary but opposing movements of thought to create a living relationship with the other that leaves the other both distinct from myself and yet alive to myself.

One of my students who seems to have achieved such a relationship with the Yoser prayer was Twan. In a note written to me about the role of nature in revealing god, he connected the prayer with an experience he had had several years earlier while he was an exchange-student in California.

> The Prayer that begins with a celebration of God as the creator shows obviously how nature or laws of nature become an indicator for the Jewish people to think of the greatness of God as the creator of all things. The beauty of nature in our world, as once when I was in Yosemite National Park, stimulated me to think about the greatness of the creator even though in my religion there is no God.

Yes, Twan's experience was mostly aesthetic, and the prayer speaks not of nature's beauty but of its orderliness and the divine love and wisdom it shows. And yes, Buddhadasa taught his students, Twan among them, that the God of the Christians is to be identified with nature or the laws of nature. Such interpretations do indeed alter the prayer while opening it to Twan's life; yet a part of the essential "foreignness" of the prayer nevertheless remains: "even though in my religion there is no God," nor creation, nor perhaps "beauty of nature in our world."

Apparently, as Michael Novak suggests, and other scholars before him, we, as students trying to understand a foreign religion, must undergo something of a conversion ourselves.[24] Before this, the religion has no meaning for us: living as we do in a foreign culture, we lack the experience needed to understand the religion in its given form, and no analogy can fill the gap. Moreover, our habits of thought deflect or cancel out anything important that foreign people might be saying to us. Hence, for an understanding to occur, there must be change. We as students must actively seek meaning in the religion, partly by allowing our experiences to be given foreign meanings, by separating ourselves a little from the explanations and cultural forms that block out the foreign. The "conversion" consists in this change whereby we somehow make room for the other, turning toward the other, allowing our experiences to be restructured, at least provisionally. But in this, too, an opposing consideration arises: our new perceptions must at the same time remain grounded in what we consider real and important, retaining a connection with our life in our own immediate world.

Related oppositions in the endeavor to understand arise from the nature of Judaism itself -- and of every other religion that claims universal validity. Judaism is, on the one hand, a specific historical phenomenon rooted in its own culture and language. (This is not to

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24. *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove* (New York, 1978). "Religious studies are before all else a conversion in one's experience of life" (p. 12). See also p. 24.

say that Jewish culture has not itself interacted with other cultures and undergone historical changes.) *Kadosh* has no precise equivalent in the Thai language. On the other hand, as I have already suggested, Judaism makes universal claims that crosses cultural boundaries. The truths declared and righteousness demanded by the Torah are meant to apply as fully in Thailand as anywhere else. Hence, Judaism, while approaching the world through the particular history and experience of one people, is intended to be interpretable everywhere. Perhaps, therefore, understanding should be conceived not as a tension of opposites, but as a drawing out of the particular into the universal (that is, all other particulars). From this viewpoint, interpretation does not oppose the particular uniqueness of Judaism so much as draw out the consequences for other people which are inherent in it.

Midrash is the characteristic manner in which Jews have drawn out the consequences of Scripture for later periods and changed cultural settings. Deriving from methods of reasoning proper to the application of law, midrash occurs in many cases as an analogy discovered between a specific form of expression in Scripture and a specific situation or cultural phenomenon outside of Scripture. Midrash has always been used within the boundaries of Jewish life; however, since it works on the principle that the particularity of Scriptural expression has universal application, midrash could perhaps serve as a precedent or model, or suggest a structure, for drawing out the implications of Jewish tradition, in all its particularity, for the lives of other people in all of their cultural particularity. The midrash of my students, though based on as-yet-little knowledge of Jewish tradition, shows that people of a totally foreign culture and religion can discover meaning in Jewish Scripture. (It shows also, of course, how easily words can be emptied of their contextual meanings -- but rabbinic midrash does this, too, and with great zest.) The midrash of my students points to the possibility of a more knowledgeable interpretation that might preserve the particularity of the tradition while achieving personal relevance for people outside the tradition.

We may not feel happy with what other people understand about "our" religion. Especially in my first year in Thailand, I taught with the aim in mind of promoting a sympathetic understanding of Judaism, "from within" -- which meant an understanding that reproduced that of the ideal Jew I imagined from the prayerbook. But if my students' understanding was to be personal, it might also be unsympathetic at times. Has not a student understood something about Judaism when she or he sees in it a faith in the unknowable, a similarity to the realm of the *saksit* in popular Thai religion, or ethnocentrism expressed as chosenness? I myself have reason to disagree with these interpretations, but I cannot deny that they derive from real knowledge seen from a viewpoint different from my own. As Professor Kees Bolle pointed out to me, distaste for certain religious forms may lead to insight into aspects of them which their proponents do not see.

There are thus degrees and kinds of understanding. Yet, though this makes another's understanding more difficult to judge, it does not invalidate my argument that trans-cultural understanding must preserve the subject's foreignness while achieving a relevance for the person or society seeking to understand.