Buddhist-Christian Dialogue and Action in the Theravada Countries of Modern Asia:

A Comparative Analysis of the Radical Orthopraxis of Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa and Aloysius Pieris

By

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PhD Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis constructs a creative Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action, appropriate to the Theravada countries of Asia in the era of globalization. In the face of problems and challenges never experienced before, it asks how Buddhism and Christianity can act as a source of hope to the people who suffer from socio-economic injustice, religio-political conflicts, and environmental crises. It argues that an answer is found in the dialogue between two models of radical orthopraxis: Bhikkhu Buddhadasa’s Dhammic essentialist praxis for human liberation and Aloysius Pieris’ dialogical integrationist action for justice and peace. Through a comprehensive study of each model, this thesis shows how each thinker develops a liberative spirituality of socio-spiritual transformation by radically returning to the originating sources of their respective religious traditions; and how they engage with the root problems of modern Thailand and Sri Lanka respectively, from their liberative thought and praxis. It is argued that Buddhadasa’s Dhammic essentialism and Pieris’ dialogical integrationism are not contradictory, but enhance each other as counter-point movements, in their common vision and struggle to build a more just, peaceful and humanistic community. Through a comparative analysis of both models, this thesis reveals how Buddhadasa and Pieris pursue their shared spirituality of spiritual detachment and social engagement in their respective grassroots communities, Suan Mokkh and Tulana, providing inspiration for our own Buddhist-Christian radical orthopraxis in the challenging situation of neoliberal globalization. This thesis finally asserts that a more just and sustainable world is being realized by spreading transformative interreligious community movements, engrained in the suffering reality of the poor and the marginalized, through global communication networks.
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## Abbreviations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AJT</td>
<td>Asia Journal of Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AN</td>
<td>Aṅguttara Nikāya (London: PTS, 1885-1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCC</td>
<td>Buddhist Cultural Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPS</td>
<td>Buddhist Publication Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCA</td>
<td>Christian Conference of Asia</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDB</td>
<td>The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Bhikkhu Bodhi)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIIR</td>
<td>Catholic Institute for International Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTC</td>
<td>Commission on Theological Concerns of the CCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CWF</td>
<td>Christian Workers’ Fellowship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CWM</td>
<td>Council for World Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN</td>
<td>Dīgha Nikāya (London: PTS, 1890-1911)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DM</td>
<td>Dialogue and Mission (Statement of the Pontifical Secretariat for Non-Christians)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhp</td>
<td>Dhammapada (London: PTS, 1914)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>Dialogue and Proclamation (Statement of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council on Inter-Religious Dialogue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPBS</td>
<td>Department of Pāli and Buddhist Studies, University of Peradeniya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV</td>
<td>Dei Verbum (The Vatican II Constitution on Divine Revelation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAJT</td>
<td>East Asia Journal of Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAPR</td>
<td>East Asian Pastoral Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAPI</td>
<td>East Asian Pastoral Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EATWOT</td>
<td>Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EISD</td>
<td>Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FABC</td>
<td>Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS</td>
<td>Gaudium et Spes (The Vatican II Constitution on the Church in the Modern Word)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INEB</td>
<td>International Network of Engaged Buddhists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISPCK</td>
<td>Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCBSSL</td>
<td>Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies, Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JHU</td>
<td>Jathika Hela Urumaya (the National Sinhala Heritage Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPGIPBS</td>
<td>Journal of the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JRE</td>
<td>Journal of Religious Ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JVP</td>
<td>Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People’s Liberation Front, Sri Lanka)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDB</td>
<td>The Long Discourses of the Buddha (Walshe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LG</td>
<td>Lumen Gentium (The Vatican II Constitution on the Church)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTTE</td>
<td>Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MN</td>
<td>Majjhima Nikāya (London: PTS, 1976)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEP</td>
<td>Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (People’s United Front)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLDB</td>
<td>The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi)</td>
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| NA           | Nostra Aetate (The Vatican II Declaration on the Relation of the
In this thesis, non-English words, such as Pali, Greek and Thai, are italicized with the exception of proper nouns. In addition, Pali and Thai transcriptions also use diacritics commonly accepted in the Theravada academia: for example, nibbāna, karuṇā, and chit-wāng. However, some Pali words already familiar in English usage are neither italicized nor with diacritics: for example, Pali (not Pāli), Theravada (not Theravāda), Mahayana (not Mahāyāna), and Sangha (not Saṅgha).

Emphasizing marks appear as used in the original quotations. Especially, Pieris uses a wide range of emphases in his writings: italics, bold, underline, single-double quotation marks, or a combination of them. In order to allow Pieris to speak in his own style, this thesis will keep them as they are in whatever quotes are made from his works.
Introduction
Introduction

One of the most important tasks of theological thought and praxis today is to engage with people of other religions in the journey towards a more human, more just, and more peaceful world. In the face of the enormous challenges and crises of globalization—the division into fast and slow worlds, depending on access to highly developed science and communication technology; the ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor under the global free-market system; the new forms of ideological conflicts, violence and terrorism; and the threatening environmental crises—people from the different religious communities are asking a core question. How can a religious faith with its truth and vision act as a source of hope to the contemporary world—and do this not apart from but in collaboration with people of other religions? This is the central question that this thesis aims to explore through a comparative analysis of two models of what we will call radical orthopraxis: the reformative Buddhist action promoted by Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa and the liberative Catholic dialogical action advocated by Aloysius Pieris.

By using our own neologism ‘radical orthopraxis’, we will show how these two thinkers go back to the root of their respective religious traditions, in search for the inspirational principles to guide their liberating praxis in the Theravada countries of modern Asia; and how they also strive to penetrate into the root problems of their contemporary society, in the light of the praxis-oriented orthodox perspectives of their respective religious traditions. It will be argued that through their radical return to the sources, Buddhadāsa and Pieris have developed their own theory and praxis of human liberation, which shed light on our search for a liberative interreligious spirituality, more concretely, a Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action for the suffering people of South and Southeast Asia in the era of globalization. This thesis will demonstrate how Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialist approach and Pieris’ dialogical integrationist approach complement and enhance each other in spite of
their differences; and how their shared spirituality of the integral human liberation and their common vision of a humanistic community provide hope—a realistic hope for establishing a different world.

Both Buddhadāsa and Pieris have written a great number of articles, published in different journals; the main articles are collected in book form.¹ Their thought and praxis, expressed in these works, has been the subject of a wide range of scholarly research. Earlier comprehensive researches on Buddhadāsa were focused on his new hermeneutic of rationalization, demythologization, and deculturation of the Buddhist doctrines, analyzing its interaction with the Western rationalism as well as its social, religio-cultural, and linguistic significance.² Some scholars have sought to explore the philosophical, doctrinal, and ethical significance of Buddhadāsa’s thought: for example, his inclusive Dhammic universalism is analyzed as logically congruent with the basic principles of Mahayana Buddhism as expounded by Nagarjuna and Asanga.³ However, scholarly interests have mainly moved onto the socio-political significance of Buddhadāsa’s reformist movement in the process of modernization in Thailand. The most enduring research topic is the doctrinal and sociological analyses, showing how Buddhadāsa elaborates on the meaning of the fundamental Buddhist doctrines as a strategy to respond to the needs and challenges of the modern Thai society.⁴ He is often presented as one of the most prominent Buddhist thinkers who

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¹ See Bibliography. This bibliography covers almost all the translations into English of Buddhadāsa’s main articles, though there are many more texts in Thai which do not appear here; all the articles in English written by Pieris are listed in the bibliography.
³ See Suwanna Satha-Anand, Mahayana Philosophy in Buddhadāsa’s Thought, in Thai language (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1992). For the research on Buddhadāsa’s theory of natural law (Dhamma) as a foundation for his ethical thought, see Sallie B. King, ‘From Is to Ought: Natural Law in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Prayudh Payutto’. Journal of Religious Ethics, 30/2 (Summer 2002), 275-93.
effectively promoted the idea of ‘socially engaged Buddhism’ in Thailand. His contribution, as an Engaged Buddhist thinker, to the contemporary global issues of socio-economic injustice, religio-ethnic conflicts, and environmental crises has emerged as one of the most intriguing topics for researchers.

This important topic, however, has not been fully examined in academic research yet; most works on this topic have been intermittently produced in the form of short articles or essays. One of the objects of our thesis is to fill this lacuna: to examine Buddhadasa’s radical orthopraxis and its universal contribution to the world, in a creative and critical dialogue with Aloysius Pieris. There is, in fact, one doctoral thesis similar to our own project: an analysis of Buddhadasa’s Dhammic socialism in dialogue with Liberation Theology. The author argues that Buddhadasa’s political theory, Dhammic socialism, failed to respond to the socio-economic injustice under the global market economy; hence a new version of Dhammic socialism is to be reconstructed, with the help of liberative insights drawn from the Liberation


The term ‘Engaged Buddhism’, coined by Thich Nhat Hanh, refers to a widely spread contemporary Buddhist liberation movement which engages actively, yet non-violently, with the socio-economic, political and ecological problems of society, from the Buddhist perspective. The proponents of this movement such as Ambedkar, Ariyaratne, Maha Ghosananda, Buddhadasa, Sulak Sivaraksa, the Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh share their common vision of a new human society or a new world community in which human freedom, justice, and peace prevail. In the praxis of actualizing their vision and motivation, Engaged Buddhists often collaborate with people of other religions and thought. See Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds, Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996); Christopher S. Queen ed., Engaged Buddhism in the West (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000); Ken Jones, The New Social Face of Buddhism: An Alternative Sociopolitical Perspective (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003); Sallie B. King, Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005); Socially Engaged Buddhism: Dimensions of Asian Spirituality (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009).


Theology of Latin America. Because the author’s main concern lies in a socio-political dialogue, the larger part of the thesis is allotted to a sociological analysis of the unjust structure of the global market economy, from the perspective of Dependency Theory. Neither Buddhadāsa’s thought nor Liberation Theology is comprehensively examined, except for their socio-political theories. Our thesis is different: we will examine not only Dhammic socialism but the whole of Buddhadāsa’s radical thought and praxis systematically. Furthermore, we will also examine Pieris’ radical thought and praxis comprehensively, showing that these two thinkers are the most appropriate dialogical partners for the liberative Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action in the South and Southeast Asian context.

Scholarly research on Pieris is mainly focused on his contribution to the development of the Asian theology of liberation in dialogue with Buddhism. Some scholars have examined the distinctive character of Pieris’ theological insights into the doctrine of divine revelation and the theology of religions, in comparison with other theological positions. Some research topics are concerned with his creative and radical approach to Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology, showing how Pieris has developed his vision of the inculturated, liberative Church of Asia in response to the Sri Lankan (Asian) reality of poverty and religiosity. Many other researchers have sought to analyse the relationship between Pieris’ innovative theological thought and his engagement with Buddhism; they often emphasize that Pieris, through his profound knowledge and experience of Buddhism, has made a significant contribution to the new understanding of Christian mission as an integral

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8 See Ibid., pp. iv, xii, 195-223.
commitment to human liberation, inculturation and interreligious dialogue.\textsuperscript{11}

Although all these scholarly researches present, directly or indirectly, Buddhism as one of the most important sources of creativity in Pieris’ theology, no attempt had been made to examine his Buddhist counterpart directly, until one doctoral thesis proposed a comparative analysis of the two different journeys of Buddhist-Christian dialogue between Thich Nhat Hanh and Aloysius Pieris.\textsuperscript{12} In it, the author strives to show how these two thinkers, through their writings and practices, contribute to a dialogue of the fourfold communion: in life, in action, in the search for truth, and in religious experiences.\textsuperscript{13} There is another doctoral thesis which also examines Nhat Hanh and Pieris comparatively, from the perspective of the Christian search for an appropriate spirituality in the late modern religiously plural society.\textsuperscript{14} Although these two works entail some similar aspects to our own thesis, their basic approaches are different from ours: the former is focused on the specific issue of how Nhat Hanh and Pieris promote interreligious dialogue, rather than comprehensively examine their thought and praxis; the latter shows a more systematic analysis of the two thinkers, but it is done within the conceptual framework constructed by the author, suitable mainly for the late modern or post-modern society of the West.\textsuperscript{15} Above all, Nhat Hanh is neither a Theravada monk nor a contextualized thinker in Asia; he is rather an international Zen-master, living and teaching in the Western countries.

This brief review of the scholarly research on Buddhadāsa and Pieris illustrates the significance of our own topic, which has been partly touched upon by some scholars

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{13 See Ibid., pp. i, 363-94.
\footnote{15 See Ibid., pp. 35-78.}}
but never comprehended by any researchers. Our project is significant not only because it is the first academic attempt to bring these two thinkers together into a creative dialogue, but because it involves a very relevant issue of our time—the role of religion in the face of problems and challenges never experienced before. Religion today is to be engaged with socio-economic, political, and environmental issues, which are closely interconnected with each other and threaten the future of humankind and the earth itself. A religious faith devoted to its own apologia cannot give any hope to humanity; nor a religious theory or theology which is engrossed in abstract truth, leading people to stick to tradition for its own sake. The signs of our time ask for a transformative spirituality which does not just promise salvation after death, but provides a constant inspiration for the liberative personal-social action here and now. Religion is to be a sign of hope for, not a hindrance to, building a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. In response to this call to action, we present here two prominent religious thinkers and their radical orthopraxes as significant models of transformative spirituality, from which we draw practical insights for our own Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action in the local and global contexts.

Our proposal unfolds in three parts: (1) Buddhadāsa’s radical orthopraxis as a Theravada monk in modern Thailand; (2) Pieris’ radical orthopraxis in dialogue with Buddhism in Sri Lanka; and (3) a comparative analysis of both thinkers’ radical orthopraxes in search for a Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action. The first two parts consist of three chapters respectively, which are descriptive and analytical, showing the historical backgrounds of their thought and praxis (Chapters I and IV), their innovative hermeneutics (Chapters II and V), and their own theories of human liberation (Chapters III and VI). The last part is the concluding chapter (VII) which seeks to construct a creative and critical dialogue between the two thinkers through a comparative analysis of their radical orthopraxes.

In part one, Buddhadāsa’s radical orthopraxis is presented as a Dhammic essentialist approach to human liberation, in the sense that he radically returns to the essence of the early Buddhist sources, retrieves the purity and integrity of the original Dhamma-
practice, and applies it to the contemporary needs of personal-social liberation. From his Dhammic perspective, Buddhadāsa challenges both the traditional Theravada customs and the immoral characters of modern Thai society. This part shows in three chapters how Buddhadāsa carries out a radical Buddhist reform movement, through his Dhammic essentialist thought and praxis, while remaining faithfully within the forest monk tradition of Theravada Buddhism.

In Chapter I, the religio-political background of Buddhadāsa’s reform movement is analysed, showing that he stands between the two traditions: absolutist conservatism and progressive reformism in the modern Thai history. His Dhammic essentialist praxis is revealed as a source of inspiration for the radical transformation of people’s religio-spiritual, social and political behaviours. His entire life and work at Suan Mokkh, a forest community centre for liberation, and his constant engagement with the socio-political issues of modern Thai society are thoroughly examined. Finally, the distinctive characteristics of Buddhadāsa’s reform movement are analysed, in comparison with the traditional Thai Sangha, the earlier Buddhist reformism led by the royal powers, and some other contemporary religious movements in Thailand.

In chapter II, the interpretative theory of Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialism is examined, demonstrating how Buddhadāsa draws his innovative hermeneutic of demotic language (phasa khon) and Dhamma language (phasa tham) from the early Buddhist texts and applies it to his radical reinterpretation of the traditional cosmology and the basic Buddhist doctrines. In our critical analysis, we argue that his hermeneutic is not completely new but the renewal of the ancient Pali exegetical tradition; so its radical character lies not in the theory itself but in its rigorous application to the critical measure of the traditional beliefs and practices. It is also argued that his approach is not the same as the Bultmannian demythologization of the religious texts, but the praxis-oriented search for the original sources of the living tradition.

Chapter III deals with Buddhadāsa’s practical theories of personal-social liberation and his Dhammic essentialist approach to other religions. His theory of the void-
mind (chit-wûng) is analysed as a spiritual cultivation for inner freedom from the self-seeking desire, the root cause of human suffering (dukkha); and as a mindful awareness of the selfless nature (suññatâ) of all things—that is, the interconnected reality (idappaccayata) of all things. This chapter shows how this basic Buddhist insight is developed into his innovative political theory, Dhammic socialism; and his socially-engaged praxis for world peace, in collaboration with people of other religions. Finally, some critiques on Buddhadâsa’s radical orthopraxis are examined, as a general evaluation of the Dhammic essentialist character of his thought and praxis.

In part two, Pieris’ radical orthopraxis is presented as an integrationist dialogical approach to human liberation, in the sense that he stands neither for inculturationist nor for liberationist positions in search for the appropriate Christian praxis in Asia; he rather seeks a dialectical integration of these two positions through his radical return to the sources of both Buddhist and Christian traditions, and through his constant engagement with the complex situation of massive poverty and diverse religiosity in Asia, particularly in Sri Lanka. This part demonstrates in three chapters that Pieris, a Catholic theologian as well as a qualified Buddhologist, integrates the energizing hearts of both traditions into the contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action for the integral human liberation, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized suffering in Asia.

Chapter IV examines the historical background of Pieris’ radical orthopraxis: the socio-political, religio-ethnic conflicts and the Buddhist-Christian relations in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Through a descriptive analysis of the lasting Tamil-Sinhala conflict and violence, the frequent Marxist insurrections, and the fragile relationship between Buddhists and Christians, this chapter demonstrates how Pieris responds to this complex religio-political situation and to the post-Vatican II ecclesial situation, through his interreligious, liberative, and grassroots activities. Finally, it examines Pieris’ life and work, focusing on his personal experiences, as well as his intellectual works and liberative praxis at Tulana, a community research centre for the promotion of integral human liberation.
In Chapter V, we analyse three key concepts at the heart of Pieris’ new hermeneutic: *cosmic-metacosmic, enreligionization,* and *gnosis-agape.* These three distinctive but interrelated concepts are propounded as the interpretative key to understand Pieris’ theological framework, derived from his radical engagement with the Asian reality of poverty and religiosity. Through a thorough analysis of these concepts, this chapter shows how Pieris develops his integrationist interreligious thought and praxis for human liberation—the liberative Buddhist-Christian spirituality, challenging both the inculturationist disregard for the liberation of the poor, and the liberationist prejudice against religions. In the concluding remarks, we demonstrate how this holistic integrationist approach contrasts with Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialist radical orthopraxis.

In Chapter VI, the entire scheme of Pieris’ theology is analysed as an interreligious theology for liberating praxis in Asia, showing that his *kenotic* ecclesiology and Covenant Christology (liberation Christology of religious pluralism) are not merely the theoretical explanation of the Christian faith engaged with Asian reality, but the evocative inspiration for the twofold Christopraxis, *gnostic* detachment and *agapeic* involvement, in the basic human communities. Through a systematic analysis of his radical ecclesiology and Christology, we prove that Pieris is a truly Asian theologian who integrates the core of the biblical faith (the twofold love commandment) into the interreligious praxis for the liberation of the poor, without diluting the distinctive spirituality of other religions. Finally, in the concluding section on Pieris, and against his critics, we argue that he is not anti-traditional but wholeheartedly faithful to the early Christian tradition as recovered by Vatican II, while vigorously creative in his dialogical integrationist approach to other traditions.

Part three is our concluding chapter (VII), in which we propose a comparative analysis of these two models of radical orthopraxis. Through a dialectic comparison of Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialism and Pieris’ dialogical integrationism, we demonstrate that their different ways of human liberation are actually counter-point movements which reinforce each other in their shared vision of a more just and
peaceful humanistic community. In our judgment, the main point of convergence between Buddhadāsa and Pieris is the liberative praxis of spiritual detachment and social engagement, which they draw from the original sources of each tradition and strive to actualize through their grassroots community movements. We argue that neither thinker simply returns to the written sources but to the transformative praxis and spirituality of the originating communities of each tradition, which inspired the authors of the written sources and still animate the radical change of the contemporary spiritual, social, and political life. Finally, we note how these two models of radical orthopraxis, with their shared humanistic vision and liberative spirituality, provide a constant inspiration for our own Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action for the suffering people of the Theravada countries; and for the broader interreligious dialogue and action in the global context.
Part One

Buddhadāsa’s Radical Orthopraxis
As a Theravada Monk in Modern Thailand
Chapter I

The Historical Background

Our purpose in this chapter is to demonstrate how Buddhadāsa’s radical Buddhist reform movement actively interacts with the socio-political, religio-cultural changes of modern Thai history, through a sharp analysis of the relationship between the Thai Sangha and the state; as well as a thorough examination of Buddhadāsa’s life and work against this historical background. Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia which has managed to maintain its independence from colonization, and therefore has never been subject to the external impositions found in Sri Lanka, Burma, and French Indochina. However, Thailand was affected from the Western impact of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In that period, there were tremendous changes in the socio-economic and political structure of the country, in response to the challenges of modernity; its political leaders had to struggle to maintain its national identity as a ‘non-colonial’, ‘non-Western’ but ‘modern’ nation state. It was also in those years that the history of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand experienced its turning point: the Sangha had to adopt major changes in its structure, parallel to the socio-political modernization. As a result of the religio-political reformation led by the royal powers, the Thai Sangha turned into a highly centralized hierarchy in accord with the unitary structures of the state: all the higher appointments of the Sangha had to be sanctioned by the king and monkhood was under the control of the central government.1 Then, King Rama VI (1910-25) formulated the three pillars of Thai identity: Nation, Religion, and King.2 Here the term ‘religion’ refers to Theravada Buddhism.

These royal reforms, however, could not placate the new modern elites who asked for more radical reforms, both in the socio-political structure and the traditional

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2 Ibid., p. 131.
Buddhist customs. It was the time when the Sangha lost its intellectual and moral leadership; its hierarchy was stuck in traditional conservatism and its institutional role in legitimating the state power. Many lay intellectuals, formed in the modern education system both in Thailand and abroad, were no longer satisfied with monastic sermons and traditional rituals. The moral laxity of the monks was serious and the need for renewal was urgent. Buddhâsa aptly responded to these signs of the times: his reform movement was a movement of rebuilding the new Buddhist identity in the rapidly changing society of modern Thailand. The replacement of the absolute monarchy with a constitutional democratic monarchy in 1932 was a watershed in the history of Thai politics when the newly emerged commoner intellectuals succeeded in a bloodless revolution. By coincidence, in that same year Buddhâsa moved to Suan Mokkh, the Garden of Liberation in the forest, which became a centre of his reform movement. His radical orthopraxis at Suan Mokkh and his innovative teachings began to inspire monks and lay people alike to rethink their identity as Buddhists in modern society.

This chapter presents Buddhâsa’s reform movement as a Dhammic essentialist radical orthopraxis, which pursues at once the ascetic practices of the forest monk tradition and the active engagement with the socio-political issues of modern Thai society, drawing its inspiration from the early Buddhist sources in the Pali canon. The chapter is divided into three sections: (1) Buddhism and politics in modern Thailand; (2) Buddhâsa’s life and work; and (3) the distinctive characteristics of Buddhâsa’s movement. The first two sections demonstrate how Buddhâsa developed his radical thought and praxis at Suan Mokkh; and how his rationalist Buddhist reformism has become the source of inspiration for many democratic activists and socially engaged Buddhists. In the last section, we argue that Buddhâsa’s movement is distinct from the earlier royal Buddhist reformation, the hierarchical Thai Sangha, and other forms of modern Buddhist movements.
1. Buddhism and Politics in Modern Thailand

Baker and Phongpaichit point out that, since Thailand became a ‘nation-state’ in the late 19th century, there have been two political traditions: one is the ‘strong-state’ tradition and the other is the ‘well-being of the people’ tradition. The former began with its original formulation in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) and was revived by military dictators in the mid-20th century; and then again by Thaksin Shinawatra in the early 21st century. This tradition upholds the need for a strong and authoritarian state to protect the country from the external and domestic threats, maintaining the Thai national integrity based on the authority of monarchy and Buddhism. By contrast, the advocates of the second tradition argue that the real enemy of the Thai people is neither the external nor internal threats, but the very idea of a ‘strong-state’ itself, which in fact absolutizes the state power. For them, the purpose of the nation-state must be the well-being of its various members. Since the revolution of 1932, this tradition has continued in people’s democratic movements. Its proponents tend to bring international ideas and values such as socialism, liberal democracy, human rights, a civil society, and so on. Facing the conservative nationalist criticism that such ideas are all ‘non-Thai’, these progressive groups often try to present their ideas in parallel with the new interpretations of the Buddhist doctrines.

Despite the risk of oversimplification, this theory of two political traditions, in which both the absolutist conservatism and the progressive reformism clearly base their claims on their unblemished Buddhist credentials, gives us a viable framework for our analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and politics in modern Thai history. Since the 13th century, the cultural, social and political structures of the country have been shaped by Theravada Buddhism. More than ninety percent of the total Thai population is Buddhist, proving that to be Thai means also to be Buddhist.

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4 See Ibid., pp. 276-7.
Hence, in Thailand, Buddhism is one of the most important sources of political legitimation. This is clearly revealed in the classical structure of the Sangha-monarchy relations: the king’s duty is to protect and support the Sangha; in return, the Sangha legitimates his rule according to the ten virtues of Buddhist kingship (*rañjadhamma*). Any threat to this structure is to be taken as a serious challenge to the religio-political integrity of the country. In the Ayutthaya era, for instance, King Narai (1656-88) ignored his duty as a ‘defender of Buddhism’ and favoured the European Christians and the Persian Muslims who had gathered around the court. Then, in 1688, outraged by the aggressive proselytizing activities of those foreign missionaries, the Buddhist monks encouraged an uprising against the King. As a result, the missionaries were killed or expelled, and a new king was chosen not from among the royal clan but from the popular leaders in the official nobility. Then, under the new dynasty, the royal support of the Buddhist Sangha increased dramatically and reached its peak in King Borommakot (1733-58), who was regarded as a true *Thammaracha*.

Following this reciprocal structure, King Mongkut (1851-68) tried to realize the ideal of Buddhist kingship in response to the challenges of the Western civilization in the mid-nineteenth century. His way of protecting Buddhism was more proactive and reformative: he strived not only to defend Buddhism from the attack of the Christian missionaries, but to purify the Sangha in accord with the Buddha’s original teachings in the Pali canon. Before accession to kingship, Mongkut spent twenty-seven years in monkhood. During that time, he recognized the serious discrepancies between the Pali scriptures and the actual practices of the Sangha: in his judgement, monks were too lax and easygoing; some important Vinaya rules of conduct were ignored. Hence

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8 See Ibid., p. 20.

9 The Thai word Thammaracha derives from *Dhammarath* in Pali, the ‘righteous king’ who sincerely practices the ten royal virtues (*dasa rañjadhammā*). According to the inscriptive evidence, the ancient Sukhothai kings often took Thammaracha as their dynastic name. See Yoneo Ishii, *Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History*, trans. by Peter Hawkes (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1986), pp. 45, 61.
he established a new order, called Thammayutnikai, within the Sangha, which was stricter in discipline than the major order, called Mahānikai.\textsuperscript{10} Mongkut’s strong desire to observe the pure and correct monastic rules led him to introduce precise and complex procedures of the ordination ceremony and a new way of wearing robe, covering both shoulders, as practiced in the Mon orders.\textsuperscript{11} Mongkut was annoyed because many monks did not understand the meaning of the Pali chants and ritual performances which they mechanically repeated. Hence he tried to make his disciples well versed in Pali texts and organized the Pali examinations for monks. He also founded a press for printing and popularizing Pali works, imitating the Christian missionary presses. In addition to that, he brought the complete volumes of the Sinhalese version of the \textit{Tipiṭaka} from Ceylon, which was considered purer than any other.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, Mongkut tried to reform the Sangha through his new Thammayut order, which he believed faithful to the orthodox practices of the Pali canon.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Mongkut’s reform movement was to reject many traditional popular practices as superstitious beliefs. As a prince monk and later as a king, Mongkut had a good relationship with Christian missionaries, both Catholics and Protestants, who taught him Latin, English, science, history, and the Bible.\textsuperscript{13} He was very impressed by the Western idea of material progress and the scientific world view, but was irritated by the Christian claims to moral superiority. Mongkut and his followers thought that Buddhism could not be properly defended from the Western influence unless the superstitious folk practices were purified and the laxity of the monks was corrected. Hence, they introduced science and history to education while trying to modernise social customs. They also rejected the

\textsuperscript{11} The Mon was an ethnic group with a long and venerable history in both Thailand and Burma. When Mongkut met a Mon monk, who lived at a temple near Bangkok, he became convinced that the Mon monastic practice was closer to the original rules set out in the Vinaya texts. In fact, there is no prescribed style that can be attributed to the Buddha in the Pali texts. In Tambiah’s view, many of the new monastic practices introduced by Mongkut had no better foundation in early Buddhist practice or canonical regulations than the ones replaced. See S.J. Tambiah, \textit{World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 210-1.
\textsuperscript{12} See Ibid., p. 212. For the meaning of \textit{Tipiṭaka}, see Chapter II, footnote 3.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., pp. 213-4. See also Ishii, \textit{Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History}, p. 159.
traditional Buddhist cosmology of three worlds (*traiphum*) described in the *Traibhūnikathā*, one of the most important Buddhist texts in Thailand.\(^{14}\) Their strategy was to separate material advancement from the religious message and adopted only the former. In other words, they did not accept Christianity as a spiritual or moral foundation for material progress. They argued that Buddhism was more rational and scientific than Christianity, the popular beliefs of miracles and magic in both religions aside.\(^{15}\)

Through his reform movement, Mongkut succeeded in attaining his public image as a righteous Buddhist king (*Thammaracha*). His religious rationalism, however, was incomplete: some Brahmanical deities were still worshipped in the royal ceremonies; some miraculous accounts were credited to Mongkut himself; and the doctrine of *kamma* and rebirths was emphasized among the Thammayut monks.\(^{16}\) The political power was concentrated in the royal family and the number of Thammayut temples rapidly increased. All the sons of King Mongkut, including Chulalongkorn, were ordained as novices or monks at Wat Bowonniwet, the centre of the Thammayut order.\(^{17}\) The royal favour of the Thammayut order caused continuous dissension among the majority Mahānikai monks throughout the twentieth century. To Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, however, the hegemony of the Thammayut order within the Sangha hierarchy was essential to legitimate their ‘absolute kingship’ which they believed a necessary condition for the modernization of Thailand.

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\(^{14}\) *Traibhūnikathā* was composed in the 14th century by King Li Thai, the fifth king of the Sukhothai Kingdom. In this book, the cosmos consists of three worlds which are divided into different levels of heavens, middle realms, and hells. The destination of each category of beings and deities is determined by the effects of the good or bad *kamma* of each being. The original *Traibhūnikathā* was inscribed on palm leaves. The ancient kings regarded it as a ‘sacred text’ so that it was copied by hand and transferred to the next generations. Now ten manuscript copies are kept at the Thai National Library. See Kirsch, ‘Modernizing Implications of Nineteenth Century Reform in the Thai Sangha’, p. 55. See also Ploenpote Atthakor, ‘Painting project fit for A Great King: An artistic tribute to the King of Thailand on his 84th birthday’, *Bangkok Post*, 19 November, 2009, Outlook section.


\(^{17}\) During his monkhood, Mongkut was an abbot of Wat Bowonniwet; later, his two prince monks, Pavaret and Wachirayan, became his successors as abbots of this temple. The present Thai King Bhumipon was also ordained as a novice at this temple. See Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, pp. 215-6.
King Chulalongkorn and his half-brother Wachirayan (1860-1921), the prince monk, successfully accomplished the task of the political and religious modernization of the country. Thailand became a ‘civilized’ nation-state by adopting the European modern bureaucracy, law codes, customs, education system, and military conscription. The reformation, however, was led by the ruling class in order to entrench their privileged position in a highly centralized government. The most senior official posts were allotted to the royal family members. It was emphasized that the origin of the Siamese kingship is the Buddhist moral authority; the King’s duty is to defend both the nation and Buddhism from the external enemies. The reformed country was meant to be an ‘absolutist nation’, symbolized by the Buddhist king and the royal elites. In the same line, the Sangha Act was promulgated in 1902. It was the first modern law pertaining to the Sangha. The approximately 80,000 monks of both the Thammayut and Mahānikai orders were arrayed in a hierarchical structure, stretching down from the king and the supreme patriarch; the monarchical control of the Sangha was extended nationwide under the bureaucratic administration. Hence, monks were obliged to follow not only the Vinaya rules but also the specific and general rules of the civil law. This pattern of the Sangha’s subordination to the political authority was reiterated in the Sangha Acts of 1941 and 1962.

The prince monk Wachirayan was appointed head of a new Buddhist Academy (Mahānakut Rāchawiththayālai) in 1893. It was the first university for monks in Thailand. Wachirayan launched a series of modern experiments in the monastic education system. Monks were trained as teachers for the 12,000 branch schools of the Mahāmakut Academy. These schools followed the modern curriculum with government textbooks which provided a basic literacy, religion, mathematics,

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18 King Chulalongkorn and his royal relatives, who had studied abroad in Europe, tried to reform the country under the standard of western civilization (siwilai in Thai). They called themselves ‘Young Siam’, implying that their opponents were ‘Old Siam’ who had obstructed the urgent need of progress and reformation. See Baker and Phongpaichit, A History of Thailand, p. 53.
19 See Ibid., pp. 77, 80.
20 By indicating that monks should be subject to the civil law, the Sangha Act asserts the supremacy of the state over the Sangha. See Ishii, Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History, p. 70.
21 For more details on the Sangha Acts and their political implications, see Ibid., pp. 69-78, 102-19. See also Tambiah, World Conqueror and World Renouncer, pp. 223-4, 230-61.
science, history, and geography. Some elite monks of the Thammayut order were permitted to enter the non-monastic government school which trained teachers in English with modern pedagogy. The Mahāmakut Academy was endowed with a library and its publishing house printed a periodical containing model sermons for monks in the provinces. It was also in this period that the first edition of the Thai Tipiṭaka was completed.\footnote{23 See Tambiah, \textit{World Conqueror and World Renouncer}, p. 225.}

Wachirayan was appointed as the supreme patriarch of the Sangha in 1910 by King Vajiravudh (Rama VI). Then, he reorganized the monastic examination system: the traditional oral exam was replaced with a written exam; the new system consisted of three levels of doctrinal exams (Naktham) and nine levels of Pali exams (Parian); the main texts for these exams were taken from Wachirayan’s books and the Pali exegetical literature.\footnote{24 See Ishii, \textit{Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History}, p. 77.} Once the examination system was established, monks began to spend their life preparing for the exams with the hope of upgrading their status in the Sangha hierarchy. In the Naktham exams, monks were required to reproduce accurately the content of the designated textbooks; the Parian exams were the test of translation from the given Pali texts into Thai or vice versa. It demanded a perfect memory and allowed no leeway in personal interpretation.\footnote{25 For more details, see Ibid., pp. 81-99.} Buddhadāsa was so opposed to this system that he deliberately failed the fourth level of Parian exam in 1931 as we shall show in the next section.

King Rama VI continued to reinforce the strongly nationalist modernizing reform ‘from above’. However, the demand for democratic reformation increased among the urban commoner intellectuals. On 24 June 1932, absolute monarchy was overthrown in a revolution led by Pridi Banomyong and his People’s Party.\footnote{26 The People’s Party (Khana Ratsadon) was founded at the meeting of seven reformists in Paris on 5 February 1927. The intellectual leader of the group was Pridi, a brilliant law student at the Sorbonne. In 1932, the Party consisted of civilian and military members: Pridi and the civilian group were inspired by European socialism, whereas the military group wanted to build a strong Thai nation-state. See Baker and Phongpaichit, \textit{A History of Thailand}, pp. 116, 121, 139.} The Sangha leaders tried to establish a relationship with the new democratic government in the same line of the Sangha’s traditional stance siding with the ruler. But, many young monks were so keen on the revolutionary spirit of the time that they organized a protest against the non-democratic system of the Sangha administration. In September 1932, a group
of monks, involved in the anti-Sangha demonstration, were forcibly disrobed by the order of the Supreme Patriarch.\textsuperscript{27} However, in February 1935, again two thousand monks from twelve provinces gathered in Bangkok to petition the Prime Minister to democratize the Sangha administration.\textsuperscript{28} These events were significant because there had been no precedent in the history of Thai Buddhism. It was the time that the Sangha leaders lost their moral authority and the need for change was strongly felt. As mentioned above, Buddhāsa began his reform movement at Suan Mokkh at this time.

From the middle of the twentieth century, Thai society has rapidly changed in its economic, political structure; and various Buddhist movements have developed in response to the socio-political changes. During the Cold War period, the successive military regimes, under the US patronage, accelerated the development of a capitalist economy and fought communism. The role of the monarchy and Buddhism as a symbol of national integrity was revived by Sarit Thananat, who succeeded the military coup in 1958.\textsuperscript{29} In 1962, the new Sangha Act was promulgated in accord with Sarit’s political position of paternalistic absolutism: all the democratic provisions of the Sangha Act of 1941 were swept away; the concentrated power of the supreme patriarch was reinforced; and the structure of the Sangha administration returned to that of the 1902 Act. The new Sangha Act also deepened the Sangha’s subordination to the state authority by explicitly mentioning that the supreme patriarch could be dismissed by decree.\textsuperscript{30} The propaganda of the military regimes on radio and TV argued that communists sought to destroy Buddhism. Some conservative Buddhist monks provided ideological support for the anti-communist campaign; the most extreme right-wing monk was Kittiwuttho who announced in a

\textsuperscript{28} See Ibid. The Sangha Act of 1941 established the democratic system of Sangha administration in parallel with the new governmental structure. The royalist Thammayut order had to concede its privileged position of the supreme patriarch to a Mahānīkai monk for a short period. The most important positions in the Sangha, however, were occupied by the Thammayut monks based on their royal connections. This caused serious conflicts between the two sects and the majority Mahānīkai monks continuously appealed to the prime ministers to intervene in the affairs of unbalanced power in the Sangha administration. See Ibid., pp. 104-13.
\textsuperscript{29} King Bhumibol (Rama IX) supported this military coup and Sarit declared that his government would be headed by the king. They changed the national day from the memorial day of the 1932 revolution to the king’s birthday. See Baker and Phongpaichit, \textit{A History of Thailand}, pp. 176-7.
public speech that killing communists is a merit-making act equivalent to killing fish for the alms bowl of monks.\textsuperscript{31} By contrast, reformative Buddhists joined people’s democratic movements against military dictatorship, unrestrained capitalism, and US imperialism.\textsuperscript{32} In 1973-76, the streets of Bangkok and the major provincial towns were filled with people demonstrating. It was exactly during this time that Buddhadāsa was involved in the public debates on radio about his radical idea of socially engaged Buddhism.\textsuperscript{33} The students, inspired partly by his teachings, led the protest and demanded socio-economic justice and democracy. Although the demonstrations ended with a horrible massacre at Thammasat University, its impact on the Thai intellectuals and social activists was profound.\textsuperscript{34}

Buddhadāsa was a major spiritual inspiration behind pro-democratic intellectuals and reform-minded Buddhist activists during the time of political unrest in the 1970s and 80s. His teachings also influenced the Buddhist NGOs and the monks who committed themselves to the socio-cultural movement of ‘community development’ in the rural areas.\textsuperscript{35} Beginning from the 1980s, a group of public intellectuals were shaped through the NGOs and the press. They were graduates of the 1973-76 era: professors, medical doctors, lawyers, and journalists. They promoted social justice, human rights, and limits to the abuse of power.\textsuperscript{36} After the military coup in 1991, these intellectuals encouraged people to join a mass demonstration and the era of military rule was finally over in 1992. From that time on, businessmen like Thaksin Shinawatra have emerged as the main political force of the country under the influence of globalization.\textsuperscript{37}


\textsuperscript{32} See Baker, and Phongpaichit, \textit{A History of Thailand}, p. 168.

\textsuperscript{33} See Ibid., p. 190.

\textsuperscript{34} See Ibid., pp. 184-9, 197-8.


\textsuperscript{37} See Baker and Phongpaichit, \textit{A History of Thailand}, pp. 274-5.
The state control over the Sangha has loosened since the 1990s. The new democratic governments in the era of globalization have little interest in interfering in the religious matters because the legitimacy of the state power does not depend on the Sangha’s support any more. The democratic principles and people’s well-being came to be a crucial barometer of political legitimacy. Under the new political circumstances, various Buddhist movements have flourished within and without the Sangha. The Sangha’s moral authority has been damaged by the sexual scandals of many monks and monastic involvement in ‘spiritual consumerism’. Hence, the Buddhist activists have challenged the Sangha authority to reform its autocratic hierarchy and malpractices. The Thai Sangha is now facing the challenge of the people, not of the state power. Given the different forms of Buddhist visions and practices in the contemporary capitalist Thai society, many people follow Buddhāsa’s rationalistic Buddhist reformism and socially engaged Buddhist practices.

To sum up, Buddhāsa worked within the two main religio-political traditions in modern Thai history: the absolutist conservatism and the democratic reformism. However, Buddhāsa was too great a thinker to be subsumed under either one of these categories with his own particular vision. He presented a ‘middle way’, remaining faithfully as a Theravada monk within the Sangha, but proposing a sharply different way of doctrinal teachings and practices which have left a profound impact on Thai society. As mentioned above, the reformists have drawn much inspiration from his radical teachings. In the following section, we will demonstrate how his entire life and work actively interact with these historical changes of the country.

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39 See Ibid., pp. 80-5.
2. Buddhadāsa’s Life and Work

Buddhadāsa was born on 27 May 1906 at Phumrieng in Chaiya, Southern Thailand. His original name was Ngeuam Phanit, the first son of a second-generation Chinese father and a native Thai mother. He had a brother, Yikey (later Dhammadāsa), and a sister, Kimsoi. His father’s younger brother, Siang Phanit, was a monk who resided at Wat Patumkongkha in Bangkok. Two family members played important roles in Buddhadāsa’s life and work: his uncle Siang helped him study in Bangkok; and his brother became his closest lay supporter. The Phanit family was reasonably well off, with the father running a small general store at the Phumrieng market which in the early years of the twentieth century also functioned as a local meeting place.

In speaking of his childhood, Buddhadāsa emphasized three primary influences: his mother, the Wat (temple), and nature. His mother was the first spiritual guide, who taught him the values of Buddhist morality and a thrifty life. In a talk in 1989, Buddhadāsa said that most of his knowledge and ethics came from his mother. At the age of eight, he became a temple boy at Wat Nok in Phumrieng where he lived for three years. He learned how to read and write, attended the Buddhist ceremonies, and served the abbot. Many years later, Buddhadāsa recollected that during his temple boy period he learned valuable virtues such as diligence, responsibility, collaboration, and most importantly, unselfishness. Nature was another important part of his early life: he experienced it while taking care of cows in the field and collecting herbs from the forest for his abbot. The sea was always nearby, along with the mangrove forests that covered much of the shore. His habit of studying plants and animals, from which he drew various insights into nature, an important source of his

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teachings, continued throughout his whole life.\footnote{Santikaro, ‘Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness’, p. 149.}

Buddhadāsa had to stop his formal secondary education with only the 9th grade, in order to run the family stores when his father died in 1922. He became the head of the family at the age of 16, taking on the heavy responsibility of supporting his siblings. However, while running the family business in Chaiya, he had access to a large number of new books, including many Buddhist writings, which were sold in his store. He also had opportunities to discuss and debate on various issues with his customers, the educated local elite of that time.\footnote{See Ibid., p. 150.} It was the time that the royal reforms ‘from above’ were at their peak and the new modern elites began to challenge the absolute monarchy.

Buddhadāsa knew about the socio-political changes that were taking place in the country. He received letters and magazines from his uncle Siang in Bangkok. He read critical articles and books written by the progressive intellectuals. The local officials, monks, and his mother’s friends often visited him to talk about religious topics. His family shop was a place for regular Dhamma discussions among five or six interested lay people. Buddhadāsa also read the Buddhist textbooks written by Wachirayan and eagerly participated in the discussions. At nineteen, he was the only young person in the group, but was soon accepted as a teacher because of his innovative explanations about the Buddhist doctrines.\footnote{See Payulpitack, ‘Buddhadāsa’s Movement: An Analysis of Its Origins, Development, and Social Impact’, pp. 80-2.} Thus, despite his short formal education, he was already well prepared to enter into the life of the skillful teacher monk.

In July 1926, following Thai custom, Buddhadāsa was ordained into the monkhood at the age of twenty at Wat Nok. He was given the Pali clerical name Indapañño, which he later used on official documents.\footnote{His monastic name Indapañño means ‘one who has wisdom like Indra’. See Ibid., p. 82.} Since he decided not to disrobe after the initial three months were over, his younger brother, Yikey, who was a student of medicine at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, stopped his study and returned.

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\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Santikaro, ‘Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness’, p. 149.}
\item \footnote{See Ibid., p. 150.}
\item \footnote{His monastic name Indapañño means ‘one who has wisdom like Indra’. See Ibid., p. 82.}
\end{itemize}
home to take over the running of the family business. Elderly monks soon noticed Buddhadāsa’s intellectual abilities in monastic exams and Dhamma talks. They sent him to Bangkok to further his studies and career. However, in Bangkok, Buddhadāsa was disappointed with the Sangha education system, the laxity in monastic discipline among the monks, and the noisy environment of the city. So, after only two months, he returned home and passed the advanced level of Naktham exam. He was invited to teach at the monastic school of the Thammayut temple, Wat Boromathat, in Chaiya. When his students passed their exams well, his relatives convinced him not to waste his obvious academic talents and go back to the higher study in Bangkok.

During his second study period in Bangkok (1930-32), Buddhadāsa passed the third level of Pali examination. But, he was not satisfied with the pace and method of the Pali classes so he obtained permission to study by himself. Another reason for his decision to pursue private and personal study was that the then Pali curriculum did not include readings from the Pali canon (Tipiṭaka) which he really wanted to read. Besides studying Pali and the Tipiṭaka, he was interested in following courses in photography, typewriter and radio mechanics. He also studied English, science, and world history. He was very impressed by the articles of the progressive Thai intellectuals who had returned from studying in Europe. In 1930, Buddhadāsa himself wrote his first two articles: ‘The Worldlings Level of Buddhism’, insisting that nibbāna is not a distant ideal but an attainable goal in the present life; and ‘The Benefits of Giving’, arguing that the real benefit of dāna is not the merit-making for the future but the spiritual benefit of decreasing selfishness. Thus, his first articles already illustrated the direction of his innovative interpretations of the Buddhist doctrines, which would appeal to the modern audience.

As we mentioned in the previous section, dissatisfied with the literal translations of the exegetical Pali texts into Thai in the examination, Buddhadāsa deliberately failed the fourth level of the Parian exam. He gave answers from his own perspective, which was not allowed at that time. The more he read and researched the Tipiṭaka,

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46 Ibid., p. 85.
47 See Ibid., pp. 86-7.
the more convinced he became that Bangkok was not the proper place for studying and practicing Dhamma in its purity. Furthermore, there was increasing criticism against the Sangha hierarchy and monks’ inappropriate behaviours.\textsuperscript{48} Buddhāsa began to feel the urgent need for a Buddhist reform based on the original Pali scriptures. He shared his ideas with his brother in their frequent correspondence. One of his letters shows his conviction at this time:

We have resolutely determined that Bangkok is not the place to find purity. The mistake we made in enrolling in the ecclesiastical dhamma study is a blessing, for it makes us aware that we have made a wrong step. Had we not known this, we would have made many more; and, as some people have learned, it would have been difficult to retreat. With the awareness that we misstepped, we find the solution of how to step forward rightly. We have followed the world from the minute we were born to the minute we had this feeling. From now on, we will not follow the world but will part from it to find purity and follow the trail of the ariyans [noble ones] which we have finally found.\textsuperscript{49}

On 5 April 1932, Buddhāsa eventually left Bangkok and went back to his home town in Chaiya. He and his brother changed their names to Buddhāsa and Dhammadāsa, meaning the ‘servant of the Buddha’ and the ‘servant of the Dhamma’ respectively. The Dhammadāna Group was founded by Dhammadāsa in order to support Buddhāsa’s new way of life. They found an abandoned monastery in 28 acres of dense jungle, near the Phumrieng market, and built a small hut for Buddhāsa as he wished. He named the place Suan Mokkhabalārāma, the ‘Garden of the Power of Liberation’, called in short, Suan Mokkh, the ‘Garden of Liberation’. His intention was to create a spiritual place in the forest, similar to the environment of the Buddha’s original practice: search for liberation living in solitude under the shade of trees; but with sensitivity to the modern context. It was just one month before the political revolution, which Buddhāsa thought a ‘good omen’ for his

\textsuperscript{48} See Ibid., p. 88.
\textsuperscript{49} Buddhāsa, \textit{The First Ten Years of Suan Mokkh}, p. 51.
Buddhadāsa lived alone at Suan Mokkh for the first two years. He observed nature carefully in the forest, where animals lived harmoniously day and night. When he went out to take alms in the morning, children ran away from him, regarding him as mentally deranged. Taking the Dhamma and Vinaya of the Pali canon as guidance, Buddhadāsa practiced sincerely the essence of what he believed the Buddha had taught. For that practical purpose, he started to compile the Dhamma principles as he understood them. Besides, he began to preach at other temples the Dhamma &n Group arranged for him. Thus, from the beginning, the three main activities carried on at Suan Mokkh were studying, practicing, and teaching Buddhadhamma. In the second year, Buddhadāsa and the Dhammadāna Group began to publish the quarterly journal Buddhasāna, which was then the only Buddhist magazine published outside Bangkok. It soon received a reputation for his new ideas and insights which illustrate his ability to draw the core Buddhist insights, interpreting them in various ways. It remains the longest running Buddhist periodical, distributed nation-wide in Thailand. His talks were also recorded and published in book form.

Buddhadāsa’s approach of connecting study, practice and preaching was unique in Thailand. It was a recovery of the early Buddhist integration of learning (pariyatti) and practice (paññāpatti) of Dhamma, which had been lost in the Theravada tradition.

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50 See Ibid., p. 2.
51 See Ibid., p. 3.
52 Buddhadāsa and other Thai scholars like to use the term ‘Buddhadhamma’ or ‘Dhamma’ to refer to both the most fundamental Buddhist ‘doctrines’ and the ‘Truth’ that those doctrines designate. In this thesis, we will use the definite article before the terms (the Buddhadhamma or the Dhamma) to indicate the doctrines; and omit the article (Buddhadhamma or Dhamma) for the Dhammic Truth.
53 Already in his early articles of the 1930s, Buddhadāsa developed the methodology and the scope of explaining Dhamma through a wide range of other sources such as Zen, Taoism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and the Western science and philosophy. This way of introducing Dhamma was unusual for the Thai Theravada tradition at that time. See Payulpitak, ‘Buddhadasa’s Movement: An Analysis of Its Origins, Development, and Social Impact’, p. 97.
54 Santikaro, ‘Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness’, p. 152.
55 In the first century BCE, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was in great chaos due to a foreign invasion and an unprecedented famine. Under the fear of losing the entire Tipiṭaka, the monks’ assembly declared that learning was more important than practice, as the basis of Buddhist teachings (sāṇā). This was a crucial decision to affect the later development of the two vocations in the Theravada tradition: that of books (gāntha-dhura), associated with the city-monks (gāntha-dhara); and that of meditation (vipassanā-dhura) of the forest-monks (arəñña-dhara). This dichotomized view of the monk’s role was entrenched
He was a forest monk (araññavāsin), keeping the severe ascetic practices, and at the same time, a scholarly teacher, frequently giving relevant talks to the people. He applied the original Buddhist insights to the concrete problems found in his contemporary society. He and his brother Dhammadāsa established a school and a public library in Chaiya with the financial support of his mother and the voluntary labour of the local people; their plan to build a university was canceled due to financial difficulties. As his reputation spread, some monks started to join him and their number gradually increased; so, in 1943, Suan Mokkh was moved to its present location, several kilometers Southeast of Chaiya. In the first ten years, Buddhadāsa met many opponents who sent poison-pen letters about him to the Sangha authorities. However, some high-ranking monks and other influential civil servants, who used to visit Suan Mokkh, defended him.

Buddhadāsa’s innovative ideas became more and more widely recognized, and attracted increasing attention. Over the next decades, he was invited to give a series of lectures at many Buddhist organizations, educational institutions, and government offices in Bangkok and in other provinces. Already in the 1940s, Buddhadāsa had begun to talk about the relationship between Buddhadhamma and politics. His presentations were straightforward, rational and profound; but his radical ideas often raised vehement reactions from the conservative audiences who criticized him as a ‘destroyer of Buddhism’ or a ‘subversive communist’. However, there were many other people who welcomed his spiritual insights and innovative ideas to reform society based on the Buddhist principles. Some progressive politicians and social

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57 See Buddhadāsa, The First Ten Years of Suan Mokkh, pp. 3–4.
58 Buddhadāsa’s first two political lectures, which had a great impact on intellectuals nation-wide, are ‘Buddhadhamma and Peace’ (1946) and ‘Buddhadhamma and the Spirit of Democracy’ (1947). See Santikaro, ‘Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness’, pp. 163-4.
activists, such as Pridi Banomyong, Kulap Saipradit, and Sulak Sivaraksa, have drawn upon his teachings, considering him their spiritual and philosophical master. By contrast, there were critics who did not agree with his idea of this worldly, socially engaged Buddhism. Buddhadāsa’s most famous critic was Kukrit Pramoj, the leading politician of the mid-1970s, who upheld the traditional position of a paternalist government against the radical demands for social change. In 1973-76, Buddhadāsa received nationwide coverage when he held a public debate with Kukrit on radio and television. Kukrit, a moderate anti-communist, was horrified by the revolutionary implications of Buddhadāsa’s teachings. For many progressive reformists, however, his teachings were the source of the strong Buddhist inspiration for their democratic movements.

In 1980, the Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University conferred on Buddhadāsa an Honorary Doctorate of Buddhism. It was the first of many Honorary Doctorates conferred on him by several other Thai universities. The Thai National Library has a room filled with his books, both written and transcribed from his talks. Those books include his studies of different Buddhist schools, other religious traditions, and the philosophies of the East and the West. They reveal his ability to integrate a vast amount of knowledge and learning into his own social and spiritual context. Buddhadāsa earnestly promoted inter-religious dialogue and collaboration for world peace. Many of his friends from around the world, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, shared their vision with Buddhadāsa. Although Suan Mokkh

61 See Baker and Phongpaichit, A History of Thailand, pp. 190-91; Jackson, Buddhadāsa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand, p. 16.
62 Buddhadāsa is one of the most productive thinkers in the history of Theravada Buddhism. He published more than two thousand written works. Swearer considers him the most seminal Theravada thinker since Buddhagosha; and his role in the Buddhist history to be on a par with Nagarjuna. See D.K. Swearer, ‘The Vision of Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa’, in Dhammic Socialism, trans. and ed. by D.K. Swearer (Bangkok: TITCD, 1986), p. 14.
63 Buddhadāsa was close to Swami Satyanandaburi (a Hindu social scientist), Haji Prayoon (a Muslim scholar), Manat (a Catholic Bishop), and other Christian leaders. He also met the Dalai Lama twice in Bangkok and in Suan Mokkh. His plan to build a Tibetan Gompa for some Tibetan monks at Suan Mokkh was forcefully canceled due to Chinese opposition. See Santikaro, ‘Ajahn Buddhadāsa and Inter-Religious Understanding’, Turning Wheel: the Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism (Spring 2006) <http://www. liberationpark.org/arts/taajcent/tw_2.pdf> [accessed 3 June 2010].
has no typical set of temple buildings, using its natural forest as a Dhamma hall, it has a modern style building called ‘Spiritual Theatre’ whose interior walls are covered in beautiful murals displaying the ideals of selflessness and openness.

In his final years, though in poor health, Buddhadāsa continued his innovative works initiating some important projects. He established the International Dhamma Hermitage, situated 1.5 km to the east of Suan Mokkh, in order to provide a proper environment for the study and practice of Dhamma for anyone who wishes to join, from any part of the world and any kind of religious tradition.64 There, inter-religious dialogue has been actively organized and a ten-day silent meditation is guided in English every month, starting always on the first day of each month. More than twenty thousand people, from all over the world, have participated in these retreats, initially conducted by Buddhadāsa himself, and now by his disciples. Another important project was the establishment of the Dhamma Missionary Training Centre near the International Dhamma Hermitage. It is a community school for foreign monks, both Western and Asian, who wish to dedicate their lives to pursuing world peace through the thorough study and practice of Dhamma. In this school, they learn the more profound meditation and teaching skills. Through periodic seminars and lectures, they also learn how to apply the principles of Dhamma to various social problems.65

Buddhadāsa also seriously considered a centre for women who want to dedicate their lives to practicing and spreading Dhamma. Women in Theravada countries have had no equal right to men in practicing Dhamma since the loss of the Bhikkhuni Sangha around the thirteenth century. In Thailand, there are white-robed pious Buddhist women called Mae Ji, living in temple compounds with very little financial and moral support; they have never been organized as an institution.66 Buddhadāsa recognized the problem of gender inequality in Thai Buddhism and the fact that monks are not always able to help women; more importantly, he recognized

65 See Ibid., p. 185.
66 For more details, see Nancy J. Barnes, ‘Buddhist Women and the Nuns’ Order in Asia’, in Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia, pp. 267-71.
women’s ability to contribute to solving various social problems. Hence, he proposed the more serious practice of Dhamma to female aspirants and called them ‘Dhamma mothers’ (Dhammamātā), in the sense of people who give birth to others through Dhamma. Since he was not in a position to re-establish the Bhikkhuni Sangha, Buddhadāsa intended to found a place at Suan Mokkh for them to study and practice Dhamma. Now, many Dhamma mothers are happily practicing their mission for others at the Dhammamātā Hermitage at Suan Mokkh.

Buddhadāsa was still at work up until the moment of his death. When the final stroke occurred, he was still preparing his notes for a talk to be given on his 87th birthday and the 61st anniversary of Suan Mokkh. After six weeks of hospitalization in Bangkok, he was sent back to Suan Mokkh and died on 8 July, 1993. His remains after cremation were powdered and scattered in the sea, the river, and the valley in Southern Thailand, as he had wished; just a small portion was put inside a marble urn and sealed in a small memorial of the Dhamma Proclamation Hall at Suan Mokkh. Just as his Buddhist reform movement had started in the same year of the political revolution in 1932, Buddhadāsa passed away only one year after the long era of the military dictatorship was over in 1992. Thus, his entire life and work ran parallel to the historical moments of the country.

\[67\] It was in December 1999, six years after Buddhadāsa’s death, that the Dhammamātā Hermitage was opened to run a four-month retreat programme for women, led by the female disciples. See Tomomi Ito, ‘Dhammamātā: Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu’s notion of motherhood in Buddhist women practitioners’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 38/3 (October 2007), 409-32 (p. 420).

3. The Characteristics of Buddhadāsa’s Movement

Buddhadāsa developed his Dhammic essentialist thought and praxis by returning to the early Buddhist sources; and radically engaged in the Buddhist reform movement at Suan Mokkh, while actively interacting with the socio-political changes of his time. His reform movement was different from the earlier Buddhist reformation, led by Mongkut, Chulalongkorn and Wachirayan. The main purpose of these royal reformers was to use Buddhism for preserving a non-Western national identity while establishing a strong nation-state with modern socio-political structures. The royal reformers believed that absolute monarchy and a paternalist government were essential for the progress of the country. In their view, the traditional duty of king as a ‘defender of Buddhism’ was to ‘control’ the Sangha hierarchy and to ‘purify’ the moral behaviour of the monks. The Thammayut order was established for this purpose and its focus was on the correct observation of the monastic rules. The Thammayut monks were ambivalent about the traditional beliefs: on the one hand, they rejected the non-scientific popular Buddhist cosmology and superstitious practices; but, on the other hand, they upheld the doctrine of kamma and rebirth without clarifying how it worked in their new scientific world view. Furthermore, they believed some miraculous accounts attributed to King Mongkut. Hence, the Thammayut order was not fundamentally different from the Mahānikai order; there was no significant change in doctrinal interpretation.

By contrast, Buddhadāsa’s reform movement was distinctively radical: it challenged the very doctrinal interpretation of the orthodox Thai Buddhism. Buddhadāsa drew new insights from the original Pali scriptures and brought them to the wider Buddhist community, both monks and the laity, who were struggling to find a proper Buddhist thought and praxis in the rapidly changing society of modern Thailand. His reinterpretation of the Buddhist doctrines appealed to the modern intellectuals in their search for a rationalistic understanding of the meaning of life, morality and social order. His initial audience was the reformative urban middle class who tried to build a more just and democratic society for the well-being of the Thai people. Since
the 1980s, his monk-disciples have spread his vision and ideas to the rural areas and committed themselves to the community development projects in the villages. Hence, it has grown as a nation-wide religious movement followed by various groups of individuals and organizations.69 Some of his followers, either monks or lay leaders, established independent communities, forest centres, press houses, and public libraries in different parts of the country. These establishments, however, have never been considered branches of Suan Mokkh. There is no institutional structure or a centralized network within the movement. Buddhadāsa played the role of inspiration through his teachings and living example; he never attempted to be the head of any organization, including Suan Mokkh itself.70 Anyone who stayed with Buddhadāsa at Suan Mokkh could leave at any time and start his or her own projects with the same vision.

This flexible and informal characteristic of Buddhadāsa’s movement is in sharp contrast to the highly centralized Sangha administration. Buddhadāsa was critical of the hierarchical structure of the Sangha and its examination system. But, he never rejected the authority of the Sangha. He was interested neither in the structural change within the Sangha nor in the establishment of another order, like the Thammayutnikai. Although he was given a high rank in the Sangha hierarchy, he was not involved in any administrative work within the Sangha. He was officially appointed abbot of the royal monastery of Wat Phabaramadhatu in Chaiya, but never actually took up that position; he remained at Suan Mokkh his whole life.71 Buddhadāsa believed that the reform of the Sangha is possible only by bearing witness to the original teachings and practices of the Buddha. It meant a recovery of the early Buddhist integration of learning and practice, of individual practice and community life, and of ascetic life and social involvement.

Buddhadāsa’s radical stance went further to break down the traditional monk-lay and

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60 In an interview held in 1987, Buddhadāsa said, ‘Suan Mokkh has neither branches nor followers because I have never treated anybody as a follower, everybody is their own teacher, and attainment of dhamma or enlightenment cannot be taught’. Ibid., p. 164.
71 See Ibid., pp. 151, 159.
male-female distinctions: at Suan Mokkh, monks, nuns, lay men and women live together in the same compound, though in separate sections, pursuing their practice of Dhamma. They are encouraged to observe mindfully the movements of nature and all the daily activities. There, unlike the traditional monastic life in Theravada Buddhism, monks participate in the physical labours, together with the lay people, such as digging ditches, paving roads, and constructing buildings. Their primary duty is neither study nor chanting, nor a formal meditation; it is rather to learn Dhamma through simple daily works and actions.72 Buddhadāsa did not set any list of ‘rules’ for monks; each is responsible for oneself in practicing Dhamma.

Hence, we argue that Buddhadāsa’s movement stands for a Dhammic essentialist radical orthopraxis, balancing the forest monk tradition with social engagement. His movement is also distinct from other new Buddhist movements, such as Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke, started in the early 1970s. The Dhammakaya movement has advocated a specific meditation technique concentrating on a pure white lotus-shaped Buddha image (Dhammakaya), which is believed to exist in the core of each individual; the achievement of the visualisation of this inmost image in the biggest possible size is equated to the attainment of nibbāna.73 The practitioners are encouraged to meditate twice daily and participate in Sunday meditation sessions in the huge Dhammakaya temple outside Bangkok. The number of participants in the annual Buddhist ceremonies at this temple has been recorded as the largest religious gatherings in Thai history. The temple has received hundreds of millions of donations through the regular Sunday gatherings and the various other ceremonies. The things on sale at the temple, such as Dhamma books, tapes, bags, clothes, and souvenirs are another source of income, together with the profits from its related real estate businesses.74 Thus, this movement has created a new image of Buddhism corresponding to the consumer society of Modern Thailand.75 Its main supporters are

72 See Ibid., pp. 169-70.
73 See Ibid., pp. 57-8.
75 See Ibid., 407. See also Jackson, ‘Withering Centre, Flourishing Margins: Buddhism’s Changing Political Roles’, p. 83.
the wealthy and influential urban middle classes. The movement has often been criticized as a ‘capitalistic Buddhism’ which promotes spiritual consumerism with a ‘fast food’ meditation. Opposed to this high-tech and high-capital religious movement, the Santi Asoke sect, founded by Phra Bodhirak in 1975, has advocated a radically simple way of life through its self-sufficient agricultural communities in the rural areas. Its followers strictly observe the Buddhist moral precepts and the ten extra commandments which are summarized in the following slogan: work harder, consume less, and share the rest with society. They practice highly restrained moral virtues as the way of real meritism (bun-niyom). The Asoke community members, consisting of monks, nuns, and lay families, are all vegetarians and produce only vegetarian food through organic agriculture; the surplus products are sold in their shops and restaurants around Thailand. This movement is very keen on environmental issues and has become actively involved in politics in order to realize its ideal in the wider society. While the Dhammakaya group enjoys a considerable support from the Sangha, the Santi Asoke sect declared itself independent from the national Sangha hierarchy; and has received donations only from ‘believers’ who must visit any Asoke community at least seven times before their donations are accepted. It is regarded as a ‘Buddhist utopia’ movement: to many urban Thais, the Asoke way of life is too austere and not amenable to their urban living; however, for those who are willing, this movement

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77 See Ibid., pp. 3, 7.
80 Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, first elected governor of Bangkok in 1985, is a prominent member of the Santi Asoke. His Palang Dhamma (Moral Force) Party has been one of the leading political parties in Thailand. In 2006-2008, he led the Peoples’ Alliance for Democracy (PAD) which organized the demonstrations against Thaksin Shinawatra and hundreds of Santi Asoke members, called ‘Dhamma Army’ by the media, participated in those PAD demonstrations. For more details, see M. L. Heikkilä-Horn, ‘Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport’, Southeast Asian Studies, 3/1 (2009), 31-47.
offers a viable alternative to the modern capitalist lifestyle prevalent in Bangkok. The Santi Asoke monks are often accused of being ‘illegally ordained’ by Bodhirak, who had his monkship officially nullified by the Sangha Council of Elders.

Buddhadāsa’s movement is different from these two movements: it proposes neither a religious consumerism nor a sectarian asceticism; it has preserved a critical distance from the Sangha but never attempted to split away as a new sect; it has promoted Buddhist political theories and socially engaged activism but has never been directly involved in politics. There is no formal membership in Buddhadāsa’s movement as found in the other two movements; it is rather a radical Buddhist reform movement which aims to inspire individuals and groups to commit themselves to various renewal activities according to their own situations. It has two groups of followers: one is the urban lay intellectuals who have established the local and international NGOs; the other is his monk-disciples who have engaged in the rural development programmes. It is to be mentioned that the Santi Asoke movement was also initially influenced by Buddhadāsa and his teachings.

The most significant characteristic of Buddhadāsa’s movement is that it was not led by his personal charisma but by his teachings. Unlike other popular charismatic monks, who create their own cult-like circles of followers, Buddhadāsa emphasized the individual responsibility for following Buddhadhamma. The main driving force of his reform movement, therefore, is not his personal charisma but his writings and lectures. This is why the movement has expanded even among people who have never met him personally. As long as his teachings exist in book-form or in multi-

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82 See Essen, ‘Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement: Building Individuals, Community, and (Thai) Society’, 17.
83 Bodhirak and all the Asoke monks were on trial in 1989-96. They were forced to wear a white robe as a sign of lay status. But, they switched back to the brown robe in 1998 after the two-year period of suspended sentence was over. Since then, the number of Asoke centres in the country has rapidly increased. See Heikkilä-Horn, ‘Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport’, 34.
85 See Essen, ‘Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement: Building Individuals, Community, and (Thai) Society’, 6.
media format, the newly inspired individuals or groups will spread the movement. It is not the messenger but the message that matters. Hence, it is important to analyse Buddhadasa’s works systematically in order to understand the core of his movement. In the following chapters, therefore, we will delve into his innovative hermeneutic and radical theories of human liberation, which he drew from the early Buddhist thought and praxis by going back to the original Pali sources.
For his radical Buddhist reform movement, described in the last chapter, Buddhadāsa promoted a Dhammic essentialist thought and praxis, which he developed by a radical return to the originating sources of the early Buddhist tradition. He was keen on retrieving the heart of Buddhism, the pristine teachings of the Buddha, which he believed to be essentially in accord with the modern rationalist mind. He sought a rational and doctrinal consistency in his new interpretations of Buddhism which the educated modern Buddhist elite find appealing. For this purpose, he drew a hermeneutical principle, the theory of everyday language (phasa khon) and Dhamma language (phasa tham), out of the early Buddhist discourses. The Thai term phasa khon literally means the ‘language of people’, referring to the conventional view of ordinary people who do not really know the true meaning of the Buddha’s teachings; while the term phasa tham (Dhamma language) refers to the Dhammic perspective of the wise people who know and practice the essence of the Buddhadhamma.\(^1\) Buddhadāsa applied this theory of the two levels of language to his radical reinterpretation of the basic Buddhist doctrines and to his critical understanding of the situation of modern Thai society. More precisely, he strived to reform the traditional Buddhist beliefs and practices through his innovative hermeneutic of Dhamma language: what we call a Dhammic essentialist radical orthopraxis.

The first three sections of this chapter examine how Buddhadāsa develops his interpretative theory of phasa khon and phasa tham; and how he applies it to his reinterpretations of the traditional Buddhist cosmology and the core doctrine of Buddhism—Dependent Origination (Paṁcakaccamuppāda). In these three sections, we

demonstrate that Buddhadāsa’s praxis-oriented Dhammic essentialist approach contrasts with the traditional understanding of kamma and rebirth, the speculative theories of the Abhidhamma, and the Pali commentarial interpretations of the basic Buddhist doctrines, represented by Buddhaghosa’s Visuddhimagga. The final section provides a critical analysis of Buddhadāsa’s hermeneutic, arguing that his theory of the two languages is not completely new but the renewal of the traditional Theravada theory of the two levels of truth (sammuti-sacca and paramattha-sacca). We hold that the distinctive characteristic of his hermeneutic lies not in the theory itself but in its radical application to the reinterpretation of the traditional beliefs; and its practical implications for a transformative Buddhist spirituality and liberative praxis needed in the rapidly changing society of modern Thailand.

1. The Theory of the Two Levels of Language

The Theravada tradition upholds that all the words in the Pali canon (Tipiṭaka) are Buddhavacana, that is, ‘the words of the Buddha’. It does not mean, however, that all of them are the ‘direct’ words of the Buddha. Unless the non-direct words of the Buddha violate the original spirit and meaning intended by the Buddha, they are all considered Buddhavacana.² Hence, the correct understanding and interpretation of the Buddhavacana of the Tipiṭaka became so important for the Theravada tradition that numerous Pali commentaries and subcommentaries were produced in ancient Sri Lanka. Out of them, the Visuddhimagga (the Path of Purification), written by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century, is regarded as the most orthodox and complete Theravada commentary on the Pali canon. There had been no significant objection to

² The classical example is the Kathāvatthu of the Abhidhammapiṭaka. Although it was composed by Moggaliputta Tissa in the third century BCE, the Pali commentaries include it among the Buddha’s words. The later tradition even claimed for some words of Sri Lankan monks added to the Pali canon. For example, the Pali commentaries inform that the five stanzas at the end of the Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta (DN) and two stanzas in the Kokkāka Sutta of the Suttanipṭa were added in Sri Lanka. However, the Buddhavacana of the Pali canon (Tipiṭaka) was clearly distinguished from the later Pali commentaries; and has never been confused with the other in the tradition. See Oliver Abeynayake, ‘Theravada Tradition: A Historical and Doctrinal Study’, a lecture for MA course, recorded by In-gun Kang (Colombo: PGIPBS, University of Kelaniya, 2007), pp. 5, 17-8.
the authority of the Visuddhimagga in the Theravada tradition until Buddhadāsa raised a critical question against it from his radically praxis-oriented Dhammic essentialist perspective. Buddhadāsa’s critique was not limited to the Visuddhimagga; it was also applied to some parts of the Pali canon, such as the Abhidhammapiṭaka and the Khuddaka Nikāya.³

Through his own study and practice of Dhamma at Suan Mokkh, Buddhadāsa found a discrepancy between the core doctrine of the Buddha and the Pali commentarial tradition. He realized that even the Tipiṭaka itself include many sections which are not consistent with the Buddha’s original teachings. To Buddhadāsa, Buddhavacana should refer only to the direct words of the Buddha, mainly found in the Suttapiṭaka and the Vinayapiṭaka.⁴ Although he also cited the Buddha’s words from some texts of the Khuddaka Nikāya, the last book of the Suttapiṭaka, Buddhadāsa disregarded most of its parts, which contain the popular superstitious stories.⁵ He was critical of the Abhidhammapiṭaka, regarding it as abstract, speculative and complicated theories, added by the later tradition. He was also critical of the Visuddhimagga, believing that it provides a misleading interpretation of the core Buddhist doctrines, influenced by the traditional cosmological concepts.⁶ To Buddhadāsa, neither the Abhidhamma nor the Visuddhimagga are useful to practice pure Dhamma, the path of liberation here and now.

Thus, Buddhadāsa made his radical judgments on any Pali texts which are not

³ The Pali canon has three sections (ti-piṭaka, literally meaning ‘three-baskets’): the Suttapiṭaka, the five collections (Nikāyas) of the Buddha’s discourses (suttas); the Vinayapiṭaka, the code of monastic discipline; and the Abhidhammapiṭaka, the systematic analysis of the Buddhist doctrine, consisting of seven books. The five Nikāyas of the Suttapiṭaka are the Dīgha, Majjhima, Saṭṭhaka, Aṭṭhakatā, and Khuddaka Nikāyas.


⁵ Modern Buddhist scholars agree that most texts of the Khuddaka Nikāya are not the direct words of the Buddha and were composed chronologically later than the first four Nikāyas. Some discourses of the Khuddaka Nikāya, however, are believed to be as old as the first four Nikāyas. Abeynayake remarks that some Khuddaka texts, such as the Dhammapada, Udāna, Itivuttaka, and Suttanipāta, contain similar topics to the first four Nikāyas, whereas many other Khuddaka texts ignore the doctrinal teachings of the Buddha and display the gradual development of the popular Buddhism. See Oliver Abeynayake, A Textual and Historical Analysis of The Khuddaka Nikāya (Colombo: Tisara Press, 1984), pp. 210-5.

consistent with the original Buddha’s teachings, which he believes lead us to the immediate praxis of Dhamma. His criticism is based on his theory of the two levels of language (phasa khon and phasa tham), drawn from the early Buddhist discourses: he noted that the Buddha skillfully used these two kinds of language to help people to practice Dhamma according to their different capacity. In his lecture at Suan Mokkh in 1966, Buddhadāsa first presented this interpretative theory and published it as an essay one year later. It starts with the following remark:

Time and time again I have noticed that, regardless of how the subject is explained, there are a great many aspects of the more profound teaching that the majority of people don’t understand at all. People hear things explained many times over and still don’t understand. Why is this? If we look into it, we discover the reason. Most of us are familiar only with everyday language. We fail to realize the existence of another quite different and very special language: the language of religion, the language of Dhamma.

Here Buddhadāsa identifies the two kinds of language in the Buddhist discourses, which are two distinct modes of speaking: one is a demotic, worldly, or everyday language spoken by ordinary people who do not know Dhamma; the other is a spiritual, religious, or Dhammic language spoken by the wise people who have gained a deep insight into the Truth, into Dhamma. This definition indicates that the difference between phasa khon and phasa tham results from different knowledge. The ordinary people’s conventional knowledge is based on their experience of the physical world so that their language expresses only the matter of tangible things or worldly matters; whereas the wise people know the Truth based on their spiritual experience so that their language is related to the mental, non-physical, or meta-physical world. Thus, the distinguishing point between the two kinds of language

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7 Buddhadāsa, Phasa-Khon Phasa-Tham (Bangkok: Aksornsampan, 1967).
9 See Ibid., pp. 35-6.
10 Here the term ‘meta-physical’ does not refer to the cosmological space; it rather refers to the psychological state of the wise person. See Ibid., pp. 36-7.
is the different approach to seeing or knowing things.

In another lecture, Buddhadasa emphasizes the need to see things beyond external or material phenomena in order to realize the inner truth of things. He remarks that there are two ways of seeing things: one is ‘looking within’ and the other is ‘looking without’. He says, ‘If a person only looks without, he is the slave of external objects; but if he looks within, he becomes the master of those objects’. In other words, looking without is to see things with the state of mind that is dominated by sense objects, and looking within is to see things with a mind freed from the outer conditions. Therefore, phasa khon refers to the conventional view of ordinary people whose minds are caught within the sensory experience of the physical world; while phasa tham refers to the Dhammic view of the wise whose minds are freed from attachment to sensory objects.

Thus, Dhamma language (phasa tham) is based on Dhamma, the supermundane Truth that the Buddha and his noble disciples attained. Buddhadasa remarks, however, that the Buddha often expressed Dhamma in the spoken language of the ordinary people, so that people who know only the conventional meanings of the Buddha’s words (phasa khon) could never understand their profound meanings (phasa tham). To Buddhadasa, this means that the difference between the two languages does not lie in the expressions themselves, but rather in their different meanings: phasa khon conveys the literal meanings of the word; while phasa tham refers to the hidden, symbolic and religious meanings of the word. He cites the Buddha’s own word to support this theory:

\[
\text{Appamatto ubho atthe adhigaphā pāṇḍito}
\]

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11 The lecture, titled ‘Looking Within’, was given to the Buddhist Studies Group at Chulalongkorn University on 15 December 1961. In this lecture, Buddhadasa already introduced the seminal form of the theory of the two levels of language.


13 Buddhadasa categorizes three kinds of approach to achieve Dhamma: (1) reading and studying the Buddhist Scriptures (Pariyattidhamma); (2) renouncing the world and practicing the meditative paths strictly (Paṭipattidhamma); and (3) developing the natural insight or wisdom (paññā) through which everyone can experience the nature of the Truth that the Buddha attained (Buddhadhamma). See Buddhadasa, ‘Toward the Truth of Buddhism’, in Me and Mine, pp. 53-4.
The wise and heedful person is familiar with both modes of speaking: the meaning seen by ordinary people and the meaning which they can’t understand. One who is fluent in the various modes of speaking is a wise person.\(^{14}\)

Here the term \textit{ubho atthe} can be translated as either ‘both meanings’ or ‘both kinds of good’. The traditional interpretation of this verse has taken the second option.\(^{15}\) However, Buddhadāsa regards the term \textit{ubho atthe} as the unambiguous expression of ‘both meanings’ or ‘both modes of speaking’. He also interprets the second sentence of the verse differently from the traditional version. The Pali term \textit{diṭṭhe dhamma} means ‘the visible order of things’ or ‘the world of sensation’ and the term \textit{samparāyika dhamma} means ‘the beyond state’ or ‘the future state’. In the traditional interpretation, \textit{diṭṭhe dhamme} refers to ‘in this very life’ and \textit{samparāyika} to ‘the next life’.\(^{16}\) By contrast, Buddhadāsa interprets the terms from the new perspective, avoiding the conventional concept of rebirth. So, to him, \textit{diṭṭhe dhamme attha} refers to the meaning ‘seen’ and understood by ordinary people (\textit{phasa khon}); while \textit{attha samparāyika} refers to the meaning ‘beyond’ the ordinary sense (\textit{phasa tham}) which can be understood only by the wise, who are diligent in practicing Dhamma and fluent in both languages.\(^{17}\) To Buddhadāsa, this is a general principle for studying and interpreting the Pali texts: the constant discernment of the conventional meaning (\textit{phasa khon}) and the ultimate meaning (\textit{phasa tham}) of the Buddhadhamma.

To illustrate his point, Buddhadāsa provides several examples of interpretation according to the theory of \textit{phasa khon} and \textit{phasa tham}. The first example is the term


\(^{15}\) Bhikkhu Bodhi and the PTS translations follow this traditional interpretation: ‘the wise person who is diligent secures both kinds of good: the good visible in this very life and the good of the future life. The steadfast one, by attaining the good, is called a person of wisdom’. See Bhikkhu Bodhi, \textit{The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṁyutta Nikāya} (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 180.


‘Buddha’. In everyday language (phasa khon), the Buddha refers to the historical person, but in Dhamma language (phasa tham), it refers to the Truth or Dhamma that the historical Buddha realized and taught. Buddhadāsa quotes the famous words of the Buddha to support this: ‘Why do you want to see this foul body? One who sees Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees Dhamma’. Here the Buddha was speaking Dhamma language to correct the conventional view of seeing him as a ‘person’.

The second example is the word ‘Dhamma’. In everyday language (phasa khon), referring to the Buddhist scriptures or the talk used in expounding the Buddha’s teachings. But in Dhamma language (phasa tham), it refers to the Truth or the nirvanic state of the Buddha as cited above. Buddhadāsa remarks that the term Dhamma in the original Pali means ‘nature’ (dhammadā). Based on this, he further elaborates on the four basic meanings of Dhamma. His ethical and political thought is derived from these concepts of Dhamma, as will be thoroughly examined in the next chapter.

The third example is the word ‘Sangha’. In everyday language (phasa khon), Sangha refers to the assembly or community of monks; but, in Dhamma language (phasa tham), it refers to the high qualities of mind of the noble disciples. In other words, Sangha has the same meaning as Dhamma, referring to the mental states of the people who realize the Truth. Buddhadāsa emphasizes that what makes people different are not the physical qualities but the mental or spiritual qualities. The significance of this view is that the Sangha in phasa tham can include the lay people whose mental states are as advanced as those of the noble disciples. In fact, it is such a radical and inclusive idea that some conservatives criticize him as a destroyer of the Buddhist tradition.

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18 SN III, 120; CDB, p. 939.
19 The four meaning of Dhamma are: (1) nature itself (sabba-dhamma); (2) the law of nature (saccadhamma), specifically referring to the law of Dependent Origination (paṭiccasamuppāda); (3) the duty of every human being to act in accordance with the law of nature (paṭippatidhamma); and (4) the benefits to be derived from that lawful action (paṭivedhadhamma). For more details, see Chapter III, pp. 94-6.
The fourth example is the word ‘religion (sāsana)’. In everyday language (phasa khon), religion refers to temples, monastery buildings, pagodas, or at best ‘the teaching’. But, in Dhamma language (phasa tham), religion means ‘the sublime way of life (brahmacariya)’, that is, the way of life in accordance with Dhamma. It is the way of practice that can really free the person from suffering (dukkha). In a lecture given to a Buddhist group in Bangkok in 1967, Buddhadāsa expands the meaning of sāsana to include all religions. Here again, in everyday language (phasa khon), religion refers to different religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism; but, in Dhamma language (phasa tham), it refers to the absolute Truth shared by all religions. He holds that, if a person reaches the fundamental nature (Dhamma) of religion, he/she will realize that all religions are essentially the same. From this Dhammic essentialist perspective, asserts Buddhadāsa, ‘there is no such thing called religion—there is no Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam’. His inclusivist view on religion and interreligious relations will be examined in the next chapter.

Buddhadāsa gives many more examples of different interpretations according to the theory of phasa khon and phasa tham. Those examples show that the words of the Buddha (Buddhavacana) can be interpreted in the conventional-literal meaning (phasa khon), or the spiritual-metaphorical meaning (phasa tham). To Buddhadāsa, the true meaning of the Buddha’s words can be grasped only at the level of phasa tham. It does not mean that the whole Tipiṭaka must be read as symbolic expressions of the hidden truth; there are words which must be read in a literal sense as well. Buddhadāsa’s main concern, however, lies on the parts of the Suttapiṭaka that he believes should be interpreted in the Dhammic sense (phasa tham) but have been literally understood in the conventional sense (phasa khon) by the commentarial


23 The original talk was delivered spontaneously and informally. A first translation, done by Bhikkhu Puñño, maintains the style of the original talk. In its edited version, Santikaro tries to keep the original style but interpolates explanations for the non-Buddhist readers who are unfamiliar with the Buddhist terminology and the style of Buddhadāsa’s teachings. In Me and Mine, it has been revised to a more reader-friendly version by Swearer. For the original version, see Buddhadāsa, No Religion, trans. by Puñño Bhikkhu, rev. by Santikaro Bhikkhu (Chaiya: Buddhadāsa Foundation, 2005).

24 Buddhadāsa, ‘No Religion!’, in Me and Mine, p. 146.
The traditional cosmological concepts, such as heavens and hells, are good examples of this misunderstanding. Buddhadasa is critical of the naïve readings of those Pali texts based on ancient cosmology. In his view, those texts are to be reinterpreted through the Dhamma language, which is in accord with a modern scientific world view. The following section demonstrates how Buddhadasa applies his theory of the two languages to his reinterpretation of the traditional cosmology.

2. Reinterpretation of the Traditional Cosmology

In the Pali Tipiṭaka, the Buddha often refers to the various levels of heavens and hells inhabited by celestial beings (devas) and demons. It is quite clear that early Buddhists believed in the existence of heavens and hells where living beings are destined to be reborn according to their merits (puñña) and demerits (pāpa). The Buddhist classification of heavens and hells interrelated closely with the Hindu cosmology and gradually developed until the period of the late post canonical works. The generic term for the heavenly words is devaloka (the realms of gods) which is divided into three hierarchical spheres: firstly, the sphere of sensuous pleasures (Kāmavacara) which comprises six heavens; secondly, the form or fine-material sphere (Rūpavacara) which comprises sixteen heavens; and lastly, the formless or immaterial sphere (Arūpavacara) which is comprised of four heavens. It is emphasized, however, that all these heavens and gods (devas) are impermanent. Regarding the hells, the Pali texts refer to the four woeful states. The first is Pettivisaya (the realm of the fathers or of the ghosts) where beings are scorched and exhausted by hot weather; weary, parched, and thirsty under the dappled shadow cast by a tree with scanty foliage. The second is Tiracchānayoni (the animal realm) where beings are suffering in a cesspit. The third is Asura, which originally meant the ‘fallen gods’ from the summit of Mount Meru by Sakka; in the later canonical texts,

however, Asuras came to denote the ‘miserable beings’. The last and the worst hell is Niraya where evil beings suffer the definite pain (ekantadukkha) in the burning charcoal pit.\textsuperscript{27}

Thus, in the Pali scriptures, the living beings are believed to be reborn as one of those six destinations within saṃsāra: (1) gods (deva); (2) human beings (manussa); (3) demi-gods (asura); (4) animals (tiracchāna); (5) hungry ghosts (peta); or (6) hell denizens (naraka). In the Theravada tradition, all these superhuman and subhuman beings are regarded as real; and they are believed to be reborn in one of three realms of the universe (tiloka): the realm of sensuous desire (Kaṇaloka), of the fine material form (Rūpaloka), and of formlessness (Arūpaloka).\textsuperscript{28} As mentioned in the last chapter, this cosmology of the three worlds (traiphum) was introduced to Thailand in the 14th century in the Traibhūmikathā.\textsuperscript{29} In this traditional cosmology, human beings belong in the Kaṇaloka, the lowest plane of the three worlds (tiloka) but they have a privilege to attain the final liberation (nibbāna), the supermundane state. Monks have more opportunities than lay people to practice the strict meditation called samatha or samādhi (concentration), by which they can be reborn in different levels of the second realm (Rūpaloka) or the third realm (Arūpaloka).\textsuperscript{30} In order to attain nibbāna, they must practice the special meditation called vipassanā (insightful observance) which is the only certain way to attain the highest wisdom (pañña), the fundamental factor for the final liberation. For lay people, however, nibbāna is often considered a remote goal which might only be attained after numerous times of rebirths in different planes of the world. Even many monks in Thailand or in other Theravada countries usually believe that they will not be able to achieve nibbāna in this life. Their aim seems to become a stream-enterer (sotāpanna), the stage traditionally believed to be sure of attaining nibbāna after seven more rebirths at most.

\textsuperscript{28} For more details, see C. Witanachchi, ‘Heaven and Hell’, pp. 430-1.
\textsuperscript{29} See Chapter I, p. 27; footnote 14.
Buddhadāsa critically reinterprets these concepts of heavens, hells, and rebirth. He points out that the traditional reading of these concepts is solely based on everyday language (*phasa khon*) so that people have failed to understand their deeper meaning as intended by the Buddha. For example, in temple murals, the four woeful states of suffering are vividly depicted as real situations; in Buddhadāsa’s view, however, they must be interpreted, in Dhamma language (*phasa tham*), as the woeful states of human mind. Hence, he explains that the hell denizens (*naraka*) refer to the ‘anxious states of mind’ as follows:

Hell is anxiety (in Thai, literally ‘a hot heart’). Whenever one experiences anxiety, burning, and scorching, one is simultaneously reborn as a creature of hell. It is a spontaneous rebirth, a mental rebirth. Although the body physically inhabits the human realm, as soon as anxiety arises the mind falls into hell. Anxiety about possible loss of prestige and fame, anxiety of any sort—that is hell.\(^{31}\)

Buddhadāsa continues to reinterpret the animal rebirth (*tiraccchāna*) as ‘stupidity’ transforming the mind into that of a dumb animal. He says, ‘It happens right here and now. One may be born as a beast many times over in a single day. So in Dhamma language birth as a beast means stupidity’.\(^{32}\) To Buddhadāsa, the hungry ghost (*peta*) in everyday language (*phasa khon*) refers to a creature with a tiny mouth and enormous stomach; but in Dhamma language (*phasa tham*), it refers to a mental state, indicating the endless craving and never satisfied mind. He points out that even while doing meditation one can fall into this woeful state of mind:

Going after something with craving constitutes being a *peta*. [...] Going for lessons in insight meditation without knowing what it is all about is craving and greed; it is ignorance that leads to suffering because it is full of grasping and clinging. However, if a person wishes to attain *nibbāna*, after clearly and

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intelligently perceiving suffering and the means whereby it can be extinguished, and in this frame of mind steadily and earnestly learns about insight meditation in the right way, then such a wish to attain *nibbāna* is not craving, and it is not suffering.\(^{33}\)

Buddhadāsa clarifies here that wishing or desiring is not always necessarily craving as a woeful state of mind; there is a positive wish towards freedom from suffering. What he refers to by the symbolic image of the hungry ghost (*peta*) is the mental hunger that chases things, even spiritual things, without ever catching them. The origin of such craving is ignorance. In his view, the wise person seeks what has to be done and is satisfied with what he has done.

The last woeful state of mind is *asura*. Buddhadāsa explains the term as ‘not brave’ (*a-sura*), that is, a ‘coward’ mind. In everyday language (*phasa khon*), *asuras* refer to the invisible beings which go around haunting and spooking, but are too afraid to show themselves. They are the frightened ghosts. In Dhamma language (*phasa tham*), however, *asura* refers to ‘fear’ of the human mind: ‘whenever one is afraid, one is simultaneously reborn an *asura*. To be afraid without good reason, to be excessively fearful, to be superstitiously afraid of certain harmless creatures—this is what it is to be reborn as an *asura*.\(^{34}\) Buddhadāsa also remarks that people are too afraid of death or of arriving in hell; some are even afraid of attaining *nibbāna*, believing that they would then lose all the flavour of life. To him, these are the symptoms of the *asura* mind here and now.

Regarding the heavens, Buddhadāsa reinterprets different levels of heavenly worlds in terms of different levels of one’s mental development in this life. For example, the *Paranimmitavasavatti* heaven is interpreted as the mental state which is filled with sensual pleasure. It is the ordinary people’s state of mind. But, if someone with a hunger for sensory objects had indulged oneself until saturation, then he/she would want only to remain calm and still, untouched by sensual objects. Buddhadāsa calls

\(^{33}\) Buddhadāsa, *Buddha-dhamma for Students*, p. 69.

such state of mind the *Brahmakīya* heaven, that is, the state of mental well-being or ‘mental freedom’ that remains calm without being disturbed by sensuality. In this stage, however, the idea of ‘self’ or ‘I’ still persists. It is not the real Buddhist freedom. To Buddhadāsa, real freedom is the freedom from attachment to any idea of self and anything belonging to a self. He is convinced that the ‘freed-mind’ (*chit-wāng*) from the selfish attachment is the core of Buddhism.\(^{35}\) In his view, therefore, the different levels of heavens indicate the process of mental development towards final liberation (*nibbāna*), the ultimate fruit of the void-mind (*chit-wāng*). Māra, the lord of the *Paranimmitavasavatti* heaven is reinterpreted as the mental state which obstructs the spiritual progress towards the complete cessation of suffering (*dukkha*).\(^{36}\)

Taken as a whole, Buddhadāsa uses his theory of *phasa khon* and *phasa tham* for the systematic reinterpretation of the Buddhist scriptures; thereby the cosmological realms transform into the psychological states, and the celestial beings and demons into the personal experiences of those mental states in this very life.\(^{37}\) To Buddhadāsa, the traditional interpretation of the cosmological concepts is solely based on the literal sense of the terms (*phasa khon*) so that the Buddhist teachings have become too farfetched for the modern audiences. He is convinced that his reinterpretation of those terms in Dhamma language (*phasa tham*) is accordant with the ‘meaning and purpose of what the Buddha taught’.\(^{38}\) However, his conservative critics have accused him of distorting the Pali scriptures with his own ideological interpretation. They argue that, in the Pali canon, the Buddha often refers to those cosmological concepts as real. In their view, the Theravada tradition has always believed in the heavens, hells, and rebirths in the real sense.

Buddhadāsa does not totally reject the possible existence of those cosmological

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35. The term *chit-wāng* literally means ‘void mind’ or ‘empty mind’. But, the term must not be understood in its negative sense of lack; what Buddhadāsa means by the term is the mind free of the self-idea and the selfish desires. The void-mind or the freed-mind (*chit-wāng*) is a key concept to understand Buddhadāsa’s thought. See Buddhadāsa, *Buddha-Dhamma for Students*, p. 75. For a more detailed examination, see the first section of Chapter III.


38. See Buddhadāsa, *Buddha-Dhamma for Students*, p. 70.
worlds and rebirths either. He emphasizes, however, that those concepts must be 
reinterpreted in the light of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. To him, the 
essence of the Buddhadhamma is the liberation (nibbāna) from suffering (dukkha) 
here and now. The Buddha also warned people not to ponder too much on kamma 
and rebirth because it would derive them mad.\textsuperscript{39} Buddhadāsa is faithful to this 
advice of the Buddha. He asserts that the Buddhist goal is not the rebirth in the 
mystical realms of the impermanent world, but the attainment of liberation in this 
very life:

What we may become after death can be put aside. There is no need to concern 
ourselves with it. If we avoid in this life the hungry ghosts of Dhamma 
language, then no matter how we die, we are certain not to become the hungry 
ghosts of everyday language. If we live and practice the Dhamma properly, we 
avoid falling into the woeful states to follow death. The four woeful states are a 
part of life. The heaven and hell of everyday language are realms outside—
though don’t ask me where—and they are attained after death. But heaven and 
hell of Dhamma language are to be found in the mind and may be attained any 
time at all.\textsuperscript{40}

Thus, Buddhadāsa does not completely deny the traditional cosmological concepts, 
but rather remarks on their irrelevance to the essential goal of Buddhism and to the 
modern rationalistic world view. His critical view of the Abhidhamma and the 
Visuddhimagga is also to be understood in this line of thought. The point is not a 
total rejection of the traditional interpretations, but the retrieval of the original 
meanings in the light of everyday language (phasa khon) and Dhamma language 
(phasa tham), which he thinks the most appropriate skill for the interpretation of the 
Buddhadhamma. In the following section, we will illustrate how Buddhadāsa 
radically reinterprets the basic Buddhist doctrines, mainly focusing on the doctrine of

\textsuperscript{39} The Buddha says that the relations between kamma and its results (vipāka) in saṃsāra cannot be 
pondered (acinteyya) and should not be pondered (acintetabba) because it is too complicated and 
brings people to madness (ummaññassa) and frustration (vighātassa). See AN II, 80.

\textsuperscript{40} Buddhadāsa, ‘Everyday Language and Dhamma Language’, in Me and Mine, p. 135.
Dependent Origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), from his practical Dhammic essentialist perspective; and how his new interpretation sharply contrasts with that of the *Abhidhamma* and the *Visuddhimagga*.

3. Reinterpretation of the Buddhist Doctrines

The most fundamental Buddhist doctrine, accepted by all Buddhist schools, is the Four Noble Truths. In the Pali scriptures, the Buddha often summarizes his entire teachings into two things: ‘As I did formerly, even now, what I teach is just suffering (*dukkha*) and the cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*)’.\(^4^1\) This does not mean that the Buddha made preferential value-judgments between the four truths. The two other truths—the origin of suffering (*dukkha-samudaya*) and the path leading to the cessation of suffering (*dukkhanirodha-gāminī-paṭipada*)—are equally called ‘noble’ (*ariya*). The above statement is rather an emphatic expression of the soteriological significance of the Buddhadhamma, showing that all other teachings of the Buddha are to be understood in the light of the practical purpose of attaining liberation from suffering (*dukkha*). Buddhadāsa is so keen on this principle that his interpretation of the Buddhist doctrines always aims to lead people to the sincere practice of Dhamma here and now. His reinterpretation of the core Buddhist doctrine, the Dependent Origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), is the best example of his radically praxis-oriented Dhammic essentialism, distinct from the traditional interpretation.

There are two forms of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* in the Pali texts: one is the abstract statement of the interdependent principle;\(^4^2\) the other is the twelfeifold formula which is the particular application of that universal principle to the specific problem of

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\(^{4^1}\) MN I, 140; SN III, 119.

\(^{4^2}\) The abstract formula of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* is: ‘when this exists, that comes to be (*imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti*); with the arising of this, that arises (*imassa uppādī idaṃ uppajjati*); when this does not exist, that does not come to be (*imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti*); with the cessation of this, that ceases (*imassa nirodhi idaṃ nirujjhati*). See MN II, 32; SN II, 28. Buddhadāsa applies this general principle of interdependency (*idappaccayat*) to his political theory called Dhammic Socialism. For more details, see the second section of Chapter III.
human suffering (dukkha). It is on this second formula that Buddhadāsa gives his distinctive reinterpretation. The twelve links of Paṭiccasamuppāda are given in the Pali texts as follows:

- avijjā (ignorance) gives rise to saīkhāra
- saīkhāra (disposition) gives rise to viṇīṭṭha
- viṇīṭṭha (consciousness) gives rise to nāma-rūpa
- nāma-rūpa (name-and-form) gives rise to saḷāyatana
- saḷāyatana (sense bases) gives rise to phasa
- phasa (contact) gives rise to vedanā
- vedanā (feeling) gives rise to taṭṭha
- taṭṭha (craving) gives rise to upālāna
- upālāna (clinging) gives rise to bhava
- bhava (becoming) gives rise to jāti
- jāti (birth) gives rise to jarā-marāpa

Buddhadāsa regards this exposition of Paṭiccasamuppāda as the heart of Buddhism in the sense that it is another version of the Four Noble Truths: it is a detailed demonstration of how suffering (dukkha) arises and ceases every moment from interdependent psycho-physical factors.44 He critically notes, however, that since Buddhaghosa explained Paṭiccasamuppāda as a rebirth process over the three life times in the Visuddhimagga, the Pali commentarial tradition has followed that interpretation.45 Hence, in the Theravada tradition, the first two factors (avijjā and saīkhāra) are regarded as the karmic causes from the past life; and the next five factors (viṇīṭṭha, nāma-rūpa, saḷāyatana, phasa, vedanā) as the karmic results in the present life; the following three factors (taṭṭha, upālāna, bhava) as the karmic causes from the present life; and the last two factors (jāti and jarā-marāpa) as the karmic

43 MN III, 63-4; SN II, 1. The term jarā-marāpa (decay and death) refers to the generic term dukkha (suffering). In the Pali texts, the term jarā-marāpa is almost always followed by the other term soka-parideva-dukkha-domamassa-upāyās (sorrow-grief-pain-distress-despair). These terms are in the list of suffering (dukkha) presented by the Buddha in his first discourse. See SN V, 421.

44 See Buddhadāsa, Paṭiccasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination, pp. 22-4.

45 For Buddhaghosa’s expounding of this doctrine, see Buddhaghosa, Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification, trans. by Bhikkhu Ṋāṇamoli (Kandy: BPS,1999), pp. 525-604.
results in the future life. Buddhadāsa criticises this interpretation as misleading people from what the Buddha really taught:

The Buddha delivered his teaching on Dependent Origination in order to destroy wrong views and in order to destroy attachment to the self, beings, and persons. So it is that there is a continuous series of eleven conditions wherein no self, no ‘I’ can be found. Now there are some people who explain it anew by saying Paṭiccasamuppāda covers three life times (births) connected by the same person. […] When Paṭiccasamuppāda is taught in that way, it becomes a teaching of a self, soul, being or person which whirls about in the maelstrom of existence, just as in the wrong view of Bhikkhu Sati, the fisherman’s son. But the Buddha clearly taught about the absence of self by means of Paṭiccasamuppāda; to teach that Paṭiccasamuppāda covers three lives is to undo the Buddha’s teaching and teach that there is a self.46

Thus, Buddhadāsa argues that the traditional interpretation goes against the basic Buddhist doctrine of non-self (anatta). He points out that such misinterpretation is found even among the Buddha’s own disciples like Bhikkhu Sati, who believed that the Buddha had taught him about the ‘same consciousness’ which runs and wanders through the round of rebirths.47 Buddhadāsa also remarks that the doctrine of Paṭiccasamuppāda is so profound and difficult that the Buddha was reluctant to set out to teach it to the ordinary people.48 When the Buddha had eventually begun to teach Dhamma, he adapted his methods to the different needs and intellectual capacities of his audiences. To Buddhadāsa, the most important method that the Buddha employed in his teachings was to use two kinds of language: one is the conventional language (vohāra-vacana), used in order to teach morals to the ordinary people who habitually cling to the concept of permanent self in saṃsāric rebirths; the other is the absolute language (paramattha-vacana), used for explaining the

47 See MN I, 258; MLDB, p. 350.
48 See MN I, 168-75; MLDB, pp. 260-8.
ultimate reality to the people who have enough capacity to understand the profound meaning of Dhamma.⁴⁹ Buddhadāsa derived his theory of everyday language (phasa khon) and Dhamma language (phasa tham) from these two kinds of language of the Buddha. He emphasizes that Paṭiccasamuppāda is not a matter of morality taught in everyday language (phasa khon) to encourage people to make merits for a better rebirth, but the ultimate Truth always taught in Dhamma language (phasa tham) to eradicate the conventional idea of self or person.⁵⁰ To Buddhadāsa, the twelve links of Paṭiccasamuppāda indicate neither a ‘person’ going through the process of saṃsāric rebirths, nor a ‘person’ to be completely annihilated at death.⁵¹ It is the middle way (majjhima paṭipada) of the ultimate Truth as discovered and taught by the Buddha in Dhamma language (phasa tham) against both Eternalism (sassatavāda) and Annihilationism (ucchedavāda).⁵²

The eleven factors of Paṭiccasamuppāda, according to Buddhadāsa, are given in many forms in various discourses of the Suttapiṭaka, showing clearly that these factors do not cover three life times but indicate the present reality of how suffering (dukkha) arises and ceases in the human mind.⁵³ He clarifies that the term dukkha used in this core doctrine (Paṭiccasamuppāda) refers to a specific kind of suffering, not the ordinary meaning of suffering: it is a suffering dependent on ‘attachment’. In his interpretation, the whole process of Paṭiccasamuppāda demonstrates how dukkha arises from attachment in daily life:

Suffering in the operation of Paṭiccasamuppāda must always depend on attachment. Take a farmer who works out in the open, exposed to wind and sun, transplanting the young rice plants: he thinks ‘Oh! I’m so hot!’ If no clinging arises in the sense of ‘I’ am so hot, there is merely suffering of a natural kind and not of the kind associated with Dependent Origination. Suffering

⁴⁹ See Buddhadāsa, Paṭiccasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination, pp. 5, 20.
⁵⁰ See Ibid., pp. 5-6.
⁵¹ See Ibid., pp. 6-7.
⁵² See Ibid., pp. 7-10. In the Brahmajāla Sutta, the Buddha lists the 62 wrong views under two broad categories: Brahmanical Eternalism (sassatavāda) and Materialistic Annihilationism (ucchedavāda). For more details, see DN I, 1-46; LDB, pp. 67-90.
according to the law of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* must have clinging to the point of agitation about the ‘I’ concept. So it happens that the farmer becomes irritated and dissatisfied with being born a farmer. He thinks that it’s his fate, his karma so that he must bathe in his own sweat. When one thinks this way, suffering according to the Law of Dependent Origination arises. […] Please observe this carefully and make clear the distinction between these two kinds of suffering. If there is clinging, it is suffering according to Dependent Origination.54

Thus, Buddhadāsa distinguishes *dukkha* from the natural or physical suffering: the origin of *dukkha* is the strong attachment to the concept of ‘I’ or ‘self’. He explains that all the stages of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* indicate the momentary process of how such attachment arises.55 He asserts that it is not necessary to wait three life times in order to complete one full cycle of *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, as the traditional commentaries teach. In his new interpretation, the term ‘birth’ (*jāti*) of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* refers to the birth of the concept of ‘I’ and ‘mine’, not the physical birth.56 This is a crucial point where Buddhadāsa differs from the traditional interpretation. The traditional commentators consider the birth (*jāti*) a physical birth in the conventional meaning (*phasa khon*) so that they interpret *Paṭiccasamuppāda* as the process of rebirth over three life times. However, to Buddhadāsa, the term ‘birth’ (*jāti*) in the context of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* means the full blossoming of attachment to the idea of ‘I’ and ‘mine’. To him, the birth of the ‘self’ concept and of selfish desire is the starting point of human sufferings such as sickness, grief, sorrow, and distress. He remarks that the Buddha summarizes all these sufferings in one compound Pali word, *pañcupālāna-khandhā* (the five aggregates of clinging), showing that the origin of human suffering (*dukkha*) is not the physical-mental elements (*pañcakkhandha*) themselves; but the ignorant attachment (*upālāna*) to those elements as ‘myself’.57

Buddhadāsa argues that if the terms ‘birth’ (*jāti*) and ‘death’ (*maraṇa*) are understood in the physical sense, and the process of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* is interpreted in

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56 See Ibid., pp. 15-6, 44.
57 SN V, 421; *CDB*, p. 1844.
conventional language, the Buddha should have died immediately after his enlightenment, as the unavoidable consequence of each stage of *Paṭiccasamuppāda*. In other words, with the Buddha’s enlightenment, ignorance (*avijjā*) was completely extinguished; because of the extinction of ignorance, mental disposition (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*) were to be extinguished; and inevitably, name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*) was also to be extinguished, which would mean the ‘death’ of the Buddha in the ordinary sense (*phasā khon*). What happened to the Buddha in his enlightenment, however, argues Buddhadāsa, was not the complete dissolution of the five aggregates but the complete extinction of the ignorant attachment (*avijjā* and *tañha*) to ‘I’ and ‘mine’; that is, the real freedom from suffering (*dukkha*) in the Dhammic sense (*phasā tham*). Hence, to Buddhadāsa, the words ‘birth’ or ‘extinguish’ here do not refer to physical birth or death in the conventional sense of everyday language (*phasā khon*), but to the arising and ceasing of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ in the ultimate sense of Dhamma language (*phasā tham*). He remarks that these concepts of ‘birth’ and ‘death’ are closely related to the concept of ‘person’; and the individual ‘person’ (*puggala*) in everyday language is called ‘name-and-form’ (*nāma-rūpa*) in Dhamma language.

According to Buddhadāsa, there are two extreme views of how a person or name-and-form arises and passes away. The first is the conventional view of ordinary people, that of a person born from the mother’s womb and who passes away into a coffin; he/she exists for about eighty years between birth and death. The second is the philosophical view of the *Abhidhamma*, that name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*) arises and passes away every moment based on the *bhavaṅga-citta*. One cycle of arising,
persisting, and passing away of name-and-form (nāma-rūpa) in each successive instant is faster than the frequency of an electrical current, so that we cannot count the number of cycles.63 Buddhadāsa points out that both views are inappropriate to understand what really happens in the process of life: one is too slow and the other is too fast.64 In his judgment, the Abhidhammic theory is a superfluous invention which emphasizes the pure mechanism of the mental phenomena, unconcerned with the Paṭiccasamuppāda of the original Pali scriptures. Hence, to Buddhadāsa, no matter how true the Abhidhammic explanation is, it is totally useless for our practice of Dhamma.65

Buddhadāsa argues that both the highly sophisticated Abhidhammic interpretation and the conventional Pali commentarial interpretation of Paṭiccasamuppāda obstruct the proper Dhamma practice. He asks: if the present sufferings are caused by the kamma from the past life, and the present behaviours will cause the karmic results in the future life, then how can one practice in a way that leads to benefits here and now? It is impossible to practice because the causes and results of our practice are beyond our reach.66 To Buddhadāsa, Paṭiccasamuppāda is first and foremost a ‘practical matter’ leading us to liberation from suffering (dukkha) in this very life. He is convinced that we can obtain freedom from dukkha by mindfully observing the process of Paṭiccasamuppāda every time it occurs; and not allowing the selfish craving to arise in our mind.67 Buddhadāsa holds that this is the only beneficial interpretation of Paṭiccasamuppāda, closely related to our daily practice of Dhamma.68

In his early monk life, however, Buddhadāsa also used to teach Paṭiccasamuppāda in the traditional way. Later, he came to recognize that the traditional interpretation is contradictory to both the spirit and the letter of the early Buddhist texts. According to his careful reading of those early texts, each stage of Paṭiccasamuppāda is presented

63 See Buddhadāsa, Paṭiccasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination, p. 72.
64 See Ibid., pp. 72-3.
66 See Ibid., p. 77.
67 See Buddhadāsa, Paṭiccasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination, pp. 27-8.
68 See Ibid., pp. 30, 113.
without adding anything in between the twelve links; but, in the commentarial texts, there are three points of connection or sandhi (union) between the past and present births; there is another in the middle of the present birth; and finally another link between the present and future births. Thus, in his judgment, the later commentaries arbitrarily divide the undivided process of Pañcasamuppāda of the original Pali texts into three life times. Hence, he argues that the traditional interpretation goes against not only the spirit of non-self (anatta), but also the letter of the original Pali scriptures.

The origin of such commentarial misinterpretation, according to Buddhadasa, can be traced back to the time of the Third Buddhist Council in the third century BCE; but the first written form is found in the Visuddhimagga. He argues that the main source of misinterpretation was Brahmanism, on which Buddhaghosa received his early education. He gives some examples demonstrating how Buddhaghosa makes wrong interpretations due to his Brahmanical concepts. One notable example: when Buddhaghosa describes the Buddha’s virtue of being a ‘knower of the world’ (lokavidū), he does not follow the Buddha’s own explanation but sticks to the Brahmanical world view. In the Pali scriptures, the Buddha describes the meaning of knowing the world as follows:

Friend, I say that without having reached the end of the world, there is no making an end to suffering. It is, friend, within just this fathom-long body endowed with perception and mind, that I make known the world, the origin of the world, and the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world. The world’s end can never be reached by means of travelling, yet without reaching the world’s end, there is no release from suffering. Therefore, truly, the world-knower, the wise one, gone to the world’s end, fuller of the holy life, having known the world’s end, at peace, longs not for this world or

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69 See Ibid., pp. 75-6.
70 See Ibid., pp. 63, 77.
71 See Ibid., p. 66.
72 See Ibid., p. 83.
73 See Ibid., pp. 84-5.
Buddhadāsa asserts that here the Buddha clearly explains that the ‘world’ in the Buddhist sense does not refer to the spatial universe but to ‘human existence’, which is filled with suffering (dukkha) and which can be liberated from dukkha by the practice of Dhamma or holy life. To him, the Buddha is the ‘knower of the world’ not because he has reached the end of the universe by travelling, but because he has exhausted the truth of this world, that is, the Four Noble Truths. However, in the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa explains the Buddha’s virtue of knowing the world differently: his explanation mainly focuses on the Buddha’s extensive knowledge of all the phenomena of the universe. After describing various aspects of different worlds and all their inhabitants, Buddhagosha concludes that the world spheres are infinite in number, the world elements are infinite, and yet the Buddha has experienced, known and penetrated them with his infinite knowledge; the Buddha is the ‘knower of the world’ because he has seen the world in all ways. Buddhadosa argues that those detailed explanations of the world in the *Visuddhimagga* come from the Brahmanic belief concerning the universe. In his view, the misinterpretation of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* as the rebirth process over three lifetimes also comes from Buddhaghosa’s Brahmanical understanding of the ‘world’ as such. To Buddhadosa, however, the process of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* explains, using Dhamma language (*phasa tham*), how the ‘world’ of dukkha arises and ceases in the fathom-long body of each person in this very life.

Thus, to Buddhadosa, the *Paṭiccasamuppāda* of the original Buddhadhamma is essentially a practical teaching. He emphasizes that we have to understand two Pali words correctly for the practical purposes—*sambhavesī* and *bhūta*. In everyday language, *sambhavesī* means ‘beings or spirits not yet born’ or ‘one who is seeking birth’; and *bhūta* means ‘beings already born’ or ‘living beings’. Therefore, in the

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74 SN I, 62; CDB, p. 158.
75 See Buddhadosa, *Paṭiccasamuppāda: Practical Dependent Origination*, p. 84.
76 For more details, see Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification*, pp. 199-202.
78 See Ibid., p. 86.
water-pouring ceremony, people chant these two words to help spirits (sambhavesī) find the place to be born (bhūta). To Buddhadāsa, this is not a Buddhist practice because Buddhism does not believe that ‘spirits’ float around after death.⁷⁹ To him, this is another example of how the conventional thought (phasa khon) gives rise to superstitious rituals. In his Dhammic interpretation, sambhavesī refers to the state of an ordinary person’s mind at those times when the selfish craving has not arisen yet; and bhūta refers to the state of the mind when a strong attachment to ‘I’ and ‘mine’ has arisen.⁸⁰ Thus, to Buddhadāsa, there are two states in the ordinary people’s mind: one is the more peaceful state, with the selfish attachment waiting to be born (sambhavesī); the other is the state when such attachment is already born and the concept of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ has blossomed fully (bhūta).

Buddhadāsa clarifies that the state of sambhavesī is not the same as the complete stillness after the cessation of suffering (dukkha), but the temporary calmness which is ready to go through the process of Pañcācasamuppāda again.⁸¹ In other words, whenever our senses engage with sense objects without mindfulness, our mind will immediately be transformed from sambhavesī to bhūta. He emphasizes that we have to make good use of the time of sambhavesī by training our mind to be wakeful and not to allow the mental defilements (āsava and kilesa) to arise.⁸² He asserts that the Buddha taught Pañcācasamuppāda in order to help people practice the way to end suffering (dukkha); the end of suffering means the end of the defilements; and the end of both sambhavesī and bhūta in our mind.⁸³

Buddhadāsa points out that the Buddha realized the end of defilements (āsava) or the cessation of suffering (dukkha) by seeing and knowing the nature of the arising and passing away of the five aggregates of clinging (pañcupāda-khandhā). He further remarks that the Buddha presented the way of attaining such liberating knowledge

⁷⁹ See Ibid., p. 89.
⁸⁰ See Ibid., pp. 90-1.
⁸¹ See Ibid., p. 92.
⁸² The Pali term āsava, derived from the Sanskrit āsrava (literally ‘influx’), refers to defilements that keep the mind bound to suffering (dukkha). The term kilesa, derived from the Sanskrit kliṣyati (‘to stain’), refers to ‘moral defilements’ or ‘defilements of mind’. For more details, see You-Mee Lee, Beyond Āsava & Kilesa: Understanding the Roots of Suffering According to the Pāli Canon ((Dehiwala, Sri Lanka: BCC, 2009), pp. 5-6, 37, 175-7.
⁸³ See Buddhadāsa, Pañcācasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination, pp. 105-6.
(āsavakkhayañāna) as the radiant wheel of Paññācasamuppāda in another twelvefold formula, showing how suffering (dukkha) can be eradicated through spiritual development. Hence, Buddhadāsa emphasizes that we do not have to worry about or fear the world of suffering (samsāra) but simply use it as a foundation of practice toward liberation (nibbāna). He distinguishes three kinds of nibbāna: (1) tadaṅga nibbāna which occurs naturally from time to time when we are in favourable surroundings, in associating with calm people, or in peaceful rest; (2) vikkhambhana nibbāna which appears when we suppress the defilements (āsava) in our mind by the concentrating Buddhist meditation (samādhi); and (3) samuccheda nibbāna which results from decisively uprooting all mental defilements and ignorance (avijjā), even at the unconscious level (anusaya). Buddhadāsa asserts that all these nibbāna can be attained here and now in samsāra through the mindful observation of the process of Paññācasamuppāda.

Buddhadāsa also points out that, in the Visuddhimagga, the meaning of anupālisesa-nibbāna is misinterpreted as the full extinction of the five aggregates of arahants after death; and saupālisesa-nibbāna as the experience of arahants while living. To Buddhadāsa, this explanation is not in accordance with the original Pali text, the Nibbānadhātu Sutta of Itivuttaka, in which both terms refer to the ‘living experience’ of arahants who attained nibbāna in this very life. He remarks that the ancient Thai farmers were wiser than Buddhaghosa when they created the following proverb: ‘nibbāna is in dying before death’. To Buddhadāsa, this rural proverb illustrates the correct meaning of nibbāna as ‘dying to selfhood’ before ‘death of the body’.

84 For the twelvefold formula of spiritual development, see SN II, 30; CDB, pp. 554-3.
85 See Buddhadāsa, ‘Nibbāna Exists in Samsāra’, in Me and Mine, pp. 143-4. For the list of the seven latent tendencies (anusaya) and ten unwholesome fetters (saṁyojana), see SN V, 60-61; MN I, 432.
86 See Ibid., pp. 142, 144-5.
87 See Buddhaghosa, Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification, pp. 516-7.
88 See Buddhadāsa, Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination, pp. 86-7. Abeynayake also points out that the term anupālisesa-nibbāna indicates the living experience of an arahant because the word idheva (right here) is used for that term in the Itivuttaka text (no. 38). In his interpretation, saupālisesa-nibbāna refers to the nirvanic experience of arahants with their contacts and feelings; while anupālisesa-nibbāna refers to the nirvanic experience of arahants without any feelings and perceptions (nirodha-samāpatti) in the deepest meditation. For more details, see Oliver Abeynayake, ‘Nibbāna as Empirical Reality’, JCBSSL, Vol. II (January, 2004), 167-79.
89 See Buddhadāsa, Buddha-Dhamma for Students, pp. 38-9.
the city of immortality where all wishes are granted. In many Thai temples, Dhamma preachers often talk of the ‘wonder city of nibbāna’ in the sense of wish fulfilling paradise after death.\(^90\) Hence, Buddhadāsa holds that both the Pali commentarial tradition and the Thai popular Buddhism misunderstand the real meaning of nibbāna, which is never to be referred to the state after death. He asserts: any time there is freedom from mental defilements (kilesa) and suffering (dukkha), there is nibbāna; if defilements have been eradicated completely, it is permanent nibbāna—the total extinguishing and cooling of the fire of kilesa and dukkha here and now.\(^91\)

4. A Critical Analysis of Buddhadāsa’s Hermeneutic

As we have noted, Buddhadāsa reinterprets the traditional cosmology and the basic Buddhist doctrines by using his theory of everyday language (phaśa khon) and Dhamma language (phaśa tham). He asserts that the heart of Buddhism is the Paṭiccasamuppāda, which is the detailed practical version of the Four Noble Truths, demonstrating how suffering (dukkha) arises and ceases in our daily life. He argues, however, that the Visuddhimagga and the Pali commentarial tradition have distorted the practical meaning of Paṭiccasamuppāda, by misinterpreting it as the theory of saṃsāric rebirth, drawn from the Brahmanical world view; while the Abhidhamma scholars developed the sophisticated theory of the momentary consciousness (bhavaṅga citta), which is also believed to go through the cycle of rebirth. Buddhadāsa contends that neither the Abhidhamma nor the Visuddhimagga grasps the real meaning of Paṭiccasamuppāda as presented in the original teachings of the Buddha, which demonstrates how the ignorant attachment to ‘I’ and ‘mine’ arises and gives birth to suffering (dukkha); and how the mindful detachment from ‘I’ and ‘mine’ brings about the nirvanic experience here and now. In his Dhammic essentialist perspective (phaśa tham), the term dukkha always refers to suffering caused by attachment, and the term jāti refers to the birth of the concept of ‘I’ and

\(^91\) Ibid., pp. 49-50.
mine’. To Buddhadāsa, liberation (nibbāna) is not a far distant ideal or a paradise to reach after numerous deaths and rebirths; it is an actual living experience occurring whenever we understand and practice the process of Paṭiccasamuppāda properly. He asserts that we can experience a temporary nibbāna through daily self-examination with mindfulness; and, by striving to maintain that experience, we can attain the nibbāna of permanent peace in this very life.

Thus, Buddhadāsa’s new interpretation of the Buddhist doctrines seems to go against the traditional view of Theravada Buddhism represented by the Abhidhamma and the Visuddhimagga. He draws his hermeneutic of the two levels of language (phasa khon and phasa tham) from the early Buddhist texts and his own practical experience; then he applies it critically to the whole commentarial tradition. However, is his theory so completely different from the traditional one? We argue that it is not. His attempt is rather a ‘renewal’ of the ancient exegetical tradition within the modern context. The very terms of his theory, phasa khon and phasa tham, are not distinct from the traditional Theravada theory of double truth: the conventional truth (sammuti-sacca) and the ultimate truth (paramattha-sacca).92 Just as Buddhadāsa depends on the early Buddhist texts for support, the traditional commentaries also take their inspiration from the Pali canonical texts. Both theories are derived from the Buddha’s two kinds of discourse—that is, the discourses of direct meaning (nāattha sutta) and the discourses of indirect meaning (neyyattha sutta).93 In fact,

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92 The development of the theory of double truth was never undertaken in the canonical period because of the weight of the Buddha’s words in the Suttanipāta: ‘truth is one without a second’ (ekam hi saccaṁ na duṭṭhaṁ atthi) (Sn, 884). Hence, in the Theravada tradition, the distinction between the conventional truth (sammuti-sacca) and the ultimate truth (paramattha-sacca) does not refer to two species of truth, but two modes of explaining the truth. In other words, paramattha-sacca means the truth expressed by using the technical Dhammic terms (paramattha-vacana) whereas sammuti-sacca means the truth expressed by using conventional terms in common parlance (vohāra-vacana). See K. N. Jayatilleke, Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2004), pp. 361-8 (p. 364); Y. Karunadasa, ‘The Buddhist Theory of Double Truth’, Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Kelaniya, III/IV (Colombo: University of Kelaniya, 1984), pp. 23-55 (p. 36).

93 AN II, 60. The Buddha does not make any preferential judgment between these two discourses as one being truer than the other. What is emphasized is that the two modes of teaching should not be confused with each other. Furthermore, there are no clear examples of those two kinds of discourses to which we can refer. In the Pali commentaries, however, the explanation is given clearly that the direct discourse (nāattha sutta) refers to the Buddha’s explicit teaching of the ‘non-self’ (anatta); whereas the indirect discourse (neyyattha sutta) refers to the Buddha’s conventional speaking of a ‘person’ (puggala). For more details, see Karunadasa, ‘Theravada Version of the Two Truths’, in Wimala-prabhāsa: Essays in Honour of Venerable Professor Bellanwila Wimalaratana, ed. by
Buddhadāsa himself confirms that the distinction between phasa khon and phasa tham refers to the distinction between the two levels of truth (sammuti-sacca and paramattha-sacca). What he emphasizes is that people must not confuse the language of the conventional truth (phasa khon) with the language of the ultimate truth (phasa-tham) because the Buddha’s words expressed in phasa khon often also connote the deeper sense of Dhamma (phasa tham).

Both the traditional theory of the two levels of truth and Buddhadāsa’s hermeneutic of the two levels of language are well consonant with the canonical distinction of the four kinds of knowledge found in the Saṅgīti Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya: (1) the direct knowledge of Dhamma (dhamma-ñāṇa); (2) the knowledge consonant with Dhamma (anvaye-ñāṇa); (3) the knowledge of analysis (paricchede-ñāṇa); and (4) the conventional knowledge (sammuti-ñāṇa). In the Theravada Abhidhamma and Pali commentarial tradition, the analytic knowledge (paricchede-ñāṇa) was highly developed; but, at the same time, the conventional knowledge (sammuti-ñāṇa) was also regarded as a ‘true’ and ‘useful’ means for the ordinary people to understand Dhamma. Buddhadāsa is faithful to this tradition by conceding that both phasa khon and phasa tham are considered ‘right views’ in Buddhism.

Buddhadāsa’s hermeneutic is also faithful to the ancient exegetical principle: that is, any new theory or new interpretation must fulfill two conditions—one is a logical consistency (yutti) and the other is solid roots in the early Buddhist discourses (āgama). In the Theravada tradition, the Buddhist thinkers tried to interpret the

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94 See Buddhadāsa, Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination, pp. 5, 20, 58.
95 See DN III, 226; LDB, p. 490.
96 See Buddhadāsa, Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination, p. 20.
97 The two post-canonical texts, Nettipakaraṇa and Peṭākopadesa, are the earliest Buddhist manual of interpretation which present the comprehensive methodology for the correct understanding of the Suttapiṭaka. It is emphasized in these texts, and in the following commentarial tradition, that the Buddhist exegesis must aim to explain the logic and the structure of the Dhamma which has the goal of liberation (nibbāna) but expressed in various ways. In other words, the purpose of the Buddhist exegesis is to construct the internal logic (yutti) and doctrinal consistency (āgama) in order to stimulate readers to follow the Buddhist path towards final liberation (nibbāna). See G.D. Bond, ‘The Gradual Path as a Hermeneutical Approach to the Dhamma’, in Buddhist Hermeneutics, ed. by Donald S. Lopez (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), pp. 29-45. See also A. Pieris, Studies in the Philosophy and Literature of Pāli Abhidhammika Buddhism (Colombo: The Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, 2004), pp. 206-21 (p. 214).
Buddha’s doctrine in accordance with their own socio-cultural and intellectual context. The particular problems of each era stimulated them to rethink the meaning of the original doctrines from different perspectives. However, even if someone had a very logical thought (yuttī) consonant with his contemporary intellectuals, he could not insist on his own opinion (attanomati) without reference to the Buddha’s own words (āgama). In this sense, Buddhadāsa’s hermeneutic fulfills these two conditions: it has a logical consistency appealing to the modern audiences; and, it is derived from the early Buddhist distinction between the two kinds of discourses (nīratttha and neyyatthā). Thus, his theory is a ‘renewal’ of the ancient commentarial principle of reasoning (yuttī) and doctrinal consistency (āgama).

Hence, we argue that Buddhadāsa’s hermeneutic is distinguished from the tradition not because of the theory itself, but because of its radical application to both his reinterpretation of the Pali texts and to the various problems of his own context in modern society. In other words, the distinction lies in his awareness of the modern scientific world view; and his radical stance comes from his conviction that any kind of non-scientific superstitious belief must be discarded from Buddhist praxis. Buddhadāsa’s reinterpretation of the traditional cosmology and the basic Buddhist doctrines demonstrates his incessant effort to make Buddhism accessible to the rationalistic thought of modern audiences. Especially, his approach to the traditional Buddhist cosmology is characterized as a psychological reinterpretation of the mythical concepts, striving to make the Buddhist teachings reasonable to the modern intellectuals equipped with a scientific world view which does not accept such an out-dated cosmology.

In many ways, therefore, Buddhadāsa’s reinterpretation of the traditional concepts of heavens, hells and rebirth would appear similar to Bultmann’s de mythologization of the New Testament. Just as Bultmann tries to find out the essence of the Christian Kerygma by stripping the biblical message of mythical elements, Buddhadāsa strives to demonstrate the essence of the Buddha’s Dhamma by discarding the supernatural elements in the Buddhist texts. Both Bultmann and Buddhadāsa criticize the naïve traditional reading of the texts in the literal sense. Both felt the urgent need to make
their respective religious doctrines accessible to their modern audiences. Therefore, some scholars call Buddhāsa’s reinterpretation of the traditional concepts and beliefs a ‘demythologization’ of the Buddhist texts. \(^98\) For instance, Gabaude compares Buddhāsa and Bultmann as they present models of demythologization in their own context.\(^99\) He asserts that both thinkers share the same ambition of saving the ancient religious teachings in a new cultural context; and they received similar reactions, either enthusiastic support or harsh repulsion.\(^100\) According to Gabaude, there are some aspects common to both Bultmann and Buddhāsa:

- Both of them were aware of the mythical images in their religious texts which do not fit the scientific world view.
- In order to demythologize the non-scientific world images, they often chose the way of reinterpretation rather than dismissing them as simply illusion.
- They had the same concern for the immediate (this-worldly) use of their religious texts.
- They also coincided in criticizing two extremes of their own religious traditions—superstitious beliefs and abstract dogmatisms.
- They found the scholastic writings (Thomism and the Abhidhamma) sterile to the needs of the contemporary people.
- Although they used the scientific world view for their demythologizing works, they knew the limitations of science and modernity.\(^101\)

Thus, Gabaude regards Buddhāsa’s reinterpretation of the Buddhist scriptures as similar to Bultmann’s demythologization of the New Testament. To Gabaude, the only difference between them is that Bultmann tries to defend God’s transcendence through his demythologizing work; whereas Buddhāsa demythologizes both the conventional description of nibbāna and of the cosmic worlds of gods.\(^102\) We argue,

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\(^98\) There are several scholars who hold this opinion, such as Gabaude, Jackson, and Sirikanchana. Out of them, Gabaude proposes the most systematic comparison between Bultmann and Buddhāsa in his doctoral dissertation. See Louis Gabaude, *Une Herméneutique Bouddhique Contemporaine de Thaïlande : Buddhadasa Bhikkhu* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1988), pp. 385-9.

\(^99\) See Ibid., p. 385.

\(^100\) See Ibid., p. 389.

\(^101\) See Ibid., pp. 386-9.

\(^102\) See Ibid., p. 388.
however, that the point of difference between them does not merely lie in their theistic or non-theistic religiosities. The most distinctive point is actually revealed in the different motivation and goal of their hermeneutical works. Relying upon Heidegger’s philosophical thought, Bultmann asserts that ‘pre-understanding’ (Vorverständnis) is necessary for the exegesis of a biblical text; and that pre-understanding is found in the interpreter’s life-relationship with the reality of which the text speaks.\textsuperscript{103} He claims that Heidegger’s existential analysis has a universal application, providing the most appropriate conceptual categories for understanding the human existence revealed in the New Testament.\textsuperscript{104} Hence, his excessive demythologization of the biblical texts is based on a philosophical motivation to find the essence of human value as ‘Dasein’ or ‘Being-in-the-world’ (In-der-Welt-Sein).\textsuperscript{105} Then, for Bultmann, this existentialist principle becomes the ‘norm’ of interpretation of Scripture rather than an ‘instrument’ for understanding the central and objective message of the Bible.\textsuperscript{106}

Buddhadāsa’s praxis-oriented Dhammic essentialist approach is quite different from such a Bultmannian demythologization. He never tries to impose any philosophical principles onto the interpretation of the Buddhist texts. His approach is rather a ‘radical conservatism’ or a ‘conservative radicalism’\textsuperscript{107} in the sense of going back to the original Buddhist sources and finding out the essential Dhamma; not through applying modern philosophical principles, but through the authentic practice of the Buddhist path as described in the Pali texts. His reinterpretation of the traditional cosmology and Buddhist doctrines is not based on ‘pre-supposed’ understandings; it is derived from his radical orthopraxis following the original Dhamma principle in the practical purpose of liberation from suffering (dukkha).

\textsuperscript{103} See David Fergusson, \textit{Bultmann}, Outstanding Christian Thinkers series, ed. by Brian Davies OP (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), pp. 54-5.
\textsuperscript{104} See Ibid., pp. 64-5.
\textsuperscript{105} See Ibid., pp. 60-1, 66-9.
\textsuperscript{106} See The Pontifical Biblical Commission, \textit{The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church} (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), pp. 74, 76.
\textsuperscript{107} The term ‘radical conservatism’ is used as the title of a collection of articles in honour of Buddhaddāsa’s 84th birthday anniversary. In the introduction of this felicitation volume, Kohler explains that the title ‘radical conservatism’ reflects Buddhaddāsa’s approach to Buddhism, working within the strict framework of Theravada Buddhism as well as radically renewing that ancient tradition. See Sulak Sivaraksa and others eds, \textit{Radical Conservatism: Buddhism in the Contemporary World; Articles in Honour of Bhikkhu Buddhaddāsa’s 84th Birthday Anniversary} (Bangkok: TIRC/INEB, 1990), p. XV.
In this sense, Buddhadāsa is closer to the Abhidhammic tradition of the Theravada Buddhism than to Bultmannian hermeneutics. The original motivation of the Theravada Abhidhamma was to help monks practise the proper Buddhist meditation so as to attain final liberation (nibbāna); however, it became a highly speculative scholastic commentary which is too complicated to comprehend and practice. Hence Buddhadāsa strives to bring back the early Buddhist tradition that emphasizes the importance of the practical Buddhist path leading to liberation (nibbāna) in this very life. His reinterpretation of Paṭiccasamuppāda is also focused on the same purpose: Paṭiccasamuppāda is not a complex theory of existence in saṃsāric rebirths but a practical guide for achieving freedom from mental defilements (āsava) and suffering (dukkha) here and now. While the Abhidhamma, the Visuddhimagga and the Pali commentarial tradition focus on the monastic practice, Buddhadāsa presents a radical Dhamma practice for both monks and lay people.

In short, Buddhadāsa promoted a ‘radical orthopraxis’ drawn from the original spirit and praxis of early Buddhism in which the monastic and lay distinction is not regarded as essential to the liberating Buddhist practice. It is through this radically inclusive practical aspect of his hermeneutic that Buddhadāsa was able to have a strong impact on modern Thai society. His rationalistic interpretation of the traditional beliefs and practices enabled the Buddhist intellectuals to deepen their understanding of Buddhism as a this-worldly transformative spirituality, motivating not only personal transformation but also social change. His radical Dhammic thought and praxis resonated with the religio-intellectual, socio-political needs of his time. In the following chapter, we will examine how Buddhadāsa develops his spiritual and political theories of human liberation from this practical Dhammic essentialist hermeneutic—the radical orthopraxis of individual freedom (chit-wāng), social liberation (Dhammic socialism), and interreligious collaboration for world peace.
Chapter III

Buddhadāsa’s Radical Thought and Praxis
For World Peace

The previous chapters have demonstrated how Buddhadāsa radically reinterprets the traditional Theravada concepts and beliefs from his praxis-oriented Dhammic essentialist hermeneutic (phasa tham), drawn from the early Buddhist sources, in order to bring people, both monks and the laity, to the sincere practice of the original Buddhadhamma. This renewed Buddhist thought and praxis entail a radical change of the religio-spiritual, socio-political life of the modern Thai people. In this chapter, Buddhadāsa’s theories of the void-mind (chit-waṅg) and Dhammic socialism are presented as the interconnected theories of human liberation, illustrating his Dhammic essentialist radical orthopraxis of personal and social transformation. To Buddhadāsa, the void-mind (chit-waṅg), the mind free from ‘I’ and ‘mine’, is the liberative core of Buddhism. It is a spiritual freedom that arises from the mindful awareness of the true nature of things as voidness (suññatā), not in the sense of the total emptiness or nothingness, but in the sense of the interconnected reality (idappaccayata) of all things. Buddhadāsa draws his political theory, Dhammic socialism, from this fundamental Buddhist insight into the interdependent nature of things, promoting the human socialist ideal of the common good, the non-selfish life, and the sharing economy as an anti-dote to the problems of modern society. He asserts that the ideals of Dhammic socialism can be achieved most effectively by the people who are free from selfishness through the constant cultivation of the void-mind (chit-waṅg). To Buddhadāsa, social engagement is the natural consequence of spiritual praxis.

The first two sections of this chapter show how Buddhadāsa develops this twofold spirituality of human liberation, the void-mind (chit-waṅg) and Dhammic socialism, by radically returning to the liberating sources of the early Buddhist tradition and
addressing the root problems of modern society. The third section examines Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialist approach to other religions, emphasizing that he promotes interreligious dialogue and action to build world peace as the common goal of all religions. In the final section, we examine some of his critics and provide a concluding analysis of Buddhadāsa’s radical thought and praxis as a whole. We argue that Buddhadāsa is neither a mere forest monk nor a professional political theorist; but a humanistic Buddhist visionary who promotes the liberative spirituality of personal-social transformation. It is noted that his Dhammic vision and thought have become a source of inspiration not only for the Buddhist reformists in the changing society of modern Thailand, but also for the contemporary liberative activists who search for an appropriate transformative spirituality in the globalized capitalist world.

1. The Void-Mind (chit-wāng): Freedom from ‘I’ and Mine’

When Buddhadāsa was still a young monk, senior monks prohibited him from giving talks about the essential doctrines of the Buddha such as non-self (anatta), dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), and voidness (suññatā) because these topics are deemed to be too difficult for lay people to understand. However, these doctrines became the most important themes of Buddhadāsa’s teaching, summarized into one practical topic: the void-mind (chit-wāng). The Thai term chit-wāng refers to the Buddhist understanding of reality as voidness (suññatā).¹ The doctrine of suññatā is

¹ The Pali term suññatā is the nominal form of the adjective suñña (śūnya in Sanskrit), which literally means ‘zero’ and refers to empty, uninhabited, or void. In Theravada Buddhism, this term exclusively refers to the doctrine of non-self (anatta), that is, the unsubstantiality of all phenomena. Buddhadāsa prefers to use suññatā without translating it into English because there is no exact word to convey its exact meanings. If one must translate it, however, Buddhadāsa recommends ‘voidness’ as the best option, referring to the void of self (atta) and void of things in relation to self (attaniya); and preventing mistranslations such as nothingness, non-existence, or emptiness. In Mahayana Buddhism, this term is translated into ‘emptiness’ and the doctrine of emptiness (śūnyatā) is one of the most fundamental teachings around which metaphysical theories revolve. See Buddhadāsa, Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree: The Buddha’s Teaching on Voidness, ed. by Santikaro Bhikkhu (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1994), pp. xv-xxii. See also Nyanatiloka, Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines, (Kandy: BPS, 2004), p. 207.
not emphasized as much in Theravada as in Mahayana. Therefore, when Buddhadāsa started to teach this doctrine as the heart of Buddhism, many conservatives branded him a ‘Mahayanist’. However, what Buddhadāsa sought was not any sectarian doctrine but the essence of the original Buddhadhamma which leads to the authentic Buddhist practice. He never compromised with any of his critics on the issue of the core teachings of the Buddha. To him, the correct understanding and practice of the void-mind (chit-wāng) is the most fundamental task of all Buddhists, whether monks, nuns, or lay people.

In a series of talks to the lay Buddhists during the 1960s, Buddhadāsa systematically expounds the meanings of suññatā and chit-wāng; and their practical application in daily life. He holds that all the basic doctrines reflect the heart of Buddhism to a certain degree. To him, however, the true heart of Buddhism is found in the Cūlatappamānasankhaya Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya. In it, Sakka approached the Buddha and asked him whether he could summarize his teachings on how to attain liberation (nibbāna), to which the Buddha answered:

Here, ruler of gods, a bhikkhu has heard that nothing is worth adhering to. When a bhikkhu has heard that nothing is worth adhering to, he directly knows everything; having directly known everything, he fully understands everything; having fully understood everything, whatever feeling he feels, whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, he abides contemplating impermanence in those feelings, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, and contemplating relinquishment. Contemplating thus, he does not cling to anything in the world. When he does not cling, he is not agitated. When he is not agitated, he personally attains Nibbāna.

By citing this passage, Buddhadāsa asserts that the one phrase, ‘nothing is worth clinging to’ (sabbe dhammā nālaman abhinivesaṁ), is the true heart of Buddhism.

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2 MN I, 251; MLDB, P. 344. See also SN IV, 50; CDB, p. 1161.
3 See Buddhadāsa, Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree, p. 15.
Hence, to him, all Buddhist teachings and practices can be integrated into a single Dhamma practice—the practice of the void-mind (chit-wång). He explains that wång (suññå in Pali), which means ‘void’ or ‘free’, refers to the two characteristics of voidness (suññatå): the inherent nature of all things as void of self; and the quality of mind when it is not clinging to anything.4 To Buddhadåsa, the insubstantial reality of things and the non-clinging mind are the two sides of the same voidness (suññatå):

Ordinarily, although it is truly void of self, the mind doesn’t realize that it is void, because it is constantly enveloped and disturbed by conceptual thoughts, which are concocted due to seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and physical experiencing. Consequently, the mind is aware neither of its own voidness nor of the voidness in all things. However, when the mind completely throws off the things envelo ping it, when it removes the grasping and clinging caused by delusion and ignorance, then the mind has the character of suññatå through its non-clinging.5

Here the dynamic relationship between the mind (chit in Thai) and voidness (suññatå) is explained in its practical context: the mind knows or realizes suññatå through Dhamma practice, not through knowledge that comes from studying, reading, or learning from others.6 Buddhadåsa holds that the knowing of suññatå refers to the awareness of suññatå in a mind that is also truly void (wång); the mind (chit) and voidness (suññatå), therefore, are not two separate things: when ignorance (avijjå) and defilements (kilesa) are gone, the mind realizes its own true nature as voidness.7 Buddhadåsa clarifies that the mind (chit) here does not refer to the numerous cittas of the Abhidhammic analysis of the mind; it is rather the ‘original mind’, the mind free from grasping at self.8 To Buddhadåsa, all things (sabbe dhamma), including

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4 See Ibid., pp. 59-60.
5 Ibid., p. 60.
7 See Ibid., p. 46. See also Buddhadåsa, Handbook for Mankind, pp. 35-6.
8 Ibid., p. 33. Here the term ‘original mind’ is related to the concept of Buddha-nature. In early Buddhism, the term Buddha-nature (Buddhatå in Sanskrit, Buddha-dhåsa in Pali) referred to the
our mind, are truly void of self (suññatā). He remarks that the Pali term dhamma encompasses everything from material things to immaterial states: the different stages of the Buddhist path and their fruits are also called dhamma; even nibbāna is called dhamma.9 Hence, he emphasizes that, in Buddhism, all things are dhamma and all dhammas are voidness (suññatā); this true nature of things is called ‘just-like-that’ (tathatā).10

In order to see such voidness (suññatā) in all things, according to Buddhadāsa, there must be mindful-wisdom (sati-paññā). In his view, however, our ordinary life is full of ignorance, clinging to ‘I’ and ‘mine’. He points out that we are always living in two kinds of experience: one is the experience of ‘I’ and ‘mine’, and the other is the experience of freedom from ‘I’ and mine’. The former indicates the ‘disturbed mind’ and the latter indicates the ‘void-mind’. To Buddhadāsa, these two are totally antagonistic and cannot be present at the same time.11 He compares the disturbed mind with a burning fire: fire of greed (rāga), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha); the root cause of all which is the attachment to self.12 Hence, he emphasizes that when we can see clearly that there is nothing to be taken as ‘self’ and ‘belonging to self’, then the true nature of all things (suññatā) appears to our truly void-mind (cit-wāng).13 As we mentioned in the last chapter, Buddhadāsa is convinced that the five aggregates (pañcakkhandā) themselves are not the source of human suffering (dukkha); but the clinging (upālāva) to them as ‘I’ and ‘mine’ causes dukkha.14 To him, even basic human experiences such as birth, decay, sickness, and death are not

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9 See Buddhadāsa, Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree, pp. 51-5. The Pali term dhamma has various meanings. It literally means ‘bearer’—referring to things, nature of a thing, quality, phenomenon, or object of mind. Another Pali term dhātu also refers to ‘things’ or ‘elements’; actually dhamma and dhātu have the same Sanskrit root, ‘dhṛ’ which means ‘to hold’ or ‘to support’. Both are synonyms in this sense. When the term is used in this literal sense, it is not capitalized (dhamma). But, when the term refers to the Buddha’s doctrine or the Truth, it is.

10 See Ibid., pp. 36-8.
11 See Ibid., p. 19.
12 See Ibid., pp. 41-3.
13 See Ibid., pp. 46-7. See also MN II, 263-4; MLDB, pp. 870-1.
14 See Chapter II, p. 66.
themselves dukkha unless we cling to them as ‘I’ and ‘mine’.15

Buddhadāsa contends that lay people are those who most need suññata to cool down the ‘burning fire’ because they live in enormous suffering (dukkha) and distress.16 He remarks that the Buddha taught suññata directly to the lay followers in the Dhammadinna Sutta of the Saṅyutta Nikāya thus: ‘you should train yourselves from time to time to enter and dwell upon those discourses spoken by the Tathāgata, which are deep, deep in meaning, supermundane, dealing with voidness (suññatā)’.17 Hence, Buddhadāsa asserts that the supermundane (lokuttara) Dhamma about suññatā or nibbāna is a subject fit for lay people. To him, the traditional distinction between the monastic and lay practices is misleading of the original teachings of the Buddha. Traditionally, monks are expected to study and practice the supermundane (lokuttara) path towards liberation (nibbāna); whereas lay people are expected to remain in the mundane (lokiya) domain to keep the basic moral precepts, providing material support for monks, in the hope of accumulating good kamma for a better life in the next rebirth.18 Buddhadāsa argues, however, that both monks and the laity are called to cultivate the void-mind (chit-wāng) and realize nibbāna here and now.

To present how to cultivate the void-mind (chit-wāng), Buddhadāsa draws several ways of practice from the Buddha’s original teachings. The first way is a practice of preventing the process of Paṭiccasamuppāda from taking place. He proposes two methods for this practice. One method is to cut the process off right at the moment of sense-contact (phasa) and not to allow the feeling (vedanā) of satisfaction or dissatisfaction to arise. But, for people who have never trained in Dhamma, it is extremely difficult to prevent sense-contact from developing into feelings (vedanā) because feelings arise almost automatically.19 If the first method fails, then the

15 Buddhadāsa, Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree, p. 17.
17 SN V, 407; CDB, pp. 1833-4.
18 In the Theravada tradition, there is a clear distinction between the supermundane (lokuttara) path and the mundane (lokiya) life. The former refers to the four paths and four fruitions of the noble disciples (ariya-puggala) and the latter refers to the lay people’s worldly life. It is believed that one must renounce the world and become a monk in order to enter the stream of the supermundane (lokuttara) path. See Nyanatiloka, Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines, pp.107; T. W. R. Davids and W. Stede, eds, The Pali-English Dictionary, pp. 588.
19 See Buddhadāsa, Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree, p. 81.
second method is to be attempted: when a feeling (vedanā) of satisfaction or dissatisfaction has already arisen, one must stop it immediately and not allow it to develop ‘craving’ (taṇhā), a strong desire or aversion. Buddhadāsa warns that once craving (taṇhā) has arisen, there is no hope to prevent the arising of ego-consciousness (‘I’ and ‘mine’) and its inevitable consequences, various forms of suffering (dukkha). He emphasizes that to prevent the arising of such attachment, one must develop mindful-awareness (sati-paññā) as found in the following words of the Buddha:

O Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: whenever you see a form, let there be just the seeing; whenever you hear a sound, let there be just the hearing; when you smell an odour, let there be just the smelling; when you taste a flavour, let there be just tasting; when a thought arises, let it be just the arising of thought in mind. In this way you should train yourself, Bāhiya.

Buddhadāsa remarks that Bāhiya sincerely practiced this brief Dhamma so that he finally attained nibbāna, the complete end of suffering (dukkha-nirodha). He compares this practice to having a cat that kills the rats in our house; likewise, if we live rightly (samma vihareyya) in every moment of sense-contact with mindfulness, there is no way for the mental defilements (kilesa) to arise. He points out that when ordinary people hear about this kind of practice, they may be afraid of losing their pleasure; their deluded mind makes them fear suññata and nibbāna. He asserts, however, that the real pleasure is possible only through this practice of ending all craving (taṇhā): in fact, it makes us more active and joyful; it is not the harmful, deceitful, or illusory pleasure of ordinary people. In short, to Buddhadāsa, the practice of stopping the process of Pañccasamuppāda at one of the two stages (phasa or vedana) results in seeing clearly that ‘I’ and ‘mine’ is a mere illusion.

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20 See Ibid., p. 82.
21 Ud I, 10. This is Buddhadāsa’s adapted translation. For a literal translation, See John D. Ireland, trans., The Udāna and the Itivuttaka: Two Classics from the Pāli Canon (Kandy: BPS, 1997), p. 21.
22 See Buddhadāsa, Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree, pp. 84-5.
23 Ibid., p. 87.
is one path of cultivating the void-mind (*chit-wāng*) specific to the moment of sense-contact.

For the ‘ordinary times’\(^{24}\), Buddhadāsa presents another way of practice also particularly suitable for lay people. He says, when the mind is not disturbed by sense contact, one should take this opportunity to ‘study’ and ‘reflect’ on how things are void (*suñña*) and how the mind is void (*suñña*).\(^{25}\) He holds that a person who sees that everything is impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and insubstantial (*anatta*) can secure a calm and peaceful daily life. He asserts that such a person can clearly understand the fact that sense objects are mere illusions and thus withstands the sensuous experience without getting lost in attraction or aversion. To Buddhadāsa, seeing the illusory nature of the pleasant feelings (*sukha-vedana*) is a very important practice of the void-mind (*chit-wāng*) in ordinary times.\(^{26}\)

Buddhadāsa presents another important topic for reflection on during the ordinary times: ‘nothing is worth having or being’.\(^{27}\) He emphasizes that if we habitually or regularly contemplate this topic, we will discover the truth: the more we have or the more we want to be someone, the more suffering (*dukkha*) follows. He clarifies that this does not mean that we do not need to have anything or to become a mother or father. We can perfectly enjoy things without clinging to them as ‘mine’ and we can be a perfect parent without being anxious about becoming ‘I am a good parent of my children’. He calls this way of practice ‘the Dhamma practice of doer-less doing’ in daily life:

> Dhamma can be practiced in conjunction with our daily tasks and the movements they entail, and this is an extremely high level of Dhamma practice.

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\(^{24}\) By ‘ordinary times’, Buddhadāsa means occasions when the mind is undisturbed by sense contact: for example, when one is doing some kind of work alone and undisturbed; doing regular daily tasks; or practicing some kind of formal meditation, etc. See Ibid., p. 93.

\(^{25}\) Buddhadāsa uses here the word ‘study’ (*sikkhā*) in the sense of the constant observation and investigation of whatever arises in the mind. He emphasizes that only those familiar with the observation of the mind can really understand Dhamma, but those who merely read books cannot understand it and even go astray. See Ibid., p. 118.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., pp. 89-91.

\(^{27}\) See Ibid., pp. 93-4.
There is no need to separate Dhamma from everyday life. Just have this mindfulness and ready wisdom (sati-sampajañña) of doer-less doing. Not only will the work be successful and free from error, but at the same time the Dhamma will develop and grow exceedingly. Doer-less doing is to live naturally and ordinarily in not-having and not gaining.28

Thus, to Buddhadāsa, this is the daily practice of performing duties without a strong desire to gain ‘more’ results. He emphasizes that even the desire to be ‘happy’ ultimately ends with suffering (dukkha) in its subtle form; and this is what the forest monks experience in their serious practice of formal meditation.29 He points out that although they reach a higher level of absorption (jhāna) in samatha meditation, they are still stuck in the feeling of ‘my’ happiness; even someone who believes that ‘I have attained nibbāna’ is actually stuck in false attainment unless he/she completely forgets the feeling of ‘I’ and ‘mine’.30 To Buddhadāsa, just as the ordinary people hunger for wealth, power and sensuous pleasures, so religious people also thirst for better reputation, spiritual insights and meditative achievements.31

Buddhadāsa is convinced that ‘natural’ concentration is sufficient and appropriate for insightful introspection (vipassanā), which leads to liberation (nibbāna). To him, the fully concentrated mind in the intensive samatha meditation can be misguided by bliss, thus easily clings to such a happy experience; however, naturally occurring concentration is harmless and suitable for developing the mindfulness (sati) and clear comprehension (sampajañña) necessary for attaining nibbāna.32 He remarks

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28 Ibid., pp. 95-6.
29 The formal Buddhist meditation (bhāvanā) is divided into concentration (samāhi or samatha) and insight (vipassanā or paññā). The former refers to the fixing of the mind on a single object, which results in tranquility; and the latter refers to the intuitive observation of the impermanent and unsubstantial nature of corporeal and mental phenomena. Although in the Visuddhimagga the attainment of all levels of absorption (jhāna) is required to go further along the path of purification, Buddhadāsa goes back to the early Buddhist teaching which he believes to emphasize the more natural way of attaining concentration and insight for liberation. For more details, see P. D. Premasiri, ‘Meditation’, in Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, Vol. VI/1, ed. by W.G. Weeraratne, and others (Colombo: The Government of Sri Lanka), pp. 660-8. See also Nyanatiloka, Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines, pp. 83, 186-7, 233.
30 See Buddhadāsa, Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree, pp. 99-100.
31 See Ibid., p.100.
32 See Buddhadāsa, Handbook for Mankind: Realizing your full potential as a human being, trans. by
that in the *Suttapiñṭaka*, there are numerous references to people who became arahants without engaging in rigorous meditation. For example, the first five disciples were liberated while hearing the Buddha’s discourse on non-self (*anatta*) and the one thousand ascetics were also liberated while hearing the ‘Fire Sermon’. To Buddhadāsa, these examples clearly show that the liberating insight (*vipassanā-paññā*) can be attained quite naturally through natural concentration. He emphasizes that we all experience such natural concentration in our daily life. In other words, every moment we are completely absorbed in doing something, natural concentration is established. If we do not overlook this capacity and apply it to penetrating the impermanent nature of our life, we also can experience *nibbāna* by natural insight.

To support his view, Buddhadāsa thoroughly examines the early Buddhist discourses in the *Suttapiñṭaka* which deal with mental-cultivation (*bhāvanā*). Through his careful reading of those texts, Buddhadāsa concludes that the Buddha did not teach concentration (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) as the separate techniques developed in the later tradition. In his opinion, the Buddha taught only the necessary and simple techniques for attaining a calm and peaceful mind, along with the establishment of mindfulness (*sati-paññā*). For the people who want a more technical practice, Buddhadāsa expounds the sixteen steps of mindfulness with breathing (*ānāpānasati*) as presented in the *Suttapiñṭaka*. He emphasizes that we can practice *ānāpānasati* anywhere, at any time; and it is the practice that the Buddha himself recommended as most effective in developing both tranquillity (*samādhi*) and insight.

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33 See SN IV, 19-20; CDB, p. 1143.
35 See Ibid., p. 121.
36 The most comprehensive discourses on the Buddhist meditation are found in the *Satipatthāna Sutta* and the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*. See SN II, 214; DN I, 156; DN III, 78; AN I, 123; MN I, 56-63; MN III, 79-88.
Thus, Buddhadāsa presents the natural practice of mindfulness (sati-paññā) and the technical practice of ānānasati as the most appropriate Buddhist paths to attain liberation. He asserts that nobody needs to go to the forest or to renounce the world for those practices; but one must practise them constantly day-by-day, month-by-month, and year-by-year. This way, one can more often experience freedom from suffering and come closer to final nibbāna. He holds that only with the insight of ‘nothing to be clung to’ or ‘nothing worth having or being’, the deluded mind gives way to voidness (suññatā). To Buddhadāsa, this insight gradually uncovers the three layers which cover the original void-mind (chit-wāng): the outermost covering of instinctive attachment to sense objects; the intermediary covering of attachment to beliefs, views, rules, rituals, or cults; and the innermost covering of attachment to ‘I’ and ‘mine’.³⁹ He remarks that some attain such insight and liberation while giving Dhamma talk to others because they are then trying to think clearly in order to guide others—the benefits are given not only to the audience but also to the preachers themselves.⁴⁰

The moment of our physical death, according to Buddhadāsa, is the last chance for attaining nibbāna with the void-mind (chit-wāng). He says that we usually lose our memory capacity the closer we are to death; but the awareness of ‘nothing worth to be clung to’ can stay on to the very end.⁴¹ So, at the last moment, we can leap into final suññatā or nibbāna—what he calls the ‘art of leaping’.⁴² He asserts that with this option, even unlearned elderly people can enter into nibbāna at the moment of death. He is convinced that even with sudden deaths by accident, nuclear bombs, or natural disasters, as long as there remains a tiny moment of awareness, we can jump

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³⁸ Ibid., p. 39.
³⁹ See Buddhadāsa, Towards Buddha-Dhamma, condensed and trans. by Nāgasena Bhikkhu, (Chaiya: Dhammadāna Foundation, 2002), pp. 17-24. Here Buddhadāsa rearranges the fourfold clinging (upādāna) in the Pali texts: clinging to sensuous pleasure (kāmupādāna), to views (dīthupādāna), to rules and rituals (sākārabatupādāna), and to the self-belief (attavādupādāna). See DN II, 58; MN I, 51; SN II, 3.
⁴⁰ See Ibid., pp. 44-5.
⁴¹ See Buddhadāsa, Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree, p. 106.
⁴² See Ibid.
into nibbāna.\textsuperscript{43} In his view, physical death in any form cannot bother those who have practiced sufficiently and proficiently the non-clinging mind (chit-wång); and they do not need the ‘art of leaping’ because they are already ‘deathless’ (amata).\textsuperscript{44} He emphasizes that the Buddha and arahants lived with perfect freedom from bondage of birth and death because they quenched all deluded desires in their entirety. They lived not by desire (taĩhā) but by love (mettå) and wisdom (paññå). To Buddhadåsa, the practice of cultivating the void-mind (chit-wång) must aim at such a perfect liberation (nibbåna) in this very life.

In summary, the heart of Buddhism is epitomized by Buddhadåsa’s theory of the void-mind (chit-wång) which refers to the individual freedom from ‘I’ and ‘mine’. The void-mind (chit-wång) is the mindful-awareness of the true nature of all things (sabbe dhamma) as voidness (suññatå). It becomes clear that there is nothing to be clung to as ‘I’ and ‘mine’ in the world. Since the root cause of human suffering (dukkha) is ignorant craving (taphå) and clinging (upådåna) to ‘I’ and ‘mine’, the key practice of cultivating the void-mind (chit-wång) is to prevent the arising of such attachment at every sense-contact. In ordinary times, when our mind is not disturbed by sense-contact, we must keep reflecting on the themes of voidness (suññatå) with ‘natural’ concentration and mindfulness. In addition to them, we can regularly practise the ‘technical’ meditation called ‘mindfulness with breathing’ (ãnãpãnasati) which can intensify our concentrating insight. Buddhadåsa emphasizes that all these practices must be integrated into the Dhamma practice of ‘doer-less doing’ in daily life so that one can experience nibbåna with the successful achievement of social duties.

Thus, to Buddhadåsa, the void-mind (chit-wång) is the true heart of Buddhism, not only for monks but for lay people, who are more exposed to the burden of social relationships and responsibilities. In his view, the more a person cultivates the void-mind (chit-wång), the more he/she is involved in beneficial works for others,

\textsuperscript{43} See Ibid., pp. 107-8.
\textsuperscript{44} See Ibid., p. 108. In the Pali texts, the term amata (deathless) does not refer to the ‘metaphysical eternity’ but to ‘nibbåna’ in the sense of the ‘complete eradication’ of all defilement (kilesa) and desires (taĩhå). See SN V, 184-90; SN V, 421; AN I, 45; AN IV, 455.
understanding and following his/her social nature as a selfless interdependent being. To Buddhadāsa, personal liberation and social well-being cannot be separated; and this is what the fundamental Buddhist doctrine of voidness (suññatā) refers to. In other words, this doctrine teaches not total emptiness but the interdependent reality of the world (idappaccayata), from which Buddhadāsa draws his ethical-political theory called Dhammic socialism. Through this innovative application of the basic Buddhist doctrine to the root problems of the socio-economic political systems of modern society, Buddhadāsa became a source of inspiration for many progressive Buddhist reformists in the rapidly changing society of modern Thailand. In the following section, we will examine how Buddhadāsa develops his Dhammic socialist thought and praxis against the dominant political ideologies of liberal capitalism and socialist communism.

2. Dhammic Socialism

In the post colonial period, many political leaders in Theravada countries chose ‘Buddhist socialism’ as a political ideology to express their national identity. In Thailand, however, the USA-backed military regimes dominated Thai politics and identified socialism with communism, the enemy. Buddhist monks were under pressure not to comment on the political situation. As we noted in the first chapter, during the political unrest in the 1970s, thousands of people involved in democratic movements were killed or jailed because they were labelled communists; and many senior monks in Bangkok tacitly supported the ruling authorities. In such a situation, Buddhadāsa began to proclaim in public that Buddhism is socialist in nature and that ‘Dhammic socialism’ is the most urgent and beneficial political

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45 The most prominent political leaders who upheld the rhetoric of Buddhist socialism were Bandaranaike, the former prime minister of Sri Lanka (1956-9); U Nu, the former prime minister of Burma (1948-62); and Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia during the 1950s and 60s. See Donald K. Swearer, ‘Dhammic Socialism’, an introductory article in Dhammic Socialism, trans. and ed. by Donald K. Swearer (Bangkok: TIRCD, 1986), pp. 19-21.

46 See Chapter I, pp. 30-1.
system for modern Thailand. He was the first and foremost religious figure in Thailand to challenge what he saw as the deceitfulness of liberal democratic capitalism. His Dhammic socialism, however, is different from the materialist socialism developed from Marxist philosophy. It is a socialism based on the Buddhist understanding of nature and society. In other words, it is the ‘pure’ Buddhist theory of politics, derived from Buddhadāsa’s radical thought and praxis, in response to the growing political polarization in modern Thailand.

Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic socialism is to be understood as a social dimension of his transformative spirituality, concomitant with his theory of personal liberation (chit-wâng). As we saw in the last section, Buddhadāsa presents the aim of personal liberation as the attainment of the void-mind (chit-wâng): a mind freed from mental defilements (kilesa) and suffering (dukkha). His political thought is also integrated into this spiritual goal: for him, the best political system must be such that provides basic conditions for people to practice the non-clinging mind and to establish personal and social peace. Buddhadāsa emphasizes that the political and religious goals cannot be separated because both are related to morality:

The word “politics” […] is problematical. Some see it as something worthless, deceptive and as a strategy for exploitation. Others see it as a means or strategy capable of making the world peaceful. In its root meaning politics can be defined simply as ‘concerning many people or things’. Politics, in this sense, is a strategy for addressing the problems that arise from increasing numbers of people living together. This is its basic meaning, and in this sense may be considered moral or even religious. Ideally, then, politics is a moral system for addressing the problems arising from the need for social cooperation. […] The word “religion” (sâsana) and politics have an essential relationship. Religion means the most perfect state of morality. Since a political system should be essentially a system of morality (sîla-dhamma), politics and religion share a common ground. Of course, people think of politics only in terms of the

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47 Out of many lectures and writings on Dhammic socialism, three key essays are translated into English: ‘Democratic Socialism’, ‘A Socialism Capable of Benefitting the World’, and ‘A Dictatorial Dhammic Socialism’. These three articles are published in Dhammic Socialism, pp. 45-120 and in Me and Mine, pp. 167-207.
Thus, Buddhadāsa rejects the dichotomous view of religion and politics, which regards the former as purely spiritualistic and the latter as purely materialistic. He emphasizes that both religion and politics must serve to improve morality (sīladhamma) in society. He remarks that people see so much political corruption that they regard politics as a dirty business. But, to Buddhadāsa, true politics is a struggle against moral impurity in society. He is convinced that no part of society, whether politics, economics, religion, or social science, can be excluded from morality. Here the term ‘morality’ (sīladhamma) refers not to the ‘philosophical’, but to the ‘practical’ morality which brings about balance and harmony among all parts of society.\(^49\) He explains that the Pali term sīla means normalcy, or equilibrium (pakati); and anything conducing to this peaceful state is called sīladhamma.\(^50\) To him, morality (sīladhamma) should aim at enabling individuals to bring their mind and deeds to equilibrium (pakati); and at enabling societies to be pakati, to live together in peace and harmony.\(^51\)

Buddhadāsa derives such an ideal state of moral balance (sīladhamma) in society from the peaceful and harmonious state of nature (dhammajāti).\(^52\) In other words, he draws the norms of ethics and politics from the way things interrelate in nature: from ‘Is’ to ‘Ought’.\(^53\) It does not mean, however, that the natural world contains within itself a normative moral law; it rather means that human beings must see and behave in accordance with the natural law of the universe.\(^54\) In order to illustrate the close relationship between nature (dhammajāti) and human behaviour (sīladhamma), Buddhadāsa expounds four meanings of Dhamma:

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\(^49\) Ibid., p. 80.
\(^50\) See Buddhadāsa, ‘The Value of Morality’, in Me and Mine, p. 159.
\(^51\) Ibid., p. 164.
\(^52\) See Ibid., p. 161.
\(^54\) See Ibid., 277.
Dhamma means Nature (dhammajāti), which can be distinguished in four aspects: Nature itself (sabhavadhamma), the Law of Nature (saccadhamma), the Duty of living things according to Natural Law (paṭipattidhamma), and the results that follow from performing duty according to Natural Law (paṭivedhadhamma). All four are known by the single word ‘Dhamma’.\footnote{Buddhadāsa, Dharmaghosana Atthanukrom [Dhamma Propagation Book of Meanings] (Bangkok: Alliance for the Propagation of Buddhism, 1990), p. 67, quoted in Santikaro, ‘Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness’, in Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 159.}

The first meaning of Dhamma is nature itself (sabhavadhamma), referring to the reality of ‘what is’. The word ‘nature’ (dhammajāti) indicates that all things are ‘born’ (jāti) out of ‘Dhamma’. Hence, to Buddhadāsa, everything is nature and nature is Dhamma. He emphasizes that human beings and all their creations are also a part of nature.\footnote{See Santikaro, ‘Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness’, p. 160.} To him, the truth of nature (saccadhamma) is that all beings, including humans, cannot exist unless they follow natural law. This is the second meaning of Dhamma. In the Pali canon, the natural law of interdependent reality is given as an abstract formula of Paṭiccasamuppāda as follows:

\begin{align*}
\text{Imasmiṃ sati idam hoti;} & \quad \text{When this exists, that comes to be;} \\
\text{Imassa uppāda idam uppaññati.} & \quad \text{With the arising of this, that arises.} \\
\text{Imasmiṃ asati idam na hoti;} & \quad \text{When this does not exist, that does not come to be;} \\
\text{Imassa nirodha idam nirujjhati.} & \quad \text{With the cessation of this, that ceases.}\footnote{MN II, 32; III, 63; MLDB, pp. 655, 927.}
\end{align*}

Buddhadāsa remarks that this principle of interdependency (idappaccayatā) is the universal law of nature that governs all beings. To him, this is the ‘Buddhist God’, an impersonal creator: omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.\footnote{Buddhadāsa says that Buddhism has no ‘personal God’ but an ‘impersonal God’ called ‘the law of conditionality’ (idappaccayatā), which is more powerful than any kind of personal God. See}
Dhamma as nature and natural law has a plan to preserve the whole universe through balance and harmony: if one section disobeys the law of nature, all interconnected things must suffer; hence, all beings in the universe have a duty to follow natural law (paṭippattidhamma). This is the third meaning of Dhamma. He further remarks that by living close to nature, we can observe that rocks, insects, trees and animals are faithful to their duty to follow natural law; but, unfortunately, only human beings, with their selfish greed, fail to perform this duty, so everything on earth suffers. To Buddhāsa, human duty is not a passive interaction with outer nature for the sake of survival, but an active practice of mindfulness to penetrate deep into the inner or spiritual nature so as to conserve the outer or material nature as well. He emphasizes that since everything is interconnected by natural law, when human beings perform their duty properly, the environment, which has been distorted by human selfishness, will soon recover its natural state; and human beings, liberated from their greed and delusion, will live their spiritual and social life in peaceful harmony with nature. This is the fourth meaning of Dhamma: the fruits or benefits that follow when humans act according to the law of nature (paṭivedhadhamma).

These are the four meanings of Dhamma—nature, the law of nature, duty according to this natural law, and the results of performing that duty—based on which Buddhāsa further develops his political theory of Dhammic socialism.

Nature in its pure state, argues Buddhāsa, is a perfect example of socialism. He asserts that the entire universe is inherently ‘socialistic’ (sankhom-niyom in Thai): nothing can exist independently; everything follows the law of interdependency (idappaccayata). He remarks that countless numbers of stars in the sky exist, surviving together because they follow a socialist system in which things do not collide with one another. He insists that true socialism must be drawn from such a Dhammic nature of peace and harmony in the cosmos. Hence, his Dhammic socialism is a political system which seeks genuine peace in the world. To

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59 See Ibid., p. 160.
60 See Ibid., pp. 160-1.
63 See Ibid., p. 114.
Buddhadāsa, however, the two dominant political systems, liberal democracy and socialist democracy, are based on adhammic principles which constantly engender violent conflicts and mutual destruction.\(^{64}\) He points out that liberal democracy upholds the ideal of individual freedom but actually operates under the power of selfish defilements (*kilesa*) of capitalists; whereas socialist democracy upholds the ideal of social equality but has historically shown its brutality under communist authoritarianism.\(^{65}\) Buddhadāsa proposes Dhammic socialism as a truly reliable political system which can save the world from self-destruction because it promotes the ideal of balance between individual freedom and social benefit, without being entrapped into the false freedom of capitalism and the false equality of communism.\(^{66}\) Furthermore, his Dhammic socialism seeks not only peace in human society but also the natural balance of all living beings.\(^{67}\) To Buddhadāsa, real freedom must be a freedom from selfish desires and real equality must be genuine mutual cooperation for building peace and justice in the world. He is convinced that the fundamental meaning of ‘socialism’ (*sankhom-niyom*) is the ability to live together in harmony just as things exist in nature.

Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic socialism upholds three basic principles: the common good; a restrained and sharing economy; and the respect of life with compassion.\(^{68}\) The first principle refers to a political system which emphasizes the good of the whole before that of the individuals.\(^{69}\) Buddhadāsa remarks that this principle pervades all aspects of life: from an atom, a molecule, a cell to animals, human beings, societies, and the entire cosmos; everything lives in abundance and diversity because each part is working for the benefit of the whole.\(^{70}\) Hence, to Buddhadāsa, the ideal socio-economic political structure is to be a system which follows the universal principle of the common good. He is critical of liberal capitalism, which goes against such a fundamental principle of the universe by promoting selfish and egoistic interests

\(^{64}\) See Ibid., p. 111.
\(^{65}\) See Buddhadāsa, ‘A Dictatorial Dhammic Socialism’, p.81.
\(^{66}\) See Ibid., p. 82.
\(^{69}\) Santikaro, ‘Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness’, p. 166.
over the well-being of society as a whole.\textsuperscript{71} He does not deny the importance of economic development but criticizes the exploitation of resources and the selfish accumulation of wealth under the capitalist system. He remarks that the Buddhist understanding of a ‘wealthy person’ is quite different from the capitalist concept:

A person of great material wealth (Sanskrit: \textit{śreṣṭhī}) in the Buddhist tradition differs greatly from the capitalist (Thai: \textit{nai thun}) of today. Outside of Buddhism, \textit{śreṣṭhī} has the same meaning as \textit{nai thun}—one who keeps accumulating material wealth far beyond what he actually needs. In the Buddhist tradition, however, the status of a \textit{śreṣṭhī} was measured by the number of \textit{rong than} that person had. A \textit{rong than} was an almshouse, a communal place where those in need could find what they lacked materially. The more \textit{rong than} one had, the wealthier one was considered to be. Because of the surplus produced by the \textit{śreṣṭhī} and the large number of servants and labourers they employed, they were able to build \textit{rong than} as a kind of social service. \textit{Śreṣṭhī} in the non-Buddhist sense, however, are strictly \textit{nai thun}. They accumulate endless wealth and reinvest all the profits for themselves, while oppressing their workers. A \textit{śreṣṭhī} in the Buddhist sense, on the other hand, employs workers in a cooperative effort for the welfare of the entire community.\textsuperscript{72}

Thus, Buddhadāsa distinguishes the truly wealthy person (\textit{śreṣṭhī}) from the selfish capitalist (\textit{nai thun}): the former shares his wealth with others but the latter does not. He points out that the capitalist attitude is completely opposed to how things operate in nature: a harmonious balance based on limiting and controlling unnecessary accumulation or consumption of resources. He claims that natural balance was not threatened in the process of evolution until humans began to hoard more resources than they needed for themselves; and social problems exploded when human intelligence was applied to accumulating wealth, power and resources.\textsuperscript{73} In his

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{71} See D.K. Swearer, ‘Dhammic Socialism’, p. 32.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Buddhadāsa, ‘Democratic Socialism’, in \textit{Dhammic Socialism}, p. 57.
\item \textsuperscript{73} See Ibid., pp. 59-60.
\end{itemize}
judgment, liberal democracy has no power to control the capitalist selfish desire; the situation of humanity is deteriorating in the capitalist society.

Buddhadāsa then proposes a return to a socialism which follows the natural principle of restraint and sharing: humans must be content with what they really need and share the rest with others. This is the second principle of Dhammic socialism. He clarifies that this principle does not prohibit a surplus production; on the contrary, ‘people have a right to produce more than they need, and it is even appropriate to do so if the surplus is shared with others’.74 He emphasizes that even ‘those with little to spare have something to share, although they may not realize it’.75 To him, the principles of a restrained life and the sharing of wealth is the highest law of nature (Dhamma). Buddhadāsa emphasizes the urgency of this principle by using the paradoxical term ‘dictatorial’ Dhammic socialism. Here the term ‘dictatorial’ does not refer to a political ideology but to an ‘immediate and effective’ act, limiting our egoistic desires as nature does for the harmonious growth of each part.76 It means to act expeditiously when responding to social problems as nature (Dhamma) controls each part for the benefit of the whole universe:

A truly socialistic government would embody the characteristics of Dhamma. It would not allow for class distinctions based on wealth. Nor would it permit anyone to accumulate private wealth at the expense of others. Because it would set limits on “freedom” as such, it could be called “dictatorial”; but, it also maintains a harmonious balance that brings the socialism of nature to the basis of a political system. Buddhism is a prime example of dictatorial Dhammic socialism not only in theory but also in practice. Activities within the Sangha are “dictatorial” in that limits are set on what any one person can have or use so that there will always be enough for everyone. […] The Buddha developed a socialist system with a “dictatorial” method. Unlike liberal democracy’s inability to act in an expeditious and timely manner, this Dhammic dictatorial

74 Ibid., pp. 62-3.
75 Ibid., 63.
76 See Buddhadāsa, ‘Dictatorial Dhammic Socialism’, pp. 82-3, 86.
socialism is able to act immediately to accomplish what needs to be done.  

Buddhadāsa clarifies that ‘dictatorship’ in the sense of ‘tyranny’ has no place in Dhammic socialism. What he promotes is a political system similar to the Buddhist Sangha or the ancient socialistic kingdom ruled by the Buddhist kings (rāja) as described in the Pali canon. He emphasizes that the word rāja originally meant ‘contentment’ and the first mythological rāja of the world appeared when people took advantage of one another; under his rule, no one could oppress anyone else and the entire community enjoyed peace and harmony. To Buddhadāsa, the ideal ruler (rāja) fulfils all of the ten royal virtues (dasarājadhamma), which reflect the spirit of Dhammic socialism: (1) dāna (giving or the will to give); (2) sīla (morality in the sense of keeping things as they are); (3) pariccāga (liberty in the sense of giving up all inner evils and selfishness); (4) aṭṭava (uprightness or truthfulness); (5) maddava (meekness and gentleness toward all citizens); (6) tapo (self-control); (7) akkodha (freedom from anger); (8) avihīnī (harmlessness, non-violence, or absence of cruelty); (9) khanti (being patient or forbearing); (10) avirodha (absence of obstruction or non-opposition). He holds that a ruler who embodies these ten royal virtues cannot be a tyrant but the best kind of socialist ‘dictator’ in the Dhammic sense. He gives as examples King Mahāsammattā, the mythical universal ruler; King Aśoka; and some kings of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya. Buddhadāsa supports the need for non-violent revolution against any ruler who is not faithful to this ideal kingship and wields his/her power for personal gain:

Do not blindly follow the political theories of someone who does not embody the dasarājadhamma system, the true socialist system which can save humankind. Indeed, revolution has a place in deposing a ruler who does not

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77 Ibid., pp. 90-2.
78 See Ibid., p. 83.
79 See Ibid., pp. 89, 91.
80 See Ibid., pp. 89-90.
81 Ibid., p. 95. The ten royal virtues are originally found in the Jātaka texts. See Chapter I, footnote 6.
82 See Ibid., pp. 90, 97.
83 See Ibid., pp. 92-3, 96.
embody the *dasarājadhama*, but not a place within a revolutionary political philosophy which espouses violence and bloodshed.\(^{84}\)

Thus, Buddhadāsa agrees that the unqualified ruler must be replaced according to the spirit of the ten virtues mentioned; violent overthrow, however, is not appropriate because it goes against *avihiṃsa* (non-violence), one of those ten virtues. It means that no political action is to be justified without a measure of *dasarājadhamma*. He is critical of Marxist revolutions because, in his view, they have created nothing but mutual destruction and insane conflict; their attempts to solve the problems of the world are like ‘cleaning something muddied with muddy water’.\(^{85}\) Buddhadāsa is convinced that in a Dhammic socialist society, the vast disparity of wealth we see in capitalist societies would not be tolerated.\(^{86}\) The distribution of wealth, however, is not to be forced by the state power; the virtuous rich person (*sreyṣṭhi*) must be motivated to share his wealth by the moral ideals of generosity and loving-kindness instilled in such a society.\(^{87}\)

The third and last principle of Dhammic socialism is to respect all forms of life and to produce the cooperative social conditions of love and compassion. Buddhadāsa remarks that human beings become so cruel that they are willing to drop a bomb, knowing that it can kill thousands of people; both capitalist and socialist countries are equal in their brutality.\(^{88}\) He further remarks that their destructive technologies have devastated nature so that some kinds of plants and animals have become extinct; even some groups of humans have become extinct. He asserts, however, that in a truly human community, people act with love and compassion rather than hatred and violence:

> If we want peace, we should choose the path of peace. Killing others can only

\(^{84}\) Ibid., p. 97.  
\(^{87}\) See Ibid., pp. 32-3.  
lead to being killed. If we are to be harmoniously united with one another, we should act out of mutual compassion (*mettā* and *karuṇā*). No one today believes in the saying, “If we have universal love, even fierce beasts will not harm us.” People today hunt not only animals but human beings as well. We should consider well the saying, “We should overcome evil by good; we should not overcome evil by evil.”

Buddhāsa thus advocates a spirit of peace and love in the world of conflict and hatred. To him, each individual is a social unit responsible for promoting peace in the world. He points out that people today blindly believe in the power of economics, thinking that economic success will lead to peace and happiness; however, economic success without moral restraint encourages people to struggle for more possessions and destroy others for their own benefit. Hence, Buddhāsa argues that both individuals and governments must cultivate their moral qualities in order to enable economic progress to contribute to world peace. He presents the nine moral qualities necessary to be a peace maker as follows:

1. One must be well-versed in professional knowledge and moral conduct.
2. One should be a healthy person physically, mentally, and spiritually.
3. One should come from a righteous and peaceful family whose members behave according to the Buddha’s teaching of the six directions.
4. One should live according to a Dhammic economic plan being neither too poor nor too rich, and following the principle of moderation and sharing.
5. One should practise Dhamma, the human duty of helping one another to be free from ‘I’ and ‘mine’.
6. One should know the importance of cooperation with others in order to build a peaceful and loving society, the ideal human community (*sri-ariya-metteyya*).

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89 Ibid.
91 See Ibid.
92 In the *Siṅgālovāla Sutta*, the Buddha transforms the Brahmanist worship toward six directions—the east, the south, the west, the north, the nadir, and the zenith—to focus on the human duties in six kinds of social relationship: parents-children; teacher-pupil; husband-wife; friend-companion; monk-lay; and employer-employee. See DN III, 180-93.
93 In the *Cakkavatti-Sāhanāla Sutta*, the Buddha prophesies the coming of the future Buddha
(7) One should keep normalcy or equilibrium (pakati) in his/her thought, word, and action.

(8) One should have a right view (samma-diñhi) of morality.

(9) One should keep cultivating mindfulness so as to strengthen and extend the temporal experiences of nibbaña to the higher degree.\(^94\)

The ideals of Dhammic socialism, according to Buddhadāsa, can be realized only by committed individuals who are equipped with these spiritual and moral virtues. He emphasizes, however, that such peace makers cannot arise without a proper political system which promotes a peaceful socio-cultural, religious ethos. To Buddhadāsa, the ideal political system is a Dhammic socialism in which both the rich and the poor work together for the benefit of the entire society; and whose members are encouraged to cultivate the void-mind (chit-wāng) and moral virtues.\(^95\) He asserts that, in a Dhammic socialist society, people have ample opportunity to learn human values and wisdom, through effective educational systems and peaceful religio-cultural surroundings; their morality (siladhama) also applies to a good ecological system, which deals not only with the eradication of material pollution but the purification of all aspects of personal and social life.\(^96\)

In summary, Buddhadāsa promotes Dhammic socialism as the most appropriate political system for modern Thailand, against both liberal capitalism and socialist communism which he thinks adhammic political systems based on immoral human tendencies: greed of selfish capitalists, and hatred of vengeful proletarians. He asserts that political systems must serve the people’s moral and spiritual development rather than stimulate their immoral tendencies. To Buddhadāsa, Dhammic socialism is the ideal political system for Buddhist countries because it provides a proper environment for people to perform their individual and social duties in accordance with Dhamma. The three principles of Dhammic socialism—the

\(^94\) See Buddhadāsa, ‘Till the World Is With Peace’, pp. 204-6. For Buddhadāsa’s distinction of the three levels of nibbaña, see Chapter II, p. 72.

\(^95\) See Ibid., p. 206.

\(^96\) Ibid., pp. 206-7.
common good, the sharing economy, and the peaceful social environment—are derived from the way that the entire universe operates in natural harmony and balance. Thus, Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic socialism aims at establishing a society in which personal freedom, social liberation and ecological harmony are all interconnected.

Buddhadāsa recognizes, however, that the ideals of Dhammic socialism will be realized only through the people who sincerely practice both spiritual cultivation and social engagement; and their ceaseless commitment to genuine world peace in cooperation with other religions. Hence, he calls not only for Buddhist followers but also for people of other faiths to join his Dhammic essentialist radical orthopraxis to build a just and peaceful world. He asserts that every religion has the same goal of attaining freedom from selfishness and establishing world peace in mutual collaboration. To Buddhadāsa, true religion is not to be measured by different doctrines or religious expressions, but tested by actual practice for that very goal. In the following section, we will examine how Buddhadāsa understands religion and how he promotes interreligious dialogue and action for world peace.

3. Interreligious Dialogue and Collaboration for World Peace

Buddhadāsa engaged in dialogue with people of other religions from early in his monkhood. In the 1930s, he was close to Swami Satyanandaburi, an Indian Vedantist who was well versed in the social sciences. They talked frequently and shared a common interest in social and religious issues. In 1939, Buddhadāsa wrote an article entitled ‘Answering the Questions of the Priest’, in which he criticizes the Christian idea of a personal God along with aggressive missionary activities. He

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98 The article was written in response to a visit by an Italian missionary priest whose name is unknown. See Santikaro, ‘Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness’, p. 183.
thought that Christian missionaries were spreading superstitious teachings and proselytizing Thai people by using wealth and support of the Western powers.\textsuperscript{99} After reading the Bible himself, however, Buddhāśa found great value in it and began to talk positively with Christians. In February 1967, he gave a set of three lectures at the Protestant seminary in Chiang Mai, which he published as a book, \textit{Christianity and Buddhism}.\textsuperscript{100} He also gave a series of twelve lectures at Suan Mokkh, \textit{The Essence of Christianity as Far as Buddhists Ought to Know}, in which he explains how Buddhists can learn from the Christian teachings, focusing mainly on the theme of love.\textsuperscript{101} His active relationship with people of other religions made Suan Mokkh a centre for interreligious dialogue. Many Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs visited Buddhāśa, considering him their spiritual friend and teacher (\textit{guru}).

Through his experience of interreligious engagement and his own study of the scriptures of different world religions, Buddhāśa came to be convinced that the heart of all religions is one and the same: the liberative praxis that grants freedom from selfishness and human suffering (\textit{dukkha}).\textsuperscript{102} He emphasizes that religion is all about practice and the Truth is revealed only through liberating praxis:

\begin{quote}
The essence of religion is always its practice. Knowledge is only a preparation for practice, and only when it is actually put into practice, is it religion; only then can there be real benefits; only then is there religion in the fullest sense of the word. Acting in absolute, unwavering accordance with the principle of Truth—that is religion. No matter where it occurs, in what period of history, under whatever name, it is all one and the same. There can be no separation of theory and practice in true religion.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., p. 184.
\textsuperscript{101} This series of lectures was published as \textit{Putth-Khrit Nai Tasana Tan Buddhadasa [Buddhism and Christianity as Seen by Venerable Buddhadasa]} (Bangkok: Tianwaan Press, 1984). See Santikaro, ‘Buddhāśa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness’, p. 184, 192.
\textsuperscript{102} See Buddhāśa, ‘Democratic Socialism’ in \textit{Dhammic Socialism}, pp.45-8.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., p. 48.
Buddhadāsa remarks that the one ultimate Truth is called different names such as Dhamma, God, and Tao. To him, however, the differences are just a matter of expression; their soteriological goal is the same. In other words, Buddhadāsa is convinced that all world religions show various ways to the same salvation—to become one with the highest good, the same salvific reality. Hence, to him, when people cling to their own dogmas and ideologies, which lead to conflict and hostility, they stand exactly opposed to the Truth and goal they seek. He points out that people today have confused the purpose of religion to the extent that they have split off into many hostile groups which proved the source of war and conflict. Seeing a world situation of socio-political and religious conflicts, Buddhadāsa made three wishes (pañiddhāna) as his life mission; and posted them at the entrance of Suan Mokkh.

1. To help everyone realize the core of their own religion.
2. To build mutual understanding between all religions.
3. To work together in pulling the world out of materialism.

With regard to the first wish, Buddhadāsa points out that every religion has its own core and outer coverings; the inner heart or essence of each religion is hidden and hard to grasp. He recognizes that the external rites and rituals are necessary for the survival of religions. He emphasizes, however, that they are merely their superficial cover; and the more rituals are added to a religion, the more this becomes a superstitious faith rather than a religion of wisdom. To Buddhadāsa, the ‘real taste’ of each religion is not in the outer coverings, but in the core of the religious teachings as found in their holy scriptures. He remarks that the reason why people do not understand the essential teaching of their own religion is that they have a strong tendency to read the scriptures in a literal sense (phasa khon), not in a

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104 See Ibid., pp. 48-9.
105 See Ibid., p. 49.
106 See Ibid., pp. 49-50.
108 See Ibid., pp. 51-3.
109 See Ibid., p. 55.
spiritual sense (phasa tham). He argues that just as Buddhists must understand the meaning of ‘birth’ and ‘death’, not in the physical sense, but in the Dhammic sense of arising and passing away of ‘I’ and ‘mine’, Christians also should understand the meaning of ‘life’ and ‘death’, not in the physical sense, but in the spiritual sense of committing ‘sin’ (death) and ‘freedom’ from sin (life). To Buddhadāsa, the true meaning of ‘eternal life’ or ‘entering into the Kingdom of God’ is not only meant to be an individual reborn after death as understood in demotic language (phasa khon), but a ‘full of life’ or a ‘selfless life’ here and now, as the Buddhist nibbāna indicates in Dhamma language (phasa tham).

Thus, Buddhadāsa tries to help people understand the core teachings of their own religion from his Dhammic essentialist perspective. He maintains that every religion has its own soteriological purpose, which is in fact shared by all religions. To Buddhadāsa, the common goal of every true religion is to build a sustainable world peace through the restraint of selfishness, the most dangerous human instinct. He remarks that in modern society human selfishness is so widely spread that it has almost become the Lord of the world, creating constant problems and conflicts. He asserts that when people understand the core of their own religion in the deepest sense, they will be able to realize their freedom from selfish attachment; and bring hope to the tumultuous world where there is seemingly no alternative to achieve a permanent peace. He is convinced that when people learn Dhamma language (phasa tham) properly, both the theistic and non-theistic religions will eventually come to realize that there is only one Truth—the natural Truth of selflessness.

Buddhadāsa’s second wish is to promote mutual understanding between all religions, based on his practical Dhammic essentialist insights. He holds that we must accept the reality of religious pluralism as a fact whether we like it or not. He remarks that just as people are divided into different nations by racial origin, cultural background,

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112 See Ibid., pp. 32-3.  
113 See Buddhadāsa, The Three Wishes of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, pp. 35-7.  
114 See Ibid., p. 45.  
115 See Ibid., pp. 45-7.  
116 See Ibid., pp. 61-76.
and other historical factors, we cannot simply avoid the rise of different religions according to the suitability of geographical conditions and cultural factors.\footnote{See Ibid., p.231.} He further remarks that the truly civilized nations maintain the policy of religious freedom and encourage people to respect the religious right of others. In his judgement, the scriptures of every religion deliver the message of love and peace; however, religious fundamentalists cling to their own narrow and distorted view so rigidly that they turn religions into a major source of conflict in the world; and moreover, unscrupulous politicians always use religion as a political tool to achieve their goals.\footnote{See Ibid., pp. 289-93.} That is why he calls for mutual understanding between all religions. To Buddhadāsa, it is only through the mutual understanding of the core of all other religions that tolerance, respect, and harmony can spread among them. He is convinced that in spite of the unavoidable differences between the world religions, they share the same spirituality in their essence:

We may safely say that the one ‘God’, if he taught \textit{twenty-five centuries ago in India, nineteen centuries ago in Palestine, and nearly fourteen centuries ago in Arabia}, could certainly not teach in identical terms. […] But when coming to the very essence of religion, that is something identical and contained in all religions, the essence being not to cherish self-love (egoism-selfishness) but Dhamma-love, devoted to the truth, or you may say, God-love. Not to cherish self-love (selfishness) is truth; \textit{it is in the highest sense the Summum Bonum, and we cannot say that it is something Buddhist, Christian, or Islamic}. […] \textit{It is the truth of all places and all times}. […] Man can therefore reach God or Dhamma, the ultimate genuine, by treading the common way of getting rid of self-love or selfishness.\footnote{Buddhadāsa, \textit{Christianity and Buddhism}, pp. 24-5.} [Emphasis is original].

Buddhadāsa thus emphasizes that selfless life is the common practice of all religions, through which one can attain the highest Truth. He asserts that the founders of all world religions share the same goal of helping their disciples and followers to
practice this simple but essential Truth of selflessness.\(^{120}\) He holds that the divisions between religions and denominations exist because people have not yet realized the Truth of selfless reality as such; if people penetrate the essential nature of religions, they will see that there is no religion at all. He illustrates this point with a water simile: ordinary people think there are different kinds of water; but, a wise person knows that pure water can be distilled out of rainwater, river water, or even sewer water; proceeding further with the analysis of pure water, he/she will conclude that there is no water as such, but only two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen, which are not water anymore; at this stage of understanding, the substance that we have been calling water has disappeared: it is void, empty.\(^{121}\) To Buddhadāsa, there are ultimately no religions: just as the essential elements of water are the same in any place and any time, every religion has the same spirituality in their essence—the practice of selflessness. In the same line, he interprets the meaning of the cross as the Christian symbol of selfless life:

I feel that the cross is the symbol of cutting down the ‘ego’. The vertical bar of the cross is equivalent to the letter ‘I’; the horizontal bar means cutting the ‘I’ or ‘ego’ thereby being without ‘I’ or ‘ego’, and this is to be regarded as the most excellent deed on the part of Jesus Christ to sacrifice his own life for other people. The heart of every religion is the teaching of the destroying of selfishness, destroying egoism and destroying egoistic ideas. The cross is but the symbol of the heart of every religion. A good member of any religion has no self or belonging to self; but if there is to be ‘self’, then it must belong to God, or to Dhamma, or to Nature.\(^{122}\)

From this Dhammic essentialist perspective, Buddhadāsa asserts that Christianity is not merely a religion of *faith* and *rituals*, but a religion of *action* and *wisdom*, which promotes selfless love, forgiveness, and forbearance.\(^{123}\) To Buddhadāsa, this kind of

\(^{120}\) See Ibid., p. 29.
\(^{121}\) See Buddhadāsa, ‘No Religion!’ in *Me and Mine*, p. 147.
\(^{123}\) See Buddhadāsa, *Christianity and Buddhism*, pp. 46-7, 51, 59.
interpretation of other religion does not harm anyone; it is based on the inner essence of every religion, not on the outer forms of each religion.\textsuperscript{124} This is what he calls ‘enlightened flexibility’ approaching interreligious dialogue with broadmindedness, meaning that the interpretation of any word in any religion must lead to the harmonious co-existence of religions and further the welfare of the many.\textsuperscript{125} He points out that for the people who pursue the selfless life, there is no reason to quarrel over religion because they can distinguish, relate, and harmonize different faiths; they are not misguided by religious fundamentalism, which actually distorts the original Truth.\textsuperscript{126} To Buddhadāsa, any form of war in the name of religion is outright rebellion to God’s will. He asserts that a genuine and real God would never approve the destructive conflicts between religions; God would rather help people to establish peace and harmony on earth.\textsuperscript{127}

Buddhadāsa’s third wish is to save the world from materialism through cooperation with people of other religions. He emphasizes that every religion has the duty of joining together to build world peace by destroying materialism—the most subtle and dangerous enemy of human society, which constantly stimulates a selfishness opposed to the common spirituality of all true religions:

\begin{quote}
It is materialism that has become our enemy and it is even more harmful than anything else one could possibly conceive of, especially in this present age when materialism practically reigns over the world. The charm of materialism has the pull on the heart and mind of every human being on earth, and it forces us to struggle to get more of it till we become deluded which is the reason behind the arising of selfishness as well as the factor that encourages the thriving of selfishness. The world is thus full of selfishness because human beings are contented with the ‘taste’ of material goods and have become more infatuated with it than any other tastes.\textsuperscript{128}
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{124} See Ibid., p. 59.
\textsuperscript{125} See Ibid., p. 15.
\textsuperscript{126} See Buddhadāsa, \textit{The Three Wishes of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu}, pp.289-90.
\textsuperscript{127} See Ibid., pp.289, 295, 464.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., p. 353.
\end{flushright}
Thus, to Buddhadāsa, materialism refers to people’s attachment to material things, and the social environments that encourage the pursuit of an ever-increasing material consumption. He contends that the tremendous material progress of the modern age has actually transformed this world into hell because it is not controlled by moral and spiritual principles. He points out several negative results of materialism:

- It makes people become very selfish and creates various kinds of evils which never existed before.
- It drives people to degenerate into sensual indulgence, forgetting their religious ethics.
- It causes the enormous gap between the rich and the poor.
- It pushes both capitalists and communists to serve and worship matter and destroy religious values.
- It gives rise to constant competition and strife in the name of ‘war for peace and justice’.
- It has inexorably exploited the world’s natural resources and caused an extensive ecological crisis.
- It makes people turn their back on God or Dhamma to the extent that people ignore the essential liberating practices; leaving only the external rites and rituals.

Buddhadāsa summarizes such a world situation as people waging ‘war against God’, behaving only according to their endless selfish aims, while paying only lip service to God. He points out that people do not devote their lives genuinely to a real God but create an artificial God—the God of defilements and selfish desires for material success. To Buddhadāsa, materialism is ‘Satan’ or a ‘monster’ with an enticing power to tempt people into delusion and addiction to material goods and services. He remarks that people do not realize that they are caught in the trap of the endless

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130 See Ibid., pp. 3-5.
131 See Ibid., p. 7.
132 See Ibid., p. 8.
133 See Ibid., p. 6. See also Buddhadāsa, *The Three Wishes of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu*, p. 373.
chain of desires which leads them to suffering (dukkha). To him, materialism is the prime cause behind unlimited competition, violent conflicts, epidemic diseases, and ecological crises; they are the work and result of Satan, who has done his best serving God to test humanity:

Satan is there, at the same time a lesson and a test in itself which God has sent in order to put His men on trial, this He does for some men at some times and under certain circumstances. This He does to select or sort out the person to be His man forever. Therefore Satan or Mara is able to or dares to put to trial even a person such as Jesus Christ or the Buddha, both before and after they were teachers. [...] Therefore, in order that we human beings go back and become the beloved children of God again to receive real peace as a reward, we must look at materialism or ‘materialistic culture’, which we are worshiping far more than God, as being something which is a barrier between us and God, making us hate God and causing us to establish ourselves as God.\textsuperscript{134}

Buddhad\textsa, of course, does not believe in the personified concept of God or Satan; what he means here is that in order to save the world from the crisis caused by materialism or the ‘materialistic culture’, people must return to the ‘spiritual culture’ of all religions, to Dhamma.\textsuperscript{135} He emphasizes, however, that escape from materialism does not necessarily mean to follow a life style of extreme austerity in a forest. He knows that human beings need a certain degree of material progress and must have a reasonable amount of wealth for their physical life. However, to Buddhad\textsa, the problem with the modern world is that people do not know how to control their excessive desire for wealth, power, fame, and sensual pleasure; they increasingly turn themselves into slaves to the material culture.\textsuperscript{136} To him, what people seriously lack is the spiritual training of the non-selfish life, which is at the heart of all religions. He argues that people do not understand that it is the core of their own religion, and even if they do, they do not really commit themselves to

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., pp. 14, 16.
\textsuperscript{135} See Ibid., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{136} See Buddhad\textsa, \textit{The Three Wishes of Buddhad\textsa Bhikkhu}, pp.355-69.
practice because they are already caught in the charm of materialism.\textsuperscript{137} Hence, he calls for interreligious dialogue and collaboration for the sublime goal of pulling the world out of materialism. He asks for people of other religions to join his struggle for promoting spiritual culture—the culture of selfless love.\textsuperscript{138} He asserts that without balancing the overwhelming materialism with spiritual culture, the world will never reach the state of justice, peace and harmony.\textsuperscript{139} To Buddhāsa, the duty of every religion is to tell the political leaders that their role is also to promote the spiritual culture which can eradicate the root causes of war and conflict in the world.\textsuperscript{140}

In summary, Buddhāsa is convinced that it is only through liberating praxis that religion can reveal the Truth. To him, although each religion has its own teachings and practices, there is only one ultimate Truth at the heart of all religions, expressed in different names: God, Dhamma, or Tao. Buddhāsa argues that these names are mere labels of the same salvific reality—the highest freedom, peace and happiness. In his Dhammic interpretation (\textit{phasa tham}), the core of this ultimate reality is selflessness, which he believes the common spirituality of all religions. He knows, however, that people tend to have a literal understanding (\textit{phasa khon}) of the religious truths, clinging to their own conventional beliefs and views, which often lead to unnecessary disputes, conflicts, and extreme fanaticism. Moreover, people live under the strong influence of materialism which continuously stimulates their selfish instinct against the core teachings of every religion. Hence, Buddhāsa strives to help people understand the shared goal of all religions: to bring peace and happiness to the world by promoting the transformative spirituality of selfless love and wisdom, against the modern stream of selfish materialism.

\textsuperscript{137} See Ibid., pp. 371-3.
\textsuperscript{138} See Buddhāsa, \textit{Exchanging Dhamma While Fighting}, pp. 20-5.
\textsuperscript{139} See Ibid., pp. 25, 32.
\textsuperscript{140} See Ibid., pp. 35-8.
4. Buddhāsa’s Critics and His Radical Orthopraxis

Buddhāsa’s radical orthopraxis derives from his hermeneutic of Dhamma language (*phasa tham*) which he applies to reinterpret the basic Buddhist teachings, to correct the traditional Buddhist practices, and to develop his theories of personal (*chit-wāng*) and socio-political liberation (Dhammic socialism). This practical Dhammic essentialist hermeneutic is also applied to his understanding of religion and its role in the modern world. As we noted in the last chapter, Buddhāsa’s radicalism comes not from his theory of Dhamma language itself, but from its application to his radical reinterpretation of traditional beliefs and practices; and to the problems of his contemporary society. In other words, his constant emphasis on freedom from ‘I’ and ‘mine’ is not different from the traditional Theravada teaching of non-self (*anatta*); however, Buddhāsa departs from the tradition in his attempt to ‘universalize’ and ‘contemporize’ liberation. His theory of the void-mind (*chit-wāng*) envisages a breakdown of the traditional monk-lay distinction, by emphasizing that both monks and lay people are called to the supreme goal of achieving individual freedom (*nibbāna*) here and now. To Buddhāsa, the traditional cosmological beliefs and merit-making rituals obscure this truly Buddhist spiritual goal and practice. As we have seen, Buddhāsa is also convinced that the spiritual praxis (*chit-wāng*) is to be conducive to social action for world peace (Dhammic socialism), in dialogue and collaboration with people of other religions.

Jackson points out that if such a radical stance were widely accepted, it would mean that the traditional role of the Sangha as the institutional foundation of Theravada society would be threatened. For, in Thailand, the socio-religious structure is established on the strong belief that giving alms to monks and donations to monasteries are the most effective meritorious acts. Lay people believe that these acts lead to well-being in this life and to a better rebirth in the next life. The Sangha, the spiritual domain of monks who pursue the supermundane (*lokuttara*) goal of

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attaining nibbāna, functions as the ‘field for merit’ and provides Buddhist cultural values to the mundane (lokiya) life of lay people.\textsuperscript{143} Jackson argues that the logical consequence of Buddhadāsa’s radical ideas is the abolition of this well established distinction between laity and monks; and that is why Buddhadāsa’s conservative critics accuse him of seeking to destroy Buddhism and the Sangha.\textsuperscript{144}

In Jackson’s view, however, Buddhadāsa’s theoretical radicalism is in contradiction with his conservative practice, as he faithfully remained a forest monk in the tradition of Theravada Buddhism.\textsuperscript{145} In other words, to him, Buddhadāsa was able to maintain a high degree of intellectual freedom by avoiding direct criticism of, or involvement with, the Sangha hierarchy; but, his extra-institutional role limited the extent of practical reforms which his radical ideas are capable of effecting.\textsuperscript{146} Jackson argues that unless the shell of institutional practices and rituals is actually changed, modernizing and reforming Buddhist movements like that initiated by Buddhadāsa will have little impact on socio-religious policy or state decision making.\textsuperscript{147} In his opinion, Buddhadāsa remained conservative in his practice because he was under the influence of the traditional concept of the ‘orthopraxy’ of Theravada Buddhism, in which interpretations of doctrine are more authoritative depending on the interpreter’s strictness in practice than his intellectual acumen or theoretical arguments.\textsuperscript{148} He points out that as long as Buddhadāsa kept a faithful Theravada monk tradition in his practice, the Sangha did not feel threatened by his radical theories.\textsuperscript{149} Jackson concludes that Buddhadāsa’s vision will only be fulfilled when his monk-followers come out of the ‘forest’ and actively engage with the socio-political world.\textsuperscript{150}

Thus, to Jackson, Buddhadāsa’s radical theories remain unrealistic and idealistic because he withdrew in practice from active world-involvement, and failed to

\textsuperscript{143} See Y. Ishii, Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History, pp. 27-30.
\textsuperscript{144} See P. Jackson, Buddhadāsa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand, pp. 146-7.
\textsuperscript{145} See Ibid., pp. 218, 270.
\textsuperscript{146} See Ibid., p. 267.
\textsuperscript{147} See Ibid., p. 268.
\textsuperscript{148} See Ibid., pp. 19-32, 272.
\textsuperscript{149} See Ibid., p. 31.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., p. 272.
develop a clear analysis of the monk’s role in institutional change within a Buddhist polity and social order. In the same line, Buddhadāsa is often criticized for not elaborating on how his Dhammic socialism might be implemented concretely. Gabaude remarks that the Santi Asoke movement emerged from Bodhirak’s critical view of Buddhadāsa’s failure to change Thai society: to Bodhirak, Buddhadāsa’s followers are mainly among the upper middle class who only read his books and talk about them; just like their Master, they are actually uncommitted to any specific socio-political action.\textsuperscript{151} Gabaude points out that the root of this accusation is related to the question of priority between wisdom (\textit{paññā}) and morals (\textit{sīla}).\textsuperscript{152} Again to Bodhirak, Buddhadāsa failed because he placed too much emphasis on personal wisdom (\textit{chit-\textit{wāng}}) without explaining exactly how to put it into practice in a social life which needs the more precise norms, markers, and moral precepts.\textsuperscript{153} Thus, the utopian character of Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic socialism and the lack of a realistic political involvement are generally criticized.

However, we must not forget that Buddhadāsa is neither a theorist of political science nor a professional politician. He is a Buddhist visionary who provokes people to think carefully about who they are and what they are doing as individuals, groups, and nations.\textsuperscript{154} What he promotes is the right understanding (\textit{samma-di\textit{ṭṭhi}}) of one’s personal-social situation from the Dhammic perspective, aiming to enable people to engage in responsible actions in various ways. As for himself, Buddhadāsa sought to embody his ideals when building a community, Suan Mokkh, which is quite different from the traditional monasteries or forest meditation centres. Suan Mokkh has served as a centre for him and his followers to practice the principles of the void-mind (\textit{chit-\textit{wāng}}) and Dhammic socialism: everyone is to be immersed in natural surroundings to learn from the socialist cooperation of nature; strong leadership is required, not in the sense of managing people, but in the sense of inspiring and helping people discern and perform their own duties; a simple and

\textsuperscript{151} See Louis Gabaude, ‘Buddhadāsa’s Contributions As a Human Being, As a Thai, As a Buddhist’, in \textit{The Quest for A Just Society}, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{152} See Ibid., p. 51.
moderate lifestyle is preferred in every individual and communal activity; a spirit of respect for all levels of life in the forest permeates the entire community; the monks and the lay men and women intermingle, though living in separate sections, but in the same spirit of cultivating the void-mind (chit-wång). Thousands of visitors, staying short or long periods, have been inspired by the teachings and life examples of Buddhâsa and his followers at Suan Mokkh.

Santikaro argues that Buddhâsa’s Dhammic socialism, and its implementation at Suan Mokkh, provided a middle ground for many Thai people who were struggling between the right and left conflicts during the Cold War period. He emphasizes that Buddhâsa did not turn away from anybody who asked for his advice: high ranking government leaders, judges, bureaucrats, soldiers and businessmen were welcomed to his Dhamma talk; at the same time, he gave the same Dhamma training to radical students, Marxist insurgents, social activists and peasants. In Santikaro’s view, this neutral ground saved many lives during the 1970s bloody massacres and stimulated numerous NGOs to develop non-violent action programmes. He points out that Dhammic socialism inspired those working in the areas of education, rural development, social justice, and environmental movements. To Santikaro, Buddhâsa was the single major Buddhist teacher of the time to speak out about social issues and politics.

Therefore, the accusation against Buddhâsa’s conservative practice in the forest or the perceived lack of realistic socio-political involvement is an unfair judgment on what he really did. His radical orthopraxis stands for the dynamic integration of the forest monk tradition and socially engaged Buddhism, from his praxis-oriented Dhammic essentialist perspective. From the beginning of his residence at Suan Mokkh, he was actively involved in the local social and educational problems. His writings on Buddhásana and frequent lectures at the different institutions of Bangkok and other provinces often stimulated nation-wide discussions about the

156 See Ibid., pp. 2-3.
157 See Ibid., p. 3.
ideal forms of socio-political change in Thailand. Pridi Banomyong, the former prime minister, was so impressed by his reformist vision and ideas that he invited Buddhadāsa to Bangkok and had long personal conversations, from 1 P.M. till 10 P.M., on three consecutive days.ł58 He was not a mere spiritual guru withdrawn in the forest centre, but an active political debater, as shown by his well-known debates with Kukrit Pramoj, covered by the mass media for three years (1973-76) during the most sensitive time of modern Thai history. Hence, in fairness, Buddhadāsa strived to develop his spiritual practice into socio-political engagement, although he was never directly involved in any political parties.

It is true that Buddhadāsa’s radical orthopraxis is derived from his rather idealistic and utopian political vision. But, as Swearer aptly points out, ‘the power of his vision lies in its very idealistic and utopian character’.ł59 His vision of the personal-social liberation in harmony with nature cannot be completely institutionalized in any society; but because of that very reason, it continuously challenges and transforms people’s behaviours and political systems to be better than they are. In fact, his radical orthopraxis has left a long standing impact on Thai society. His followers are not only a small intellectual elite in the urban middle class any more, but various groups of people who struggle to embody his vision through the Dhamma-based community movements inspired by the example of Suan Mokkh.ł60 Buddhadāsa’s theory and praxis of conserving nature is also to be seen as one of the most significant contributions he made beyond social awareness: his creative insights into the Dhammic balance of nature and society provide a Buddhist agenda for solving the environmental and ecological crises faced by the world today.ł61

However, there are some weaknesses in his Dhammic essentialist theory and praxis. Referring to an ideal socio-religious and political system, Buddhadāsa tends to look naively back to the Buddhist ‘golden age’. He often describes the ancient societies during the time of King Aśoka, the kings of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya as full of the spirit of Dhammic socialism, with the leaders observing the ten royal virtues and the

ł58 See P. Jackson, Buddhadāsa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand, p. 15.
ł60 See Ibid., pp. 13-4.
people faithfully practicing Buddhist moral principles. However, as Puntarigvivat points out, Buddhadāsa forgets that those societies also contained various forms of social oppression such as slavery, an arbitrary legal system, and many assassinations in the recurring power struggles for the throne. Puntarigvivat also argues that Buddhadāsa’s approach to the socio-economic problems of modern society is too individualistic. In his view, Buddhadāsa regards the capitalists’ greed as the main cause of scarcity and poverty; so, he naively believes that the modern socio-economic problems could be solved by the personal practice of self-restraint and sharing (dāna). Hence, to Puntarigvivat, Buddhadāsa presents a powerful theory of psychological liberation but fails to address the adequate social liberation: that is, the systematic struggle against the suffering of Thai people under the structural injustice caused by the global market economy.

Puntarigvivat is right when he says that Buddhadāsa’s retrospective political theory is inadequate to provide a concrete scheme for structural change in the contemporary globalized society. In his Dhammic socialism, Buddhadāsa does mention the need for structural change in the socio-political system of the modern world; but, his view remains an abstract and utopian Buddhist guideline for a new political philosophy. As we argued above, however, Buddhadāsa is not a political theorist but a Buddhist visionary who calls for people to develop a more precise liberating theory and praxis according to their own situation. Puntarigvivat’s attempt to construct a ‘new Dhammic socialism’ against the neo-liberalist global market economy is a good example. In his thesis, Puntarigvivat strives to make the principles of Dhammic socialism work in the context of the Thai people’s struggle for socio-economic justice in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, suggesting that Buddhist activists must learn from the Latin American liberation theologians about the structural dimension of liberating praxis; especially, their proactive base community movements. In fact, Buddhadāsa’s greatest social impact lies on the ever-growing

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163 See Ibid., pp. 102-3.
164 See Ibid., pp. xiv-xvi, 195-216.
165 See Ibid., pp. 222-3.
number of grassroots Buddhist communities which are actively engaged in the local socio-economic, religio-cultural, and environmental issues. It is clear that his radical vision and thought will be continuously actualized through these grassroots communities; and his critical followers, like Puntarigvivat, will develop a more adequate Buddhist political philosophy for the structural transformation of the unjust global socio-economic political system. Buddhadāsa’s practical theories of twofold liberation (chit-wâng, Dhammic socialism) and his humanistic vision for world peace not only have made a strong impact on the Buddhist reform movements in the changing society of modern Thailand; but also have significant implications for the contemporary needs for a transformative spirituality in the globalized capitalist world.

However, there is a lacuna in Buddhadāsa’s radical orthopraxis: his emphasis on the purest Dhamma and praxis leads him to a superficial and condescending view of the popular forms of religious practices. He is always critical of the merit-making rites and rituals, which he thinks perpetuate superstitious beliefs and often turn into a ‘cancerous tumor’ that distorts the original teachings. Yet, is popular Buddhism simply to be seen as superstitious? Is there really no religious value in itself? In fact, popular Buddhism is the psycho-cultural matrix in which people live and act. It is the real Buddhism ingrained in people’s life. In any religious tradition, there is no such thing as a pure, unadulterated, or deculturated truth. The liberating praxis in the grassroots communities always asks for a balancing act between the cultivation of the selfless mind (chit-wâng) and the sincere awareness of the cultural sensitivity of the local people. In our judgment, Buddhadāsa’s search for the heart of Buddhism and of all religions has made him disregard the importance of historical and cultural specificity, part of the very essence of each religion. This reveals another lacuna in his radical orthopraxis: his inclusivist approach to other religions, seeing that all religions are one and the same in Dhamma or Truth. This approach is to be complemented by a more realistic and pluralistic view of religions.

To fill these lacunae, Aloysius Pieris must be brought into a creative and critical

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dialogue with Buddhadāsa. As a Christian liberation theologian of Asia as well as an eminent Buddhologist, Pieris has developed his own radical orthopraxis, which we call a ‘dialogical integrationist’ approach. To him, the Christian praxis of liberation in Asia is always to be engaged with the local religious culture, which contains both enslaving and liberating aspects. In his view, the ‘metacosmic’ goal of Buddhism (nibbāna) is always contextualized within the ‘cosmic religiosity’ of a given culture. Hence, to Pieris, the popular Buddhist practices in Theravada society are not mere superstitions or animistic beliefs as Buddhadāsa thinks, but the cosmic expression of the Buddhist struggle for final liberation. He points out that, in the complex religio-cultural, socio-economic, and political situation of Asia, the issue of poverty is inextricably interwoven with the cosmic and metacosmic structure of Asian religions. He argues, therefore, that the Christian radical orthopraxis in Asia is always to be interreligious, entering into a participatory discernment of the liberative aspects of the cosmic-metacosmic religiosity of the Asian poor, in the communal struggle for integral human liberation. To Pieris, the main locus of human liberation is not the individual mind but the interreligious community of the poor. This holistic, dialogical, and communal approach to human liberation contrasts with Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialist approach which emphasizes the puritanistic practice of Dhamma.

As we shall see in the following part, Pieris’ dialogical integrationist approach stands between the two dominant theological positions of the post-Vatican II Church in Asia: inculturationist and liberationist. Through his dialectical integration of the best aspects of these two positions, Pieris succeeds in promoting his innovative radical orthopraxis for the liberation of the Asian poor, in constant dialogue with Buddhism. In the next three chapters, we will examine how Pieris constructs his dialogical integrationist thought and praxis by radically returning to the originating sources of both Buddhist and Christian traditions; and actively engaging with the complex situation of poverty and religiosity in Asia, particularly the socio-political and religio-ethnic conflicts in postcolonial Sri Lanka.
Part Two

Aloysius Pieris’ Radical Orthopraxis
In Dialogue with Buddhism in Sri Lanka
Chapter IV

The Historical Background

To answer to the question of how a religious faith and action could be a source of hope to the contemporary world of globalization, we have presented Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialist radical orthopraxis as a significant model, which promotes a liberative spirituality of personal-social transformation as well as interreligious dialogue and collaboration for building sustainable world peace. As we have shown, Buddhadāsa drew his inspirational insights mainly from the originating sources of the early Buddhist tradition; and developed them into practical theories of spiritual-political liberation, appropriate to the rapidly changing situation of Theravada society in modern Thailand. In this second part of our thesis, we move on to Pieris’ dialogical integrationist radical orthopraxis, another significant model of transformative spirituality, which promotes liberative Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action for an integral human liberation in strong solidarity with the suffering poor of Asia. We will show in three chapters that Pieris has developed his innovative radical thought and praxis, not only through his in-depth study of the original sources of both Christianity and Buddhism; but also through his constant engagement in the living experience of both traditions, which, in his view, are deeply inculturated in the lives of the poor and the marginalized.

At the Third Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) held in Sri Lanka in 1979, Pieris presented a paper in which he describes poverty and religiosity as two inseparable realities that ‘constitute in their interpenetration what might be designated as the Asian context, the matrix of any

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1 The conference was held in Wennappuwa on 7-20 January 1979 and its theme was ‘Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology’. The participants represented ten Asian countries as well as Africa, Latin America, the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean, and the U.S. minorities with a Black and a Native American theologian. Pieris was one of the three main addresses and his paper provoked the most heated debates among the participants. See Virginia Fabella, ed., Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology (New York: Orbis, 1980), pp. 3-4, 10.
theology truly Asian. This was a defining moment for the development of Asian theology. He sharply raised the question of the Asian particularity, asserting that the religio-cultural dimension must not be overlooked in our search for socio-economic political liberation in Asia. Opposing him were the delegates from the Philippines, who maintained the priority of the socio-political liberation of the poor and the oppressed. Then an intense debate followed between the so-called ‘inculturationists’ and ‘liberationists’. This polarization had been actually present before the conference: after the Second Vatican Council (1962-5), the theological circle in Asia had divided into either a group for inculturation or for liberation. The former was dominant among Indian theologians, who emphasized the importance of Christian immersion into their indigenous culture and religious traditions; while the latter was promoted by theologians from other Asian countries in awareness of the dehumanized and impoverished conditions of their people. Each group upheld the priority of their own agenda without compromise.

In this situation, Pieris introduced a new perspective to reconcile and integrate both groups into a radical Christian orthopraxis, by consciously avoiding those two words ‘inculturation’ and ‘liberation’ as inappropriate to the multifaceted context of Asia. However, the participants were not able to grasp his innovative insight into the poverty-religiosity dynamics and took him to be an inculturationist. It was at the fifth conference of EATWOT, held in New Delhi in 1981, that many theologians came to understand the novelty of his ideas and his contribution to the emergence of a distinctive Asian Theology. There, Pieris presented a more defined paper on the same issue which was well received. The details of his insight will be examined in Chapter V, when analysing his key theological concepts. What must be pointed out here is that neither ‘liberation theology’ nor ‘inculturation theology’ is an appropriate term for Pieris. He is rather a proponent of a Christian ‘radical orthopraxis’ which

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3 See Fabella, ed., *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology*, p. 11.

4 The title of his paper at this conference was ‘The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures in the Evolution of a Third World Theology’, which first appeared in the *CTC Bulletin*, 3 (Singapore: 1982), 43-61. It was republished as a chapter in *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, pp. 87-110.
integrates both liberation and inculturation, while dialogically engaging with the complex Asian reality, in which poverty and religiosity are interwoven culturally, politically, and economically.

Our purpose in this chapter is to show the particular historical background of Pieris’ promotion of such radical orthopraxis: the socio-political situation and the Buddhist-Christian relations in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The first two sections demonstrate how Pieris actively engages with the Sri Lankan experience of poverty and religiosity—the lasting Tamil-Sinhala conflicts, the frequent Marxist insurrections, and the ever-growing Buddhist-Christian hostilities—through his incessant commitment to a Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action for the liberation of the poor, whom he thinks the most affected victims of the ethno-political conflicts and the socio-economic injustice. We argue that it is within this particular context of Sri Lankan poverty and religiosity that Pieris has developed a dialogical integrationist radical orthopraxis, through a grassroots basic human community movement in the ‘periphery’ of the official Church. In the final section, we briefly examine Pieris’ entire life and work to show how he creatively integrates his personal experiences, studies, and intellectual work into a liberating praxis at Tulana, an interreligious community research centre for the promotion of the twofold spirituality of inner freedom and social liberation.
1. The Socio-Political Situation of Postcolonial Sri Lanka

Pieris’ Tulana Centre is famous not only for its academic, spiritual, and grassroots social work, but also for its aesthetic environment filled with beautiful art in harmony with nature. Most art pieces in Tulana are executed by Buddhist artists, after long hours of dialogue with Pieris about various themes. Two of them are concerned with the tragic socio-political events of postcolonial Sri Lanka: one is the untitled oil painting by a Buddhist monk, Hatigammana Uttarananda, which captures the bloody ethnic riots in July 1983, the holocaust of innocent Tamils on the streets of Colombo; the other is the sculpture Pietà Lanka 1989 by another Buddhist artist, Kingsley Gunatilleke, referring to the violent Marxist JVP insurrection in 1987-89, which caused numerous killings of both Tamil and Sinhala youth in the process of brutal suppression by the security forces, what Pieris calls ‘state terrorism’. Thus, the stark reality of the religio-ethnic and socio-political conflicts in the country is so present to Pieris’ attention that he has made Tulana a centre for the interreligious liberative movements to promote social and ethnic justice. Hence, a brief historical overview of the political situation in modern Sri Lanka is necessary for our wider understanding of Pieris’ radical orthopraxis.

Sri Lanka has always been a multi-ethnic society. The Sinhala make up 74% of the total population, originating from the Indo-Aryan migrants from northern India between the 6th and the 4th century BCE. According to the Mahāvamsa and other chronicles, with the arrival of Buddhism in the third century BCE, the racial and religious identity of the island was established as the ‘land of the Sinhala’ (Sinhaladīpa) and ‘of Buddhism’ (Dhammadīpa). The Tamils are of Dravidian origin and account for 18% of the total population. The early Tamil migrants from

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6 The Pali and Sinhalese chronicles were written by Buddhist monks of the Mahāvihāra sect, focusing on the Buddhist apologia rather than on the general socio-political history. Hence, their accounts of the Tamil kingdoms or of the other Buddhist sects should be carefully approached with the help of other historical sources such as the Tamil chronicles, Chinese sources, and most importantly, the ancient inscriptions. See Yogasundram, A Comprehensive History of Sri Lanka: from Prehistory to Tsunami, rev. 2nd edn (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2008), pp. 6-11, 14.
South India around the third century BCE were not powerful enough to alter the Sinhala culture. However, during the period of the Tamil Cōla colony (993-1070), Tamil and Hindu culture significantly influenced the Sinhala at Poḷonnaruva. The ancient Tamils called the island Īlam (or Eelam), the ‘land of the Tamils’. In the 19th century, the British brought new Tamil immigrants from Southern India to work on the tea estates. These later arrivals are called ‘Indian Tamils’ to be distinguished from the indigenous ‘Sri Lankan Tamils’. The Moors or Muslims are the third largest ethnicity and comprise 7% of the total population. There are also smaller minorities, such as the Malays and the Burghers (descendents of mixed race with European colonists). Dividing the population by religion we find: 69.5% are Buddhists, 15% Hindus, 7.5% Christians, and 7.5% Muslims. Among the religions, only the Christians are mixed ethnicity, equally divided between Sinhalas and Tamils.

Most scholars agree that the General election of April 1956 was a watershed in the history of postcolonial Sri Lanka. The main issues were language and religio-cultural identity. Many Sinhala-educated Buddhist voters felt that they were excluded from rewarding careers because of their lack of English, before and after independence from Britain in 1948. They were not happy with the Christian elites educated in English at the Christian mission schools; and were also filled with indignation at a situation where English speaking Tamils held senior governmental, professional posts out of all proportion to their relative numbers. During the election campaign, Bandaranaike and his political party (SLFP) grasped these Sinhalese grievances and encouraged a linguistic, racial and religious nationalism.

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8 See Ibid., pp. 16, 23.
9 The Indian Tamils of Sri Lanka live in the central highlands, working on tea plantations. They account for a third of the total Tamil population and their living standard is below the national average. They are the most deprived group in the socio-economic and political life in Sri Lanka. See Ibid., pp. 17, 320.
12 See Ibid., p. 299.
leaders ignored the situation but soon they also were vying with the SLFP to fuel Sinhala nationalist sentiment.\textsuperscript{13} Up to that time, all the parties had stood for keeping both Sinhala and Tamil as official languages. However, after winning the election, Bandaranike’s new coalition party (MEP) introduced the Sinhala Only Act, which became the starting point of the long-standing Tamil-Sinhala conflict and violence.\textsuperscript{14}

It was coincidental that 1956 was also the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha Jayanti celebration. With these events, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism rapidly spread over the whole country. In order to rectify the historical injustice caused to Buddhism and Sinhala culture during the colonial rule, some Buddhist intellectuals organized the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry, comprised of seven monastic leaders and another seven lay leaders, headed by G.P. Malalasekera.\textsuperscript{15} Its main task was to inquire and report on the then current situation of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and make suggestions to the government.\textsuperscript{16} The final proposal was completed just before Bandaranaike’s assassination in September 1959.\textsuperscript{17} Hence, its implementation had to be postponed to the next government, in which Mrs. Bandaranaike took over the leadership. One of the most important acts that Mrs. Bandaranaike passed, based on the proposal, was to place all the privately owned schools under state control in 1960.\textsuperscript{18} This meant that the Christian mission schools lost the influence they had enjoyed since the colonial period.

\textsuperscript{13} See Ibid., pp. 299-300.
\textsuperscript{14} In May 1958, after some Sinhala people were killed by an unexplained explosion, the horrific racial riots arose and hundreds of people lost their life; the main victims were Tamils but also some Sinhala in the east provinces. See Ibid., p. 304.
\textsuperscript{16} The report of this commission starts with a long introductory chapter which focuses on the plight of Buddhism during the colonial period. The main ten chapters deal with the following themes: (1) Education—how the British rule actively supported Christian education while undermining Buddhist education; (2) Contemporary Society; (3) Social Service; (4) Present State of the Bhikkhus; (5) Buddhist Temporalities; (6) Pirivena Education; (7) State of Economy of Buddhists; (8) Tolerance of the Buddhists; (9) Religion and State; (10) Temple-owned Land and Property Looted. See Ibid., 233-4.
\textsuperscript{17} Bandaranaike’s ruling coalition party was comprised of the Buddhist nationalists majority and the minority Marxist group. Some politicized monks instigated conflicts by demanding the resignation of the left-wing ministers; and at the climax of their activity, a Buddhist monk, named Talduw Somarama, assassinated the prime minister. See Yugasundram, \textit{A Comprehensive History of Sri Lanka}, p. 305.
\textsuperscript{18} See Tilakaratne, ‘Fifty Years of Buddhism in Sri Lanka’, 236.
Pieris remarks that the Catholic Church leaders then were so afraid of losing the social power gained through Catholic educational institutions that they engineered the people’s occupation of the schools; as a result of this protest, the Church managed to retain a few urban private schools serving the elite, while it handed over all the rural schools to the government. To Pieris, this event and the abortive ‘Catholic Coup’ of January 1962 demonstrate that the Church leaders failed to read the ‘signs of the times’, to give up colonial domination theology and to be more sensitive to the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist consciousness. He points out that given the Church’s obligation to both Tamil and Sinhala Catholics, if the Church leaders had been less antagonistic, less apologetic, and more collaborative, they could have obtained the credibility to prevail upon the policy makers to foresee that disastrous ethnic conflict would result from the Sinhala Only Bill, officially passed in 1961.

The Marxist insurrection of April 1971, led by an ultra left-wing party called People’s Liberation Front (JVP), was another decisive socio-political event which influenced Pieris’ social awareness and his radical decision to open the Tulana Centre. The rebels were too young, poorly armed, and inadequately trained to fight with the state; the revolt was completely suppressed by September. It is estimated that about 16,000 insurgents were either killed or imprisoned. Many innocent people had also been killed and injured in the process. This insurrection was the first striking political incident after independence to take people’s lives away in a large scale. Many intellectuals, including Pieris, were awoken by the event to the reality of the poor youth in the rural areas and the Marxist influence over them. Most of the JVP recruits were 16 to 25 years old Sinhala Buddhists from deprived families, who felt that their economic interests had been neglected by the politicians. The group

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20 After the government took over the Christian mission schools under state control, some senior officers in the police and army attempted an aborted bloodless coup, often called the ‘Catholic Coup’ because the leaders of the coup were predominantly Catholics with UNP sympathies. As a result, the Catholics were deliberately excluded from the high ranks of the public services. See Ibid., 266.
21 See Ibid., 262-4.
22 See Ibid., 263. See also Yogasundram, A Comprehensive History of Sri Lanka, p. 309.
23 There is high discrepancy among estimates given by different sources. The number here is quoted from Yogasundram, A Comprehensive History of Sri Lanka, p. 315.
expanded rapidly among the students of major university campuses. They sought radical socio-economic and political changes according to the revolutionary socialist ideals.

As we will later see in detail, Pieris had personal contacts with these young Marxist students, and took their questions and challenges seriously. In an article written immediately after the insurrection, Pieris criticizes the Church for failing to engage with the rural youth through Catholic education.²⁴ He points out that the students of the Catholic private schools could not be involved in the nation-wide insurrection, not because they were immune to Marxism, but because they were an isolated and privileged group who had no empathy with the pains and sufferings of their fellow youths.²⁵ He emphasizes the urgent need for Christian conversion from an ideology of ‘elitism’ to the radical socialism of the Gospels, of the early Fathers, and of the recent papal encyclicals.²⁶ Pieris then urges the Church leaders to embark on radical rehabilitation programmes not only to help the ‘misguided youth’, but also to rehabilitate or convert the ‘Christian themselves’ to the original spirit of the socio-spiritual liberation of the Gospel.²⁷ For his part, he founded Tulana Centre in the vicinity of the Kelaniya Temple, which the rural youth can easily reach.

The large scale of victims in this insurrection was later mirrored by the bloody ethnic riots and Tamil militant upheaval of 1983, another tragic event that Pieris remembers through the above mentioned painting. On 23 July 1983, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) combatants ambushed a military convoy, killing thirteen Sinhala soldiers on the outskirts of Jaffna.²⁸ This act provoked a horrific retaliation by the Sinhala against Tamils living in Colombo and surrounding areas: the mobs, carrying the electoral registers, attacked Tamil residences and businesses, proving that these riots were not entirely spontaneous but had been carefully pre-planned.

²⁵ See Ibid., 9.
²⁶ See Ibid., 10.
²⁷ See Ibid., 11-2.
with the connivance of government officials.\textsuperscript{29} It is estimated that at least 400 Tamils were killed, tens of thousands of houses destroyed, and 10,000 Tamils became refugees; about 150,000 Tamils left the country and joined the Tamil Diaspora around the world, while many Tamil youths joined the militant separatist groups.\textsuperscript{30} Pieris points out that most of the Tamil victims were harmless poor people such as street vendors, shoe-repairers, and estate labourers.\textsuperscript{31} He remarks that the monk artist Uttarananda Thera was so shocked by the event that he organized a Buddhist movement for ethnic justice.\textsuperscript{32}

The riots of 1983, dubbed Black July, were the trigger for a full-scale armed conflict between government forces and the Tamil militants, in the North and Northeast area. During the three decades of the civil war, people in the South also suffered from the constant terrorist attacks of the LTTE. Meanwhile, Marxist JVP insurgent activities flared up in 1987-89; thousands of people’s lives were lost in the process of this violent insurrection and its brutal suppression.\textsuperscript{33} As mentioned earlier, Pieris was so shocked by this second JVP uprising that he invited the Buddhist artist Gunatilleke to immortalise this episode in his famous sculpture \textit{Pietà Lanka 1989} at Tulana Centre.\textsuperscript{34} The surviving JVP members relaunched an ultra-nationalist party to participate in electoral politics; and became a third largest party in the 2001 election.\textsuperscript{35} They cooperated with the chauvinistic Sinhala Buddhist groups in putting pressure on the government to continue waging war against the LTTE, rather than negotiate a ceasefire.\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} See Ibid. \\
\item \textsuperscript{30} See Ibid., pp. 330-1. \\
\item \textsuperscript{31} See Pieris, ‘Inculturation in Asia: A Theological Reflection on an Experience’, p. 135. \\
\item \textsuperscript{32} See Ibid., pp. 133, 135. \\
\item \textsuperscript{33} For more details, see C. A. Chandraprema, \textit{Sri Lanka, the Years of Terror: The J.V.P. Insurrection, 1987-1989} (Colombo: Lake House Bookshop, 1991). \\
\item \textsuperscript{35} See Yogasundram, \textit{A Comprehensive History of Sri Lanka}, pp. 344, 362-3. \\
\item \textsuperscript{36} In the election of April 2004, the Buddhist monks launched a political party, the National Sinhala Heritage (JHU), which won 9 out of the 225 seats. The UPFA (the SLFP and JVP coalition) won 105 seats but failed to obtain a majority by 8 seats. The two extremist nationalist parties (JVP and JHU) became the strongest support for Mahinda Rajapaksa and his militant coalition government. See Ibid. pp. 372-3. For more details on the JHU, see Mahinda Deegalle, ‘JHU Politics for Peace and a Righteous State’, in \textit{Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka}, pp. 233-54.
\end{itemize}
Despite the constant calls by the international community for a permanent ceasefire and the enormous efforts of the local-international activists who promoted a peaceful resolution of the conflict, Rajapaksa’s militant government continued war and finally defeated the LTTE in May 2009. The long-drawn civil war was therefore officially ended. It left, however, serious social scars: the underlying causes of the war have not been eliminated; and the triumphant government seems to have no interest in embarking on a programme for reconciliation, necessary to overcome the tragic ethnic conflict and division.\(^{37}\) The result of the 2010 elections demonstrates that the landslide victory for Rajapaksa’s ruling party could not win the heart of Tamils in the North and Northeast. This means that the ethnic conflicts problem still remains. The results of two other elections to the local governments, held in March and July 2011, clearly indicate the sharpened ethnic division between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority.\(^{38}\) Rajapaksa’s political style is often seen as despotic, due to his monopoly of power, economy and the media, as well as to his disregard for international criticism of the human right abuses during and after the war.\(^{39}\) The armed conflict is over. But, the country has still not found a reasonable political solution to the Tamil-Sinhala issue.

This brief historical overview illustrates the harsh reality of the religio-ethnic, socio-political conflicts in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Pieris has developed his radical thought and praxis in response to this complex situation, reading it as a particular Sri Lankan experience of the Asian reality: massive poverty and diverse religiosity. He has strived to read the ‘signs of the times’ from these two basic insights. The issue of poverty is concerned with the urgent need for social justice for the poor, whom he perceives as the most affected victims of both the Tamil-Sinhala conflicts and the


Marxist insurrections. The issue of *religiosity* in this Sri Lankan political context refers to the importance of Christian sensitivity to the deep rooted causes of interreligious and inter-communal strife: Christians are not innocent bystanders because they have been implicated in the historical process which has led to the conflict situation. Pieris is aware of the fact that, against the aggressive proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries, a strong Buddhist resurgent movement arose in the 19th century, which entailed the later Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. He is therefore critical of the contemporary fundamentalist Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, who repeat the same mistakes of the past, becoming involved in the new forms of proselytism accused of ‘unethical conversion’ to Christianity.

In the context of Buddhist mistrust toward the Christian communities and the growing Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, entrenched in the military success, Pieris calls for a fundamental renewal of the Church in Sri Lanka in accordance with the spirit of Vatican II. He remarks that the Church also suffers from the wounds of the Tamil and Sinhala conflict: many of its members, the clergy, religious and laity, are divided along the ethnic lines; so, they feel ‘unqualified’ to emerge as a catalyst of reconciliation. To Pieris, however, this very *humble* experience of failure could and should be the *starting point* for launching a ‘reconciliation campaign’ within and outside the Church. He emphasizes that the Christian mission of reconciliation is to be a movement for *crossing over* the narrow boundaries of racial differences, religious denominations, and political ideologies; and *conversion to the victims’ side*. To Pieris, this will be possible only when the Sri Lankan churches radically return to the sources (*reditus ad fontes*) of Christianity, as Vatican II promoted, and retrieve the liberative inspiration of the Founder, Jesus, who rejected the rabid nationalist ideology of Zealots (the JVP, the JHU and the LTTE of the time); as well as the early Christian faith in the risen Christ, in whom there is neither Sinhalese, nor Burgher, nor Tamil.

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41 See Ibid., pp. 9-12.
43 See Ibid.
44 See Ibid., pp. 14-5.
45 See Ibid., pp. 15-6.
Pieris points out that most of the Church leaders in Sri Lanka have lost their credibility to carry out the vitally important mission of bearing witness to love and reconciliation as well as promoting socio-ethnic justice and peace. He is convinced that the main reason for their failure is the lack of proper knowledge of the historical facts and of the proper tools for social analysis; they often think and act without the critical analysis of given information and data, many of which are wild rumours. He remarks that education in religio-social analysis is conspicuously absent in the seminary formation programmes of the contemporary Church in Sri Lanka. He also points out that the Church in Sri Lanka has officially halted its renewal process, following the recent trends of Rome, so that the pioneering works of the ecumenical education and research community centres in the periphery have been abandoned by the hierarchy, without realising that such relapse into Catholic fundamentalism fosters its adverse counterpart in other denominations and religions. Tulana Centre is one of those pioneering community centres through which Pieris has advocated the Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action for the liberation of the poor, the victims of the socio-political, religio-ethnic conflict and violence. As he emphasizes, a proper knowledge and analysis of the past is necessary to understand the present. Hence, we now move on to a brief examination of the Buddhist-Christian relations in the last two centuries in Sri Lanka, to deepen our understanding of the historical background of Pieris’ radical orthopraxis engaging with Buddhism.

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47 See Ibid.
2. Buddhist-Christian Relations in Sri Lanka

Before the Portuguese colonized Sri Lanka in 1505, Buddhism was the main religio-cultural factor which gave a sense of identity to people, but not necessarily exclusive to the Sinhala; there were also Tamil Buddhists by the 15th century and the historical images of the Tamil were varied, often positive. Obeyesekere argues that the image of Tamil as the ‘other’ surfaced during the sporadic Tamil invasions from South India; and historical texts like the Mahāvamsa were written by monks to construct an axiomatic ‘Sinhala-Buddhist’ identity. He points out that this linkage of Sinhala and Buddhism was revitalized by encounters with European ‘others’ during the successive colonial rules; especially, in the late 19th century under the British, the ‘Sinhala’ identity began to take precedence over the ‘Buddhist’ because many Sinhalas were not Buddhist anymore. In fact, the new others from Europe were so powerful that many of both Sinhalas and Tamils converted to Christianity. These local converts, however, did not abandon their former religious practices until the first two-thirds of the 19th century; for them, according to Harris, ‘dual religious belonging’ under the one dominant religious identity was not problematic. Harris remarks that the Buddhist Sangha in these early years of the 19th century was basically hospitable and courteous to Christian missionaries: the Buddhist monks

50 See Ibid., p. 153.
51 See Ibid. p. 159.
52 Catholic missionaries came to Sri Lanka as an integral part of the Portuguese colonization in the early 16th century, and succeeded in attaining mass conversions of the lower castes in the coastal areas; they also converted some upper class and higher castes by using the powers of state-patronage. During the period of Dutch rule (1656-1796), however, Catholicism was banned by law and Catholic priests banished; they survived the persecution in the Kingdom of Kandy. When the British took over the country from the Dutch, new Protestant missionaries arrived from Britain and the United States establishing various Christian schools, aimed at converting the children of the local elite to Christianity. As a result, a small privileged English-speaking Christian elite was produced. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church was able to recover from the bleak period thanks to the British policy of religious freedom, and began to compete with the Protestant Church in the field of education and in proselytizing activities. See Yogasundram, A Comprehensive History of Sri Lanka, pp. 182-3, 197, 285-8.
were willing to engage in dialogue about religion and ready to cooperate for mutual benefit; they were polite and tolerant about the missionary activities.\(^{54}\)

However, with the arrival of the new exclusivist evangelical missionaries in the second decade of the 19th century, the idea of religious coexistence or double religious belonging became impossible; facing the aggressive and confrontational Christian proselytizing activities, the Buddhist monks came to be convinced that dialogue based on reason and mutual respect was possible no more.\(^ {55}\) Harris points out that many hospitable and tolerant Buddhist monks so strongly felt ‘betrayed’ and ‘beleaguered’ by the ‘non-compromise’ attitude of the evangelical missionaries that they seismically turned to retaliation against the Christian attacks.\(^ {56}\) She remarks, however, that the general spirit of the early years—tolerance, welcome and mutual respect—was not completely lost: there were still Buddhists, and even some Christians, who sought a peaceful co-existence and a reverential dialogue with each other; but, their voices were overshadowed by the ‘rhetoric of confrontation and mistrust’.\(^ {57}\) The Buddhist-Christian antagonism became more evident in two historic incidents: the public debates between Protestant missionaries and Buddhist monks, which climaxed at the Panadura debate in 1873; and the riots between Catholics and Buddhists in Kotahena, near Colombo in 1883.\(^ {58}\)

At Panadura, Mohottivatte Gunananda, the main Buddhist contender, showed in debate how Buddhists could effectively challenge the Christian missionaries by using the same weapons—the contemptuous utilization of the other’s religious


\(^{56}\) See Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*, pp. 196, 200.

\(^{57}\) See Ibid., p. 201.

The perceived Buddhist victory at the Panadura debate brought back self-confidence, dignity and identity to the Sinhala Buddhists. While Gunānanda and many others strived to revive the traditional Buddhist beliefs and practices, Olcott, an American Buddhist and the Founder of the Theosophical Society, devoted himself to promote a modernist Buddhism: his *Buddhist Catechism* presents Buddhism as a ‘scientific religion’ consistent with evolution and psychology far better than the ‘revealed religion’ of Christianity. Olcott’s contribution to the revival and reform of Buddhism in Sri Lanka was remarkable. However, the most influential proponent of the Buddhist Revival was Anagarika Dharmapala, who led a radical Buddhist reform movement in accord with rationalist modern ideas and values.

In an influential article, Obeyesekere describes this modernist trend of the Sinhala Buddhist revival movement in the late 19th century as ‘Protestant Buddhism’ in two senses: firstly, it was a new form of Buddhism to protest against Christianity; secondly, it mirrored Protestant Christianity in its forms and practices. This view is generally accepted by scholars, seeing that Protestant Buddhism reflected the features of Protestant Christian ethics, in its search for the rational, individualistic and this-worldly lay asceticism, anti-ritualism, and intolerance of other faiths. Harris argues that this Buddhist Modernism or Protestant Buddhism was neither a creation of the Western Orientalists nor mere imitation of Western practices; it was rather a result of the gradual indigenous Buddhist development, and the creative, proactive and sophisticated engagement with the confrontational Christian missionaries within a particular historical context. In other words, to Harris, the Buddhist revivalists did not simply react against and imitate Christianity; they rather wisely countered the Christian attacks on Buddhism by presenting Buddhist doctrine as not nihilistic, scientifically rational, and ethically superior to Christianity, because of its non-

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59 See Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*, p. 203.
60 See Ibid.
64 See Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*, pp. 163-4, 187.
theistic nature.  

This pattern of the Sinhala Buddhist movement to protect its religio-cultural identity from the ‘threats of the others’ is a recurrent theme in postcolonial history: the massive protest against the hegemonic ‘others’ of the Tamil and Christian elites in the 1950s; the long-drawn battle against the LTTE ‘other’ regarding it as a ‘betrayor’ of the historical and demographic rights of the Sinhala people; and the contemporary Buddhist nationalism against the global ‘others’ such as evangelical Christians, international NGOs, and the influx of globalization. The Buddhist mistrust toward Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, has been continued and even enhanced throughout the 20th century; all the mainline Christian churches have faced the legitimate Buddhist indignation and accusation that Christians are involved in ‘unethical conversions’ by using the promise of material benefit, with the help of foreign powers, to place pressure on vulnerable poor village folk. Pieris is aware that the defensive Buddhist sentiment of the threatening ‘others’ has seeped into the collective unconscious of Sinhala people, as articulated by a JHU monk, Medhananada:

The Sinhala-Buddhists are the sole owners of this land, while the other religious and ethnic minorities are only their guests. They must reciprocate the kindness of the hosts and any attempt on their part to claim ownership would make them forfeit their guest-status and risk elimination. Like the “non-Sinhala-Buddhists”, Kadiragamer and Fernandopullai, the guests should be ready to compromise their ethno-religious identity to accommodate to that of their hosts.

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65 See Ibid., p. 187.
In this context of ever-growing Buddhist mistrust toward Christians, Pieris and other pioneer Christians have sought a new relationship with Buddhism. Their effort to build a Buddhist-Christian dialogue and collaboration for socio-ethnic justice and peace has received a positive response from the Buddhists who have also promoted the spirit of mutual respect and dialogue among religions. Pieris presents the late monk Walpola Rahula as a ‘great teacher’ (guru), who taught the Buddhist openness to the ‘others’ through his exemplary life and work. He remarks that Rahula maintained a noble friendship (kalyāṇa mitta) with two Christians throughout his life: the Catholic priest Etienne Lamotte and the Methodist pastor Edmund Perry. Rahula also believed, according to Pieris, that studying other religions is an essential part of studying one’s own religion; so he made the study of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity compulsory for the students at the Pali and Buddhist University of Sri Lanka. Pieris appreciates how much Rahula guided his Buddhist studies during his doctorate and post-doctorate research; as well as defending him when the right-wing politicians forced the closure of Tulana Centre in the early 1980s. When Pieris went to thank him later, Rahula asserted that it is a moral imperative for ‘religious people’ to be involved with the people’s struggle for justice and equality; however, it can always be conveniently misconstrued by politicians as subversive activity.

Rahula and Pieris were part of an emerging group of thinkers who sought a new thrust in the Buddhist-Christian relations in the middle of the 20th century. The open-minded Buddhists welcomed Christians who recognized the past mistakes associated with colonialism and sincerely embraced the national cultural heritage based on Buddhism. One of the outstanding pioneers was Rev. Lynn A. de Silva,

70 See Ibid., 157.
71 See Ibid.
72 Those politicians regarded Pieris as a ‘Marxist priest’ and his work with the Christian Workers’ Fellowship (CWF) as an ‘underground movement’ instigating the workers of the Free Trade Zone against government policies; they also tried to close Tulana through an inquiry of the Cultural Ministry on the orders of the President. However, their attempt failed because of Rahula’s intervention: when Pieris confided in Rahula, he immediately met the President to defend Pieris. See Ibid., 155-6, 158.
73 See Ibid., 158-9.
who took over the work of the Methodist Study Centre in 1962 and developed it as the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue (EISD). This centre has promoted the study and research on Buddhism, interreligious dialogue, and frontier studies for social justice. Three other important Christian movements emerged in response to the Buddhist-dominated socio-political changes after the independence: (1) The Student Christian Movement, the oldest ecumenical group, has organized forums, conferences and publications to reflect on social issues. It has also been involved in social action and reflection programmes in the context of a broader ecumenism; (2) The Christian Workers’ Fellowship (CWF), set up by Anglican and Methodist lay members in 1958, has grown into a nation-wide ecumenical movement engaged with the Sinhala and Tamil working class. Pieris was the first Catholic priest associated with the CWF, in the second half of the 1960s. This movement has led a living dialogue between Christians and Marxists within the context of a Buddhist-Hindu culture; and (3) The Devasarana Development Movement, originated from the indigenous monastic community under the guidance of Rev. Yohan Devananda in 1957, has promoted interreligious dialogue, justice and peace, and ecological awareness among the rural-based social workers and farmers.

From the early 1970s, in response to Vatican II’s call to read the ‘signs of the times’, especially in the aftermath of the insurrection of 1971, some Catholics started to establish frontier community centres for social justice and peace in collaboration with people of other religions in Sri Lanka: the Centre for Society and Religion (CSR) founded by Oblate priest Tissa Balasuriya in 1971; the Satyodaya Centre for Social Research and Encounter, established by Jesuit priest Paul Caspersz in 1972; and the Tulana Research Centre, founded by Pieris in 1974. These centres were supported by Bishop Leo Nanayakkara, who also opened the new Pastoral Centre, Sevaka Sevana, in which the seminarians of his diocese were to be trained with the new vision of the ‘Servant Church’ promoted by Vatican II. One of the eminent

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75 See Ibid., 303-4.
77 See Ibid., 270.
teachers of Sevaka Sevana was Fr. Michael Rodrigo, O.M.I., who had gained two
doctorates, in Buddhist philosophy and in comparative religions, in Europe. In 1980,
he set up Suba Seth Gedara, Good Wishes House, in the historic Buddhist village
Alukalavita, and worked for the poor villagers in dialogue and collaboration with
Buddhist monks. Rodrigo was shot dead, while saying mass at Suba Seth Gedara,
on the 10th of November 1987. In his eulogy, Pieris praised him as an exemplary
martyr, a great pioneer in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and an inspiring liberator
who served the poor in life and in death. These and many other Catholic individuals
and groups have continued their grassroots basic human community movements in
the ‘periphery’ of the Catholic Church.

Pieris remarks that the tension between the Catholic Church and the government
during the early 1960s, caused by the ‘school crisis’ and the aborted ‘Catholic Coup’,
was eased by Pope Paul VI's visit to Sri Lanka in 1964. Pieris points out that the
Church leaders of that time, influenced by Vatican II, started to listen to and even
made use of the above mentioned education centres; Buddhist-Christian dialogue
was positively encouraged and the theologically informed Catholic lay movements
flourished. However, with the Jayawardana Government’s policy of ‘open-market’
economy of 1977, the Western economic influence helped the Church, both Catholic
and Protestant, to regain lost social power and to return to the old position of
comfort and domination ecclesiology; as a result, the fast growing Christian NGOs
and the fundamentalist evangelical groups, financed by the West, stimulated a new
series of hostility among the nationalist Buddhists. It was in this precarious
situation that the third EATWOT conference was held in Sri Lanka in 1979, in which
Pieris proposed a decisive drive for an Asian theology engaged with poverty and
religiosity; more precisely, in the Sri Lankan context, a vision of Buddhist-Christian

79 See Ibid., pp. 81-5.
80 See Pieris, ‘The Reverend Father Michael Rodrigo, a Pioneer in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue’,
81 Pieris, ‘Catholic Church in Sri Lanka during the First Fifty Years of the Country’s Independence
82 See Ibid., 266.
83 See Ibid., 266-7, 272-3; and Pieris, ‘The Church in Sri Lanka during the Last Decade (2000-2009),
pp. 6-7.
dialogue and action working for the victims of the emerging capitalist economy.

During the last decades of ethnic polarization, Buddhist-Christian animosity has also escalated between the militant Sinhala Buddhists and the fundamentalist evangelical Christians. The JHU monks have demanded the passing of the ‘Unethical Conversion Bill’ to ban Christian proselytizing activities among poor Buddhists and Hindus. As we noted, the Christian proselytizing activities with financial help of the West have been perceived as a new ‘threat’ to Buddhism. Unfortunately, the mainstream churches, both Catholic and Protestant, have lost their credibility to deal with the national crises of the tragic ethnic conflicts and the emerging tensions between the fundamentalist religious groups. Furthermore, the mainstream churches themselves reveal a self-defensive or regressive tendency against the signs of the times, which demand an intensive interreligious collaboration for national peace and reconciliation through truth and justice.

This brief overview of the Buddhist-Christian relations in Sri Lanka explains Pieris’ pursuit of a radical way of liberating praxis engaged with Buddhism. He is well aware of the collective, subliminal Sinhala Buddhist fear of the two historical ‘others’: the aggressive Christian missionaries and the destructive Tamil invaders. He knows, however, that the Sinhala Buddhist elite themselves could turn into the oppressive minorities, just as the Christian and Tamil elites were during the British rule.85 To Pieris, both the poor Sinhala and Tamil masses are the victims of ethnic conflict and socio-economic injustice, ideologically manipulated by the oppressive minorities of the racist political elite.86 His primary concern always lies with the conflict between the under-privileged majority and the privileged few, regardless of their linguistic, racial and religious differences. Hence, as we will see in the following section, Pieris’ entire life and work reveal his ceaseless struggle for the liberation of the poor, in collaboration with people of other religions, especially with Buddhists, who are not oppressive minorities but liberative dialogical partners.

85 See Ibid., 262.
86 See Ibid.
3. Pieris’ Life and Work

Aloysius Pieris was born in a Catholic family in 1934. His home was near the then Papal Seminary in Kandy, run by Belgian Jesuits. His childhood and adolescent personality was moulded by his constant contact with Jesuit professors and pastors, who gave him living examples of true love in their self-effacing service to the poor. At the age of 19, Pieris joined the Society of Jesus. He became well versed in Latin, Greek, Pali, and Sanskrit in his early Jesuit formation period. He also showed off his talents in Music, Art and Mathematics. Pieris confesses that he was a ‘rabid Thomist’ during his philosophy studies in India; he wrote a thesis on a Thomistic critique of Buddhist epistemology for his Licentiate in Philosophy. His theological studies in Naples (1961-65) coincided with the Second Vatican Council in Rome, so Pieris was able to follow the dynamics of Vatican II closely: the Periti and Council Fathers from various countries used to visit his community at weekends. He was very impressed by Karl Rahner’s visit and advice: a young Jesuit’s task was not to waste time studying the Council documents, but to enter into the spirit of the Council and to go forward from there (ex quo proficiendum est). Pieris correctly understood Rahner’s message: to be faithful to Vatican II was to fulfil its vision, by developing its seminal insights into a creative, concrete shape rather than literally following its formulations.

Thus, when Pieris mastered the Western traditional studies in Italy, Vatican II inspired him to go back to his cultural and religious roots to create something new. He was called to become a pioneer of the innovative Christian life in Asia. After receiving his priestly ordination on 4th July 1965, he was assigned to study Buddhism so as to teach it later at the Gregorian University in Rome. During his

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88 See Ibid., p. 648
89 Pieris says that Rahner spoke in Latin because he did not know Italian or English. See Ibid., pp.651-2.
doctoral studies in Buddhism at the University of Sri Lanka (1967-71).\textsuperscript{90} Pieris had two striking experiences: the hours of Buddhist meditation under the guidance of a monk; and the meetings with the Buddhist rural youth, who were involved in the Marxist insurrection of 1971.\textsuperscript{91} These two were the ‘awakening’ experiences for him to realize that \textit{religiosity} and \textit{poverty} are the two poles of a tension, demanding a double praxis of liberation: \textit{interior transformation} and \textit{social change}.\textsuperscript{92} Later they became one of the main themes of his Asian theology: the theory of ‘double baptism’. Through this theory, Pieris emphasizes that the Church in Asia must be ‘humble enough to be baptized by its precursors in the Jordan of Asian religion and bold enough to be baptized by oppressive systems on the cross of Asian \textit{poverty’}.\textsuperscript{93}

This ‘double baptism’ was what Pieris experienced while seriously engaging with the Buddhist studies for his doctoral degree. Researching on consciousness (\textit{viññāṇa}) and reality in Pali exegetical writings, he was not satisfied with an academic knowledge of Buddhism; he wanted to have the experience behind the theory.\textsuperscript{94} The key to opening the treasure of wisdom was his humble immersion into the heart of Buddhism through meditation: the deeper he entered into it, the more Pieris was released from conceptual boundaries such as God, Christ and Church; he was led into the unknown, absolute freedom through a total letting go.\textsuperscript{95} What emerged from this experience was not a syncretistic or synthetic form of Buddhist-Christianity or Christian-Buddhism, but a much deeper understanding of the nature of religion itself and its role in society.\textsuperscript{96}

This experience of ‘baptism’ in Buddhist meditation led Pieris to experience the

\begin{itemize}
\item[90] Pieris was the first Christian to obtain a doctorate in Buddhism from a Sri Lankan university. He gained two doctorates, one in Buddhism and one in Christian theology (ThD, 1987). See Frances de Silva, ‘Bio-Bibliographical Information on Aloysius Pieris, S.J.’, in \textit{Encounters with the Word: Essays to Honour Aloysius Pieris, S.J. on his 70th Birthday 9th April 2004}, p. 673.
\item[92] See Ibid., p. 654.
\item[95] See Ibid., p. 14.
\item[96] See Harris, ‘Double Belonging in Sri Lanka: Illusion or Liberating Path?’, p. 86.
\end{itemize}
‘other baptism’ that happened during the conversation with a poor Marxist student, whom he had invited for lunch, just before the insurrection. The student was so poor that he stayed hungry all day at university and went home late with a loaf of bread for his family’s only meal of the day.\textsuperscript{97} When Pieris explained that as a religious priest he was bound to share the money with the needy like him, the student asked Pieris where he received his money from. Pieris replied that it came from God. After giving this answer, Pieris realized that he had proclaimed an unjust God, who provides a comfortable life to priests while ignoring the desperate need of poor students.\textsuperscript{98} Seeing the poor youths eagerly joining the insurrection and being killed by the army, Pieris woke up to the reality of poverty in the country. The image of the student’s face often overlapped Jesus’ on the cross asking Pieris: ‘Aloy, from where do you get your money?’\textsuperscript{99} He then realized that Jesus received the ‘second baptism’ on Calvary to call his disciples to follow: a sincere commitment for social justice in solidarity with the poor.\textsuperscript{100} This personal experience of double baptism—the Buddhist meditation and the JVP youth insurrection—led Pieris to establish the Tulana Research Centre in 1974.\textsuperscript{101} The word \textit{tulana} means four things taken together: weighing, balancing, deliberating, and deciding, as its Sanskrit root \textit{tul} connotes. In short, it refers to ‘discernment’. Hence, Tulana works for an integral balance between spiritual discernment and social engagement, in the complex realities of poverty, religiosity, and the ethno-political conflicts in Sri Lanka. Its three libraries are a treasure trove of Christian theology, Buddhism (Indology), and Sri Lankan history. Unlike other academic research centres, it is filled with beautiful art in harmony with nature; most of the pieces are the creative expressions of Christian themes executed by Buddhist artists. This means that Tulana promotes theology as an aesthetic achievement in living dialogue with people of other religions for the liberation of the poor.\textsuperscript{102} According to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{97} See Pieris, ‘My Journey from Jordan to Calvary’, p. 16.
\item \textsuperscript{98} See Ibid., p. 17.
\item \textsuperscript{99} See Ibid., p. 18.
\item \textsuperscript{100} See Ibid., pp. 18-9.
\item \textsuperscript{101} Before starting his new mission in Tulana, Pieris taught one semester (1972-73) in the Gregorian University as originally assigned by his Jesuit superiors. See Pieris, ‘A Self Portrait’, p. 654.
\item \textsuperscript{102} See Ibid., p. 660.
\end{itemize}
Pieris, Tulana has three areas of encounter, three areas of research, and one Media unit which can be summarized as follows:

(1) As a centre of *informal encounter*, Tulana is open to anyone to come to stay as long as they want; (2) It is also a centre of *organized encounters* such as workshops, seminars and dialogue sessions; (3) As for the more intimate and *deeper encounters*, it works as the place of spiritual guidance, retreats, and meditation for both Buddhists and Christians.\(^{103}\)

(4) As a research centre, Pieris has developed the area of *Classical Indology* and *Buddhist Studies* with an in-depth study of the Sanskrit and Pali texts; (5) He has also explored the *Anthropological* and *Sociological* area: he has made years of on-the-spot studies of *contextual Buddhism*, focusing on popular (cosmic) religiosity, in Sri Lanka and Asia; and has documented the findings in various forms, including 3,000 photo slides and many recordings, for sociological analysis; (6) Lastly, Pieris has integrated the three levels of encounter and the two levels of research into the third level of research, *Theological reflection*. His articles have appeared in various theological and Buddhist journals; out of them, *Dialogue* is the most important journal for which he has served as a chief editor since 1974.\(^{104}\)

(7) Besides, the Tulana Media Unit was set up in 2000, under the coordination of Robert Cruz, for research and training of the rural youth in alternative media practices, radio-video production and theatre arts, within the ethos of harmonious encounter and dialogue.\(^{105}\)

For the last four decades, Tulana has become the base camp for Pieris’ professional life as an internationally recognized theologian, a Buddhologist, a lecturer, a spiritual

\(^{103}\) See Ibid., pp. 657-8.
\(^{104}\) See Ibid., pp. 658-9.
\(^{105}\) See Ibid., p. 670.
guru, and, most of all, a compassionate friend of the poor. It has been a mini-university, a mini-retreat centre, a social animation centre, a forum for artists, and an asylum for the politically persecuted. Hence, Tulana is not a mere research centre but a basic human community, in which numerous individuals and groups have gone through a profound experience of spiritual freedom and social awareness, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, religious faith, or ideological stance. It has been a refuge for social activists and victims, as well as a basis for engagement with the causes of poor villagers and factory workers. Tulana is also deeply associated with the Centre for Education of Hearing Impaired Children (CEHIC), a multi-religious, multi-ethnic community school, for which Pieris has been a co-patron with Ven. Kusaladhamma Thera, the Chancellor of the University of Kelaniya. Thus, in Tulana, Pieris has developed his radical orthopraxis for integral human liberation by balancing his academic intellectual works with his constant engagement in the interreligious liberative practices.

Pieris emphasizes that his written works are the fruits of a ‘collective experience’ in Tulana and different parts of Asia. The most important experience in Tulana has come from the seminars and workshops conducted in Sinhala for the Buddhist and Christian youth, whether university students, worker-group members, or rural teachers. Pieris has helped them reflect on their personal problems and socio-political issues through intensive cross-scripture reading, which entailed a creative encounter between the Bible and the Pali Tipiṭaka.106 Another source of learning experience for Pieris was his twenty-three years of teaching at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila (1972-94). He gave lectures for thirty-six hours two weeks annually in a mutual exchange between him and the participants, who came from various parts of Asia.107 His personal research trips were another source of inspiration for him to see and understand the real life of Asian people. The most significant source of inspiration, however, was his ceaseless interaction with the poor in the basic human communities. In short, Pieris stresses that he has not invented his personal Asian Theology, but has only discovered and explicitated what he had read.

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107 See Ibid., p. 21.
in the events and situations which he recognized as salvation history.\(^{108}\) To Pieris, Asian theology must be an explication of a collective thrust of liberation in solidarity with the suffering poor in Asia.

**Concluding Remarks**

There are two conspicuous elements in this background of Pieris’ radical orthopraxis: Marxism and Sinhala culture. Pieris did not encounter Marxism as an imported ideology from the West, but as part and parcel of Sri Lankan history. Many of his Marxist friends sacrificed their lives in the struggle against oppression. The JVP insurrection of 1971 drove him to study Marxist philosophy seriously; and his interest extended to all Asian countries where Marxist or pre-Marxist uprisings had punctuated their history. This helped him see the issue of poverty from a pan-Asian perspective.\(^{109}\) However, Pieris is critical of the Marxist theory of violent revolution and of its anti-religious manifesto. As we noted, he was shocked by the second JVP uprising in 1987-89, which caused numerous deaths of the innocents in the process. Pieris nevertheless emphasizes that we should not abandon the ideals of a religiously inspired socialism, the vision of a just, peaceful and equal society, while continuing to struggle against both destructive communism and hedonist capitalism, the two dominant socio-economic political systems in Asia.\(^{110}\)

The other element is Sinhala culture. In the negative milieu of the anti-Tamil and anti-Christian nationalism prevailing among Sinhala-Buddhists, Pieris has tried to promote the best of Sinhala culture through various activities at the Tulana Centre. It is noticeable that more than a half of the Buddhist Library at Tulana is occupied by Sinhala literature, both classic and modern. It is used by the poor youth to understand the Sinhala potential, without its chauvinism, to contribute its traditional

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\(^{110}\) See Ibid., pp. 659-60.
wisdom to the wider human community. This section of the library also includes the volumes of translations of the Western classics into Sinhala. Since 1977, Pieris has persistently conducted seminars for Sinhalese rural youth and workers, both Buddhists and Christians, about the Tamil grievances based on historical facts and data, enabling them to realize that the Tamil masses are not their enemies, but the common victims of racist political extremists.111 Meanwhile, the Tulana Media Unit has produced radio programmes and video films in Sinhala to promote a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and justice-peace oriented society in Sri Lanka. One of these programmes, broadcast on the radio during Advent in December 2008, was the Nativity story, *Raja Upatha* (Birth of a King), written in *Hela Basha* (old Sinhala) by Charles de Silva, a famous Buddhist linguist. The characterization of Mary, Joseph, Jesus and three Wise Men in the play was based on the traditional Sinhala social norms and cultural practices. This reflects Pieris’ conviction that the *cultures of the poor*, be they Sinhala, Tamil, or any other ethnicity, share the common characteristics of *cosmic religiosity*, which has a liberative potential as great as *metacosmic religiosity*.112

In summary, we have shown how Pieris has developed his dialogical integrationist approach to the complex reality of Asian *poverty* and *religiosity*, in its particular manifestation of the socio-political and religio-ethnic conflicts in postcolonial Sri Lanka. We have noted that Pieris’ radical thought and praxis have been shaped by his constant engagement with Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Marxists; especially at Tulana, he has engaged with Buddhism at different levels, through spiritual, cultural and social encounters, as well as academic research. Pieris’ profound knowledge and experience of Buddhism have enabled him to develop a remarkable mutual dialogue with Buddhist scholars, intellectuals and forest-monks in a reverential mood. However, his main dialogical partners are the socially engaged Buddhists, who have worked for justice, peace and reconciliation among the suffering people in Asia and Sri Lanka. Pieris’ integrationist spirituality always seeks

112 For more details, see the first section of Chapter V.
balance between inner freedom and social action, between inculturation and liberation, and between intellectual dialogue and liberative collaboration.

It is to be noted that Pieris’ twofold spirituality of *interior liberation* and *social emancipation* is resonant with Buddhāsa’s radical orthopraxis of the void-mind (*chit-wāṅg*) and Dhammic socialism. However, as we propose in this thesis, both thinkers show different dynamics of human liberation: Buddhāsa retains a keen interest in the individual-spiritual enlightenment, regarding it as the foundation for the common good of society; whereas Pieris is first and foremost concerned with the suffering of the poor and their socio-political liberation, in which the personal and religio-spiritual insights are essentially engaged.\(^{113}\) We argue that Pieris is to be known neither as a simple ‘liberation theologian’, nor a mere ‘inculturation theologian’ from Asia. As we have shown, he is rather an active proponent of a Christian ‘radical orthopraxis’, a particular type of Christian living in engagement with the complex religio-cultural, socio-political realities of Asia and Sri Lanka. Pieris is a remarkable pioneer in the history of Christianity, who has integrated the interreligious dimension of the personal-spiritual life into the liberative communal commitment for social justice and peace, bringing to attention both the local and the global. In the following two chapters, we will examine how Pieris develops his dialogical integrationist thought and praxis, by radically returning to the originating sources of both Buddhist and Christian traditions, in accordance with the spirit of Vatican II.

\(^{113}\) For more details, see the second section of Chapter VII.
Chapter V

Three Key Concepts:
Pieris’ New Hermeneutic

As we saw in the previous chapter, Pieris’ radical orthopraxis is characterized by its dynamic engagement with various aspects of Asian reality. His thought and praxis can be reduced to neither the inculturationist nor the liberationist categories. What he has established is a new trajectory in Asian theology, relevant to the particular Asian context of poverty and religiosity, from his dialogical integrationist perspective. His work is a deconstruction of old paradigms and a construction of a truly Asian theology: a holistic, interreligious, and liberative theology, which integrates the best of the liberationist approach and the best of the inculturationist approach into a creative dialogue. However, it is not easy to systematize his work because his writings, in a scholarly condensed style, are filled with rhetoric more intuitive, evocative and spiritual than systematic. Pieris regards his theological reflection as an open journey or pilgrimage mediated by his constant liberative praxis in the concrete situations of people. Hence it is hard to pinpoint a conclusive theological position in his work. There are some key concepts, however, that reveal the dominant features of his thought and praxis, which Pieris has developed in a sort of short-hand as personal neologisms to emphasize the novelty and creativity of his insights. This chapter aims to examine three of these concepts as the interpretative principles which unlock the theological framework of his radical orthopraxis.

The first important concept is *cosmic religiosity*, referring to the tribal religions and the popular forms of the major world religions. Pieris has invented this phrase to avoid the pejorative nuance of the general term ‘animism’.\(^1\) He remarks that *cosmic* religions revere natural and preternatural powers in the poor people’s quest for

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liberation from suffering, whereas *metacosmic* religions provide them with a transcendental horizon with an ultimate salvific goal.\(^2\) He points out that the world religions usually spread by sending their roots into the *cosmic religiositas* of a local culture, which explains the popular base of all *metacosmic* religions.\(^3\) Out of his analysis of the cosmic-metacosmic structure of Asian religions, Pieris builds a theory of *enreligionization*, by which he criticizes both the inculturationist disregard for the liberation of the poor and the liberationist prejudice against religions. Through this new concept, *enreligionization*, Pieris promotes an integrationist Christian radical orthopraxis: a participatory experience of other religions (*communicatio in sacris*) in an interreligious liberative praxis for the liberation of the poor. The last key concept, Buddhist *gnosis* and Christian *agape*, is the practical application of *enreligionization*, referring to what Pieris calls a ‘core-to-core dialogue’ between Buddhism and Christianity in Asia.

This chapter expounds each of these concepts in three respective sections, to show how Pieris’ innovative hermeneutic is distinguished, not only from the traditional Christian thought but also from the theological trends of his contemporaries in Asia. We argue that these distinctive but interrelated concepts are the interpretative key to understand Pieris’ holistic approach to religion, culture and action, as well as his radical thought and praxis, drawn from the originating sources of both Buddhist and Christian spiritualities. Through a thorough analysis of these three hermeneutical concepts, this chapter demonstrates that Pieris’ dialogical integrationist approach to human liberation is in sharp contrast to Buddhāśa’s puritan Dhammic essentialist radical orthopraxis.


\(^3\) See Ibid., p. 60.

1. The Dynamics of Cosmic and Metacosmic Religiosity in Asia

Pieris has his own formulation of religious diversity, arguing that the concept of religion and culture in Asia must not be taken from the Western perspective but from the intuitive and experiential grasp of what they mean in life as understood locally. He remarks that generations of Western writers on religion ended producing anti-religious theories, from which Barthian theologians strived to save Christianity by lifting it above the realm of religion; on the other hand, Western anthropologists have nurtured the functionalist trend, which glosses over religion as something redundant in the cultures they study. Hence, Pieris warns his Asian colleagues not to spend too much time on definitions of religion and culture, which he considers ‘an academic pastime that has bred confusion in the West’. He is convinced that Asians can grasp the contour of their religious culture through their daily experience and critical observation of the intricate network of religions and cultures in Asia. To Pieris, culture is the varied expressions of religion, and religions meet each other always in and through their respective cultural self-manifestations:

Thus, one might speak about several cultures within one religion and, conversely, about several religions within one culture. The former case is exemplified in the three missionary religions: Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity (listed here in descending order of cultural differentiation). As for cultures that accommodate several religions, a whole series can be cited—for example, Buddhism and Hinduism in Nepal, Taoism and Confucianism in China, Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan, Hinduism and Islam in Java. In some instances, the culture of one religion relates to the other as host to guest. Hence these terms possess the conceptual elasticity that the complexity of

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4 See Ibid., p. 96.
5 Ibid., p. 97.
reality has bequeathed on them.\textsuperscript{8}

On the basis of this observation, Pieris sorts out the various strands of religion, which have been woven into the rich cultural fabric of Asia, according to three factors: (1) the crisscrossing of racio-linguistic contours within the scriptural religions of the world; (2) the ongoing cross-fertilization between the scriptural religions and tribal religions; (3) the ceaseless interaction between these religions and various socio-political ideologies.\textsuperscript{9} The first factor responds to the diversity of linguistic zones in Asia, through which all scriptural religions set their terrain with their own cultural, socio-political forms. The second is concerned with the process of integration of local, tribal, or cosmic religions with the metacosmic soteriologies of the scriptural religions. The last refers to the liberative or revolutionary aspects of cosmic and metacosmic religions and their ability to interact with their contemporary socio-political ideologies. Pieris strives to show the whole picture of the Asian religious culture by examining these three factors, especially focusing on the cosmic-metacosmic dynamics.

To begin with, Pieris remarks that the scriptural religions of the world have all originated from the Asian racio-linguistic zones: (1) the Semitic Judaism, Islam, and Christianity; (2) the Indian Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism; (3) the Chinese Taoism and Confucianism. He says that the streams of these religions ‘have been meandering beyond their linguistic boundaries, even across continents, thus flooding the world—Asia in particular—with a plethora of hybrid cultures’.\textsuperscript{10} To Pieris, a truly Asian theology cannot be conceived without referring to the Asian realities, expressed in such diverse religio-cultural languages and symbols. He emphasizes that one must learn the folk language first, before reading the scriptures of the world religions, because the various folk languages and cultures express the deepest desires of Asian people for liberation:

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{9} See Ibid., pp. 97-100.  
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 98.
Learn, first, the folk language. Assist at the rites and rituals of the Asian people; hear their songs; vibrate with their rhythms; keep step with their dance; taste their poems; grasp their myths; reach them through their legends. You will find that the language they speak puts them in touch with the basic truths that every religion grapples with, but each in different way: the meaning and destiny of human existence; humanity’s crippling limitations and its infinite capacity to break through them; liberation both human and cosmic; in short, the struggle for full humanness.\textsuperscript{11}

The bearers of this non-scriptural religiosity, according to Pieris, are mostly the poor, who practice it either within the framework of major religions, as the popular forms of religious practice, or totally outside any scriptural religions, as the pure forms of tribal religions. He calls them ‘cosmic religions’ because they normally revolve around cosmic powers, reverenced under different names, such as devas in South Asia, nats in Burma, phis in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, kamis in Shinto Japan, bons in Tibet, and ancestors in countries guided by Confucianism.\textsuperscript{12} To Pieris, this cosmic religiosity is neither animism nor superstition, but a religious expression of the subliminal attitude to the mysteries of life and the cosmos:

Actually it [cosmic religiosity] represents the basic psychological posture that the \textit{homo religiosus} (residing in each one of us) adopts subconsciously toward the mysteries of life. […] These mysteries relate to cosmic forces—heat, fire, winds and cyclones, earth and its quakes, oceans, rains, and floods—which we need and yet fear. Such forces serve as ambivalent symbols of our own subconscious powers, symbols freely employed in ordinary speech and in sacred rites, expressing our deepest yearnings. […] In our cultures these natural elements and forces merge into the mysterious world of invisible powers that maintain the cosmic balance. […] Rites, rituals, and a class of

\textsuperscript{11} Pieris, ‘Toward an Asian Theology of Liberation’, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{12} See Pieris, ‘Cosmic/Metacosmic Religions’, p. 60.
mediators form the constitutive elements of this religiousness.\textsuperscript{13}

Pieris contrasts this \textit{cosmic religiosity} with the ‘secularist’ worldview associated with Western technocracy: what is perceived as symbolic and \textit{sacramental} in the former is often dismissed as magical or superstitious in the latter; for instance, from the point of view of \textit{cosmic religiosity}, ‘water’ is not simply H\textsubscript{2}O but a manifestation of life, the vital cosmic energy;\textsuperscript{14} He remarks that the primordial experience of the human embryo comprises the awakening of our subliminal consciousness to the comfortable darkness of water in the mother’s womb; this fact once and for all establishes an unbreakable link between our rudimentary awareness of the Cosmos (water) and our inceptive sentience of the Woman (womb).\textsuperscript{15} He holds that, in the view of \textit{cosmic spirituality}, human beings are biopsychically determined to carry their subliminal experience as a permanent feature of the ‘fullness of humanity’, toward which they strive as the final goal of liberation; hence, the cosmos is perceived as the ecological matrix in which humans evolve as a gigantic social embryo, awaiting their birth into a new humanity.\textsuperscript{16}

To Pieris, the \textit{secularism} of the West is diametrically opposed to this subliminal, religious and cosmic worldview of Asia. He clarifies that the word ‘secularism’ here does not refer to the stance of people who dissociate themselves from the ideological and institutional grip of their former religion; it rather refers to the \textit{secularist} ideology, originated in the 17th century ‘with the Cartesian reduction of the world to a lifeless machine, and with the “masculinization of knowledge” by which Aristotle’s \textit{natura naturata} (the passive mother-earth) is now “objectively” studied’.\textsuperscript{17} To Pieris, this desacralization of the universe is the root of Western technocracy, the misuse of modern technology, which has resulted in various ecological crises. He distinguishes

\textsuperscript{14} See Pieris, ‘The Cosmic in Feminism’ in \textit{Fire and Water}, pp. 16-7.
\textsuperscript{16} See Ibid.
between technology and technocracy. The former is associated with religion in its witnessing of the gradual manifestation of the human-centred cosmos and the continuous evolution toward the metacosmic (the humanum). The latter is related to irreligion in its regression to the inhuman and its instrumental approach to the cosmos, which presages ecological disaster.\textsuperscript{18}

Pieris points out that the cosmic worldview considers all beings outside of ‘me’ as my own extended body, rather than as a tool to be used for my self-growth; whereas the secularist worldview reduces all beings outside of ‘me’ to the state of mere ‘things’ at the service of my human self.\textsuperscript{19} He remarks that self-centred secularism strives to gain access to ‘Mammon’, the accumulation of money and power, as in capitalist technocracy; or access to God, as in liberal Christianity with its individualistic pietism.\textsuperscript{20} He is convinced that the sacramental worldview of cosmic religiosity can offer an ‘antidote’ to this secularist instrumentalism that has generated a self-destructive hedonism.\textsuperscript{21} He emphasizes that secularism originates from the loss of the sense of a ‘transcendental’ or ‘metacosmic’ horizon in the perception of the world as a desacralized, mechanized and masculinized universe. In contrast, cosmic spirituality is open to the metacosmic dimension of the world, which can be intuitively grasped only by the deepest human heart:

The metacosmic is the human heart’s infinite potentiality that must be dreamed by our imagination, grasped by our intuition, strategized by our reason, actualized by our personal and collective effort, but always under the perennial impulse of love. […] We need to recognize that the metacosmic is the hidden

\textsuperscript{19} See Ibid. p. 60.
\textsuperscript{20} See Ibid., pp. 60-1. Pieris uses the term ‘Mammon’ to refer to a subtle evil force or cosmic power, operating within every person and society, which is averse to God’s will or God’s Reign: an acquisitive drive, a self-seeking desire, a socio-economic system accumulating money, power and prestige at the expense of the poor; and anything, even a good thing, that claims our absolute allegiance—language, race, class, gender, sex, market, land, and so on. Hence, Mammon is not material wealth itself but what makes wealth anti-human, anti-religious, and oppressive. See Pieris, An Asian Theology of Liberation, pp. 16, 20, 75; God’s Reign for God’s Poor: A Return to the Jesus Formula, rev. 2nd edn (Kelaniya: Tulana Research Centre, 1999), pp. 38-9; Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism (New York: Orbis, 1988), pp. 90-1.
\textsuperscript{21} See Ibid., p. 61.
future of the present moment, the “beyond” which acts as the “within” of the cosmos. This self-transcendent capacity immanent in the cosmos, this power to unfold within itself the Other, which is ever present from the first moment of cosmic evolution, is the human. Thus the “human” […] has the capacity to carry the cosmos to its ultimate perfection; and for want of a better world, let this point of perfection be called “the humanum”.

Thus, to Pieris, the ‘metacosmic’ and the ‘humanum’ are the common expression of the self-consciously active and self-transcendently immanent nucleus of the cosmos. He asserts that human liberation requires the cosmic experience of the metacosmic; it is liberation from secularism, not from the cosmic. In other words, the metacosmic (lokuttara) experience of human liberation (humanum) can be realized only within the cosmic (lokiya) world. Hence, to Pieris, the term ‘metacosmic’ refers to the ultimate salvific horizon or goal of the cosmic experience.

Pieris argues that the dynamic of the cosmic-metacosmic experience is well reflected in the historical phenomenon of the merger between the metacosmic religiosity of the world religions and the cosmic religiosity of the tribal religions. He points out that wherever these two kinds of religiosity have merged, the common people’s genius has aligned the ‘cosmic concerns’ such as food, harvest, marriage, politics, health, and death, with the ‘soteriological orientation’ of the metacosmic religions. He holds that a superficial observer might misconceive this phenomenon as ‘syncretism’, but in fact, it is a ‘symbiosis’ of the cosmic and metacosmic religions. To Pieris, this leads to an important corollary: the metacosmic religiosity of the scriptural religions cannot but be inculturated in the lives of the local people, in which the cosmic religiosity is deeply ingrained in various forms of popular beliefs and practices; the converse, however, is not true. He remarks that, in Asia, unlike in Africa or Oceania, cosmic religiosity does not exist in a pure and primordial form.

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22 Ibid., p. 52.
23 See Ibid., p. 53.
25 See Ibid.
26 See Ibid.
but has been domesticated and integrated into one of the metacosmic soteriologies; in other words, the metacosmic religions are always ‘contextualized’ within the worldview of the cosmic religiosity of a given culture in Asia, creating a twofold level of religious experience, each level well integrated into the other.27

Buddhism is presented by Pieris as a paradigm to demonstrate the interaction of these two levels of religiosity in Asia. He remarks, first of all, that the Sangha is the institutional centre and spiritual apex of any Buddhist society, which serves the cosmic level of human existence by directing its attention to the metacosmic goal, the ultimate perfection (arāhatta) or final liberation (nibbāna).28 Pieris points out that the basis of this monastic community is poverty—voluntary renunciation of wealth and family life; however, monastic poverty is sustained by the wealth-acquiring lay people who pursue material progress, revealing the paradox of the Buddhist religious system:

In this system they who renounce wealth are maintained by the wealth of those who do not. Wealth is at the service of poverty, and poverty is the condition for liberation from acquisitiveness and greed (tapā, upāsana, lobha). Hence all material progress is tempered by the ideal of non-acquisitiveness and sharing, of which monasticism is the symbol. This is, of course, the ideal; it is open to abuse, as history shows. […] The paradox of monastic renunciation is this: the holier the monk appears to be, the more generous his benefactors are toward him. The poorer he wants to be, the greater are the donations he receives. […] Thus, dependence on the people for material sustenance is at once the most basic condition and the most vulnerable feature of monastic poverty. What is true of the individual monk is even truer of the monastery as a whole. Rich benefactors and even rulers show their appreciation by lavishing land and wealth on monasteries.29

28 See Ibid., p. 75.
29 Ibid., pp. 75-6.
Pieris argues that Buddhist monasticism cannot be purely spiritual because of this fundamentally interdependent system—the metacosmic (*lokuttara*) order is founded on the cosmic (*lokiya*) basis. He remarks that the Sangha can never be dissociated from the socio-political reality because it has retained its spiritual and political authority in a close relationship with the state; this is specifically true in Southeast Asia where the state legitimization of the Sangha is reciprocated by the monks’ moral sanction of the state.\(^{30}\) To Pieris, this is why the Sangha has often suffered both persecution and purification at the hands of the state; while it has also at other times initiated political revolutions against the state.\(^{31}\) He points out that even the communist countries came to recognize Buddhism as a power to be reckoned with, because it has long been a way of life for millions of Asian people.\(^{32}\) To Pieris, this power does not merely reside in the sacred texts, but in the ‘culture of peoples who have learned to integrate their cosmic concerns with a metacosmic vision—politics with spirituality’.\(^{33}\)

This cultural power of Asian religions, argues Pieris, explains why Christians have remained an insignificant minority in the region, even after four centuries of missionary activity. He points out that, in Asia, the cohesion of cosmic and metacosmic religiosity is so strong that mass conversions from one soteriology to another are almost impossible, except under military pressure.\(^{34}\) He further remarks that tribal religions are usually open to any metacosmic religion and spontaneously provide a popular base for it, without sacrificing their own cosmic spirituality.\(^{35}\) To Pieris, here the rule of the game is ‘first come, first served’; that is, a tribal society which has already given its allegiance to one metacosmic religion will not normally withdraw it in favour of another.\(^{36}\) He gives some historical examples: Islam in Indonesia and Catholicism in the Philippines were easily established because cosmic

\(^{30}\) See Ibid., p. 76.
\(^{31}\) Pieris presents the anti-Christian, anti-colonialist movements of Sri Lanka, Burma and Indochina as examples of the monastic involvement in political revolution. See Ibid., pp. 76-7.
\(^{32}\) See Ibid., pp. 77-8.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 78.
\(^{35}\) See Ibid.
\(^{36}\) See Ibid., p. 101.
religiosity there had been in undomesticated or mildly domesticated forms; whereas in India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries, neither Islam nor Christianity succeeded because cosmic religions had already been well integrated into a cultural system of gnostic soteriologies.\(^{37}\) Hence, Pieris concludes that Asia will always remain a non-Christian continent, asking for a shift in missiology: Christians must stop disregarding the cultural integrity of Asian religions; and take the situation as an ‘opportunity’ to develop a creative radical orthopraxis, humbly participating in the non-Christian experience of liberation.\(^{38}\)

To Pieris, this means that Asian Christians must share the lives of the poor, to learn the liberative potential of their religions, both in the cosmic and metacosmic dimensions. He presents seven liberative features of cosmic religiosity that he has identified through his own experience, living among the poor:

1. The poor have a distinctively this-worldly spirituality. They cry to heaven for their daily needs—food, work, shelter, and a decent human life.

2. In their utter helplessness, they totally depend on God. Hence theirs is a God of rice and curry, a God of shelter and clothing, a God of marriage and children, in short, the God of this life.

3. It is also to this God that they cry for justice. In many Asian cultures, there is a divine manifestation (often in female form) which is concerned with retribution or restitution already here on earth rather than in some post-mortem existence.

4. Their ‘this-worldly’ spirituality, however, is not secular but cosmic. The secular is the non-sacred world vitiated by the acquisitive consumerism cycle; whereas the cosmic is a blend of the sacred, the womanly and the earthly, making that vicious cycle impossible.


\(^{38}\) See Ibid., p. 74.
(5) In the cosmic spirituality of the poor, women often find some space to express at least symbolically their state of oppression, in contrast to the metacosmic religions, which are more inextricably entrenched in patriarchalism.

(6) The faith in various cosmic forces, which determine their life, makes their spirituality ecological.

(7) The most powerful idiom of communication in their religious tradition is the story. To them, human liberation is the story of a God among his/her people. The epic, the narrative and the drama are very sacred media to the Asian poor.\(^{39}\)

Pieris remarks that many Asian theologians have a tendency to establish a dialogue only with the so-called ‘higher forms’ of metacosmic religions, while looking down upon the popular forms of religious practice as an immature and infantile stage of spiritual development.\(^{40}\) To Pieris, this distorted view underestimates the liberative potential of cosmic religiosity described above. He argues that, in fact, many great social transformations in Asia have taken place thanks to the involvement of the rural poor, mobilized by their cosmic spirituality to seek justice in this very world. He gives some examples of messianic movements in Buddhist history to indicate the influence of cosmic over metacosmic religiosity. For instance, there were about twenty revolts against kings and their British successors in Burma from 1838 to 1928—all inspired by the Maitreya cult, ‘the eschatological expectation of a just social order to be ushered in with the appearance of the future Buddha’.\(^{41}\) In China, more radical forms of messianic movements frequently arose on the fringes of the Buddhist institutions from the 5th to the 16th centuries; they rebelled against both the state and the official Sangha. They combined the Maitreya cult with the cult of the Amitābha Buddha, believing that the Western Paradise or the Pure land, a state of


\(^{40}\) See Ibid., pp. 157-8.

peace and equality, should be created on earth, here and now, rather than in a remote future. Pieris remarks that the White Lotus sect (Pai-Lien Ts’ai), one of these messianic movements, led a successful revolution to establish the Ming dynasty in 1351; and one of its branches was active under the name of I-Kuam-Tao as late as 1956, until it was hunted down by the Maoist regime.

To Pieris, these instances illustrate not only the liberative thrust of cosmic religiosity as a sub-structure of metacosmic soteriology, but also the revolutionary potential of Buddhism, in its capacity to interact with other socio-political and religio-cultural ideologies. Hence, he remarks that the Buddhist messianic rebellions of 19th century Burma influenced the later independence movement, with which the first Prime Minister U Nu, a pro-Marxist, tried his abortive experiment in Buddhist socialism.

To Pieris, the above mentioned messianic movements in China also reveal how Buddhists could respond to the revolutionary moods of the time: they were able to reinterpret the Buddhist scriptures to justify their revolutions, in response to contemporary ideologies such as the Confucian ideal of the Enlightened Emperor and the Taoist expectation of the True Ruler (Chen Chu).

He argues, however, that all religious ideals remain merely ‘utopian’ unless an appropriate ideology or a programmatic vision with a concrete agenda is made to convert them into a social reality. But, he warns that ideology, just as religion, is ambivalent in its liberating or enslaving aspects; it can gradually become despotic. Hence, he insists that both religions and ideologies need to be transcended by the truth they try to articulate:

No idea however powerful, no vision however grand, no spirituality however liberating can effect any significant change in human history if it is not verbalized and systematized into an ideology or a religion. [...] Once he [...]
Buddha] decided to communicate his discovery, he had also to formulate it, thus giving rise to doctrinal discourse (*sutta*) and to a definite lifestyle (*vinaya*), neither of which supersedes the *dhamma* it is meant to express. Hence, the Buddha’s own warning: the *dhamma* could be harmful just like a serpent, if it is “grasped” in the wrong way! Is this not tantamount to saying that *dhamma* should not be turned into a *diṭṭhi*—that is, an ideology in the wrong sense?47

Pieris notices that a pejorative connotation of the term *diṭṭhi* in the earliest discourse of the Pali canon soon became a neutral concept split into the right view (*samma-diṭṭhi*) and the wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*): the one leads to interior freedom and the other to enslavement. Hence, to Pieris, ‘to be ideologically free’ does not mean to abandon ideologies all together, but to choose the ‘right ideology’ in correspondence to the truth.48 He sees the basic difference between religion and ideology: religion *primarily* and *normatively* (but not exclusively) points to an Absolute Future as the horizon of human liberation; but ideology is *exclusively* concerned with the socio-economic and political order without allowing for even the semblance of a metacosmic future.49 In his view, religion teaches that the Absolute Future has to be anticipated here in this life, not only through the spiritual achievements of individual persons but also through visible structures in human society; therefore, it is necessary for a religion to discern the most appropriate forms of visible social structures, strategies, and institutions that this-worldly ideologies provide.50

This dynamic relationship between cosmic-metacosmic religions and socio-political ideologies inevitably draws our attention to the theological issue of inculturation and liberation. As mentioned before, the post-Vatican II theologians in Asia were divided into two main groups—liberationists and inculturationists. Pieris strived to integrate both positions into an Asian way of radical orthopraxis by presenting his new insights at the conferences of 1979 and 1981. He was critical of the theological milieu of the late 1970s in which Third World theology was dominated by the Latin

47 Ibid., p. 29.
48 See Ibid., p. 30.
49 See Ibid., p. 25.
50 See Ibid.
American model. It does not mean that he disagreed with the Latin American liberation theologians. On the contrary, Pieris was grateful to them for being his mentors with their revolutionary thought and praxis. He remarked, however, that their theology had been developed exclusively in the Latin-Christian context, which is quite different from the multicultural, religiously plural situations in Asia. In his view, the Latin American model of theology was uncritically imported and duplicated by the liberationists in Asia; and this prompted a defensive extreme among the inculturationists.51 To overcome these two unyielding positions, Pieris promotes *enreligionization* as a more appropriate Christian engagement with the Asian reality of poverty and religiosity, as we will see in the following section.

2. *Enreligionization*: Christian Engagement with Asian Reality

Pieris argues that the distinction between culture and religion is artificial. As we have seen, his theory of human religiosity is one in which the cosmic and the metacosmic are brought together in a single holistic scheme. Consequently, he is highly critical of the inculturationist approach to religion which separates the two concepts. His alternative term to ‘inculturation’ is *enreligionization*.52 This is a significant term which refers to a new paradigm of Christian engagement with the complex religio-cultural and socio-political reality of Asia. Pieris argues that the Greco-Roman model of inculturation worked well in the West, where religion, philosophy and culture were separated to an extent, but not in the Asian context in which all those factors are intermingled.53 To him, it is impossible and inconceivable to insert Christianity into an Asian culture separated from the Asian religions; and this is why Christianity has failed to evangelize Asia in spite of its many great missionary efforts over the centuries. He also knows that the Latin American model of liberation does

52 See footnote 4.
not appeal to the Asian poor because it is exclusively a Christian way of liberating praxis. Hence, Pieris asserts that the main issue for Christian praxis in Asia is neither inculturation nor liberation, but *enreligionization*. 

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Pieris has presented this theory as a theological breakthrough which transcends the old paradigm of the liberationist-inculturationist dichotomy. The point of his argument is that both groups of theologians have failed to grasp the liberative potential of the non-Christian religions which encompass the majority of the Third World. He emphasizes that the term ‘Third World’ is not merely a geo-economical word but a theological concept defining God’s own people, who are the ‘starving sons and daughters of Jacob—of all places and all times—who go in search of bread to a rich country, only to become its slaves’. Hence, to Pieris, a new peoplehood can arise wherever and whenever socio-economic dependence generates political-cultural slavery in terms of race, class, or sex. He remarks that the vast majority of God’s poor or Third World people identify their ultimate concern and express their struggle for liberation in the idiom of non-Christian religious cultures. Therefore, to Pieris, ‘a theology that does not speak to or speak through this non-Christian peoplehood is an esoteric luxury of a Christian minority’. He is convinced that *enreligionization* is necessary to expand the boundaries of orthodoxy by entering into the various liberative streams of other religions.

To Pieris, religion is a potential means of either ‘emancipation’ or ‘enslavement’, depending on how it responds to the phenomenon of poverty, which is ambivalent in

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54 In his Licentiate thesis, Swee-Chun examines how the liberationist and inculturationist theologies respectively have developed in the post-Vatican II world Church. He shows that both are valid theologies in their effort to establish the local face of the church as Vatican II requested, but the relationship between the two is too diametrically opposed. He remarks that Pieris has constructed his ‘two edged liberative theology of enreligionization’ through his critique of the division between liberationists and inculturationists in Asia. See Joseph NG Swee-Chun, ‘Aloysius Pieris’ Two-edged Liberative Theology of Enreligionization’, unpublished S.T.L. thesis (Taipei: Fu Jen Catholic University, 2004), pp. 7-85, 118.


56 See Ibid.

57 Ibid.
itself: an enslaving ‘forced poverty’ or a liberating ‘voluntary poverty’.\(^{58}\) He points out that both liberationists and inculturationists have oversimplified the complex, polysemous and contradictory realities of religion and poverty in Asia. While the liberationists define religion and poverty as negative forces from which the Asian masses have to be liberated, the inculturationists disregard the religious conspiracy to perpetuate oppressive systems that create and maintain the evils of poverty.\(^{59}\) To Pieris, however, both religion and poverty have positive and negative roles in the psychological (individual) and sociological (socio-political) dimensions. Hence, for him, there is a fourfold distinction:

(1) The *enslaving face of religion* is psychologically manifested in superstition, ritualism, and dogmatism. Its socio-political tendency is to legitimize an oppressive status quo and to serve Mammon, the anti-God.

(2) The *liberating face of religion* is an interior liberation from sin or greed (*tāphā*). Its organizational and motivational potential operates for radical social change as seen in independent movements in Asia.

(3) The *enslaving face of poverty* in its psychological dimension is alienation; the dignity of the human being is violated by imposed poverty. Its socio-political dimension is the subjugation of peoples by the followers of Mammon, such as colonial powers and multinational corporations.

(4) The *liberating face of poverty* is embodied in voluntary poverty—an interior liberation from Mammon, a spiritual dimension emphasized by Eastern religions. The socio-political dimension of voluntary poverty is revealed as a political strategy, as exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi, to liberate human society from Mammon or organized sin.\(^{60}\)

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\(^{59}\) See Ibid., pp. 37-8.

\(^{60}\) See Ibid., p. 39.
Pieris holds that a truly Asian theology must consider these dynamics of religion and poverty which characterize the deepest aspects of the Asian ethos. In his opinion, neither liberationists nor inculturationists have been able to grasp the importance of this bidimensional reality, especially that of the liberative role of religions. He argues that the polarization between these two groups manifests the two historical Christian views of other religions: ‘Christ-against-religions’ versus ‘Christ-of-religions’. He remarks that the former view is formulated clearly in Karl Barth’s dialectical theology, which set non-Christian religions opposed to God’s revelation. He further remarks that this Barthian concept of religion has influenced Western exegetical tradition so deeply that biblical scholars have had difficulties finding the exact word for ‘religion’ in the Bible. He emphasizes that the word ‘religion’ is absent not only from the Bible, but also from all Asian religions because none of the Asian soteriologies offer us a clear concept of religion in the Western sense. Hence, Pieris argues that the problem is not the absence of an exact word from the scriptures, but the very concept of religion. He points out that, in the Asian context, religion is life itself rather than a function within it, being the all-pervasive ethos of human existence; and this is even truer of tribal religion, which often overlaps with ‘culture’. To Pieris, it is under the Barthian concept of religion that all non-Christian soteriologies are subsumed and dismissed in favour of biblical faith.

Another source of liberationist prejudice about religions, according to Pieris, is Karl Marx’s dialectical materialism, which set religion against revolution. He recognizes that Latin American liberation theologians have succeeded in pushing Marx’s analysis of religion to the opposite conclusion—that is, ‘religion could be a leaven of liberation rather than an opiate’. He argues, however, that religion here means exclusively Christianity; other religions are still regarded as obstacles to liberation.

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62 See Ibid., p. 91.
63 See Ibid.
64 See Ibid., p. 90.
65 Ibid., p. 91.
He remarks that the cause of this occidentalist bias can be traced back to Marx and Engels, who had typical 19th century European attitudes about other races and cultures: they thought in terms of a hierarchy of cultures, with their own at the top; they welcomed the colonial projects for the Westernization of the East. Pieris says,

In Marx’s *Manifesto*, the whole idea of “progress” and “civilization” is simply equated with the Westernization of the East, the urbanization of the countryside, and the proletarianization of the peasantry—all in the name of socialism! And in *Capital*, the European form of capitalist industrialization is envisaged as the model for the rest of the world, an indispensable prelude to the proletarian revolution. [...] Marx welcomed the British conquest of India because the breakdown of the ancient Indian civilization, followed preferably by Europeanization, seemed an indispensable condition for the building up of a modern industrial culture. That there could, in fact, be a non-Western, non-European way to socialism culturally based on the peasant communes of the *obscina* was of course proposed and debated at length even before the October Revolution; but in this regard, Marx, and especially Engels, did not really shed their Western chauvinism.\(^{66}\)

This Marxist Occidentalism, argues Pieris, was further entrenched in the orthodox stream of classic Marxism and among the militant liberation theologians. He remarks that there are two major trends in the Latin American liberation theology: one with a Marxist mood and method; and the other with a pastoral root in popular cultures. The former group, according to Pieris, perceive popular religious cultures as evils to be destroyed because they function as a justification of the status quo and negation of Christian commitment.\(^{67}\) He points out that these militant liberation theologians do not allow the ethnic identity of racial minorities to be reflected in their theology.\(^{68}\) Pieris is convinced that these Latin American theologies became the source of the

\(^{66}\) Ibid., p. 92.

\(^{67}\) See Ibid., p. 90.

\(^{68}\) Pieris gives an example that Amerindians, blacks, and Asiatics have their unique community sense based on their cultures but no visible impact on the ecclesiological revolution of basic communities. See Ibid., p. 93.
liberationist bias against other religions in Asia.

However, to Pieris, the remote root of the ‘Christ-against-religions’ theology can be traced back to the early Christian encounter with the Greco-Roman world. He remarks that the early Church Fathers judged only the culture of Rome and the philosophy of Greece as being worth assuming by the Church—that is, capable of being redeemed by Christ from what they considered the diabolical grip of pagan religions. He acknowledges that the Greco-Roman model was a viable and even justifiable process of indigenization, given the socio-political context of the early Church. Nevertheless, he is critical of the Western theological tradition that takes for granted the ‘instrumentalization’ of non-Christian culture and philosophy for the construction of a Christian doctrinal system. He emphasizes that, in the Asian context, an attempt to pluck a philosophy or a sacred symbol out of the soteriological matrix of non-Christian religions can be criticized as ‘theological vandalism’. Pieris holds that its crudest version appeared in the 16th century when the early missionaries brought the idea of the colonial Christ to redeem Asia’s pagan souls from the grip of superstition through the medium of Western civilization. He points out that even Roberto De Nobili and Matteo Ricci, the two standard examples of the early missionaries, offered only a minor emendation to this colonialist Christology in that they used ‘pagan culture’ itself as their medium to draw Asian people away from their religions to that of Christ. To Pieris, what the early Church Fathers did to non-Christian philosophy, later the missionaries did to Asian culture: they separated

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69 See Pieris, ‘Western Models of Inculturation: Applicable in Asia?’, p. 52.
70 See Ibid., pp. 52-3.
71 See Ibid., p. 53.
it from its religious context and turned it into a means of conversion. In the same line, he is critical of the contemporary Christian attempt to pluck Zen or Yoga from the religious stems that give them sap, and adorn Christian spirituality with sapless twigs. Pieris then asks for a more reverential approach to the wholeness of the religio-cultural experience of others.

Thus, to Pieris, this kind of inculturation, based on the culture-religion dichotomy and the instrumentalization of non-Christian culture, is ‘theological vandalism’ or Christian ‘imperialism’. He remarks, however, that there have been some Indian theologians who searched for the non-colonial Christ and started to sow the seeds of a ‘Christ-of-religions’ theology in the 19th century. This new trend of theology developed in various ways, with Karl Rahner as one of its most influential proponents, whose theory of ‘anonymous Christianity’ became popular around the time of the Second Vatican Council. To Pieris, the essence of this theology is that Christ works in and through all religions as the final consummation of all human aspirations for redemption. He affirms the positive role of this theology on Christians to recognize the value of other religions as genuine bearers of revelation and as legitimate ways of salvation. Nevertheless, Pieris argues that this theology is fraught with intrinsic theological difficulties which have already boomeranged on the Asian churches: for instance, Rahner’s ‘anonymous Christianity’ has been challenged by

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75 See Pieris, ‘The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures in the Evolution of Third World Theology’, p. 94.
76 Dupuis presents two models of Catholic theology which inspired the official documents of Vatican II: one is the ‘fulfillment theory of religions’ and the other is the ‘theory of the presence of Christ in religions’. The former is associated with Farquhar, Danielou, Lubac, and Balthasar, who saw all other religions as ‘natural religions’ that variously express the human being’s innate desire for union with the Divine, while Christianity, as the ‘supernatural religion’, denotes God’s personal response to this universal human aspiration. According to this theory, the other religions play no role on the salvation of their followers because only the Christian message of the definitive self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ brings the fulfillment of their salvation. By contrast, the latter theory holds that there is no purely natural religion and all religions are supernatural. This theory is held by Rahner, Panikkar, and Küng. They maintained that although the decisive salvific event is God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, other religions play a positive role in the salvation of their followers because the saving mystery of Christ is operating through them. It is believed that the members of other religions are saved through their allegiance to and sincere practice of their traditions in virtue of the operative presence of Christ that remains unknown to them. See Jacques, Dupuis, S.J., Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism (New York: Orbis, 1997), pp. 130-57.
the counter-claims of ‘anonymous Hinduism’ or ‘anonymous Buddhism’.

In the 1960s, according to Pieris, the neocolonialist theologians believed that other religions were a hindrance to the humanizing task of eradicating poverty in Asia and only Christians were able to save the poor by implementing the Western model of development. He recalls that their work was even described as ‘pre-evangelization’ in the sense of the material preparation for the Christ’s arrival. By contrast, the inculturationists, who upheld the Christ-of-religions theology, found an anchor in the Christian ashrams, which had already been in existence for decades embodying the Asian spirit of renunciation. Pieris recognizes that these Christian ashramites developed a living Christological formula in which Jesus is confessed as the ‘God-become-poor’ or the ‘divine guru’ who offers interior liberation from greed—the demon within, an enemy of all authentic spirituality. However, he criticizes them for failing to notice the colossal scandal of organized greed thriving on religious sanction:

While the war was waged and even won within the walls of ashrams, the poor—the waste product of the earth’s capital-accumulating plutocracy—continued to grow in number and misery. Could their struggle for sheer survival succeed if that sinful system was not a target of their struggle? Unless stained by the stigma of solidarity with that struggle, monastic poverty will

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77 See Pieris, ‘Speaking of the Son of God in Non-Christian Cultures’, p. 60.
78 See Ibid., p. 61.
79 The origin of the Christian ashrams can be traced back to Roberto De Nobili (1577-1656) who lived a sannyasi’s austere life. But the first so-called ‘Christian ashram’ was established by Bengali Catholic layman Brahamabandhav Upadhyaya in 1899, although it lasted only a few months because of pressure from Church authorities. His initiative inspired many Christians to start ashrams in the 20th century. The Protestant ashrams in the 1920s under the influence of Gandhi brought the social concerns to ashram life. The Catholic ashrams of the 1950s tried to blend ashram spirituality with Christian monastic spirituality. From the late 1960s, the official Catholic Church in India began to welcome the idea of Christian ashrams with the hope that they would help promote contemplation, inculturation, and inter-faith dialogue in accordance with the spirit of Vatican II. See Korko Moses, ‘The Place of Christian Ashrams in the Journey towards Spiritual Perfection’, unpublished article (Santiniketan: January 2006), pp. 5-7; ‘Brahamabandhav Upadhyaya and the Christian Ashram Movement’, a public talk at the National Christian Ashram Aikya, (Varanasi: Matridham Ashram, 2 November 2007), pp. 1-15.
always remain a shallow status symbol of a client-gathering guru. The claim to have renounced wealth is vanity of vanities if those who have no wealth to renounce cannot benefit from it. [...] Today’s capitalism has entrenched some ashrams, zendos, and prayer centres in the grip of wealth-accumulating patrons who frequent them for spells of tranquillity and return unconverted and unrepentant, awaiting another revolution to disrupt that unholy alliance with mammon. [...] Who is the beneficiary? And what of the horror of caste and sexist discrimination that thrives on religious sanction? How many prayer centres have cared or dared to go against the grain? The ashramic Christ seemed no more sensitive to the demands of justice than did the neocolonialist Christ.\[^{81}\]

Hence, to Pieris, it is understandable that, in the 1970s, liberationists began to talk of the ‘Christ Liberator’ who redeems the poor not only from their poverty but also from their traditional religions, which perpetuate the harsh realities of poverty, injustice and exploitation in Asia; but to him, it is equally understandable that inculturationists, on the opposite pole, presented the idea of the ‘Universal Christ’ who is deeply incarnated in Asia’s religious cultures.\[^{82}\] Pieris is nevertheless critical of both groups for their failure to discern the liberative and revolutionary potential of non-Christian religions, which must be a constitutive part of any genuine theology in Asia.\[^{83}\]

Pieris offers a significant breakthrough in the liberationist-inculturationist dichotomy by presenting a new way of doing theology—what we call a dialogical integrationist radical orthopraxis. It is a way of enreligionization, a Christian engagement with the Asian reality, through a double praxis of voluntary poverty: renunciation of personal greed as well as denunciation of organized sin, the cause of structural poverty. This is related to his innovative theory of double baptism—a humble immersion in the

\[^{82}\] See Ibid.
\[^{83}\] See Ibid., p. 96.
Asian ethos of poverty and religiosity. Pieris remarks that Jesus was faced with several streams of traditional religiousness and not all of them appealed to him: while the strict ideology of the Zealot movement and the sectarian puritanism of the Essenes had no impact on him, the Pharisaic self-righteousness and the aristocratic ‘leisure-class’ spirituality of the Sadducees were condemned by Jesus; it was in the Deuteronomic tradition of prophetic asceticism represented by John the Baptist that Jesus saw an authentic spirituality and an appropriate point of departure for his own prophetic mission. To Pieris, Jesus identified himself with the ‘religious poor’ (anawim); and was humbly baptized by the prophet John, who represented the ‘world-renouncing’ spirituality of non-Christian religions. He emphasizes that Jesus’ first baptism at the Jordan was a symbolic act in the struggle against Mammon which he continued his whole life; and his second baptism on the cross was the completion of this struggle. He remarks that the cross was planted on Calvary by money-polluted religion with the aid of a colonial power (Luke 23, 1-23). Hence, to Pieris, Mammon makes allies with religion and politics to conspire against God, whereas true religion and politics join hands to work for the Kingdom of God.

Therefore, to Pieris, enreligionization means to follow the example of Jesus in the way of a participatory discernment, knowing that religion can become enslaving when it deadens the individual awareness of poverty and sacralizes oppressive systems in alliance with power. He holds that the Asian Christians are called to continually discern the liberative elements from the various religious trends in Asia. He asserts that, in spite of their negative aspects, all religions have liberative potential at heart; so, enreligionization means to enter into ‘core-to-core’ dialogue with other religions. For example, by participating in the Buddhist rituals and meditations which retain the liberative core experience of agapeic gnosis, Christians can recognize their own core experience of salvation as gnostic agape.

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85 See Ibid., p. 46.
86 See Ibid.
87 See Ibid., pp. 48-9.
88 See Ibid., p. 49.
89 See Ibid.
90 For more details, see the next section.
emphasizes, however, that this mystico-ritual encounter must go hand-in-hand with the prophetic-social commitment, as Jesus exemplified in his *double baptism* at the Jordan and Calvary.

Thus, *enreligionization* indicates the Christian baptismal immersion in the Asian reality of religiosity and poverty, symbolized by the Jordan and Calvary. Pieris remarks that the churches in Asia have been too busy talking about how to baptize the indigenous people or how to use their culture to convert them to Christianity; they do not recognise their need to be symbolically baptized through the participatory experience in other religions. He argues that a truly Asian theology must come out of a church fully baptized in the waters of Asian reality: this church must be humble enough to be baptized in the Jordan of Asian religions and bold enough to be baptized on the cross of Asian poverty. He emphasizes that the Jordan was only the beginning of Calvary; the first baptism would soon lead to the second. To Pieris, there can be no authentic religion without painful participation in the conflicts of poverty, and no true ‘Abba-experience’ without a struggle against Mammon. This Christian *double baptism* is what he means by *enreligionization*, anticipating an ecclesiological revolution in Asia.

Pieris remarks that the revolution of *enreligionization* has already begun in grassroots *basic human communities* on the fringes of the official churches. He asserts that only by becoming *basic human communities* (*ecclesiolae*), of both Christian and non-Christian membership, can the Church learn to be the authentic bearer of Christ’s presence among the poor (*ecclesia discens*: the learning church) and thus retrieve its lost authority (*ecclesia docens*: the teaching church) in Asia. This is what he calls an ‘ecclesiological revolution’ which follows Jesus’ own style of church building. To Pieris, by being located in the periphery of the official Church, these communities have in fact moved to the very centre of Asian reality. Their

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93 See Pieris, ‘Spirituality in a Liberative Perspective’, in *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, p. 12; ‘Asia’s Non-Semitic Religions and the Mission of Local Churches’, p. 40. For the detail of Pieris’ ecclesiology, see the first section of Chapter VI.
participation in the liberative streams of Asian religions and the harsh reality of Asian poverty brings about a new awareness of God’s people living beyond the boundaries of institutional churches. Pieris calls this way of doing theology, or ‘theopraxis’, happening in the basic human communities in Asia, the Christian apocalypse of the non-Christian experience of liberation.94

In summary, the theory of enreligionization is Pieris’ answer to the search for a proper Christian engagement with the complex reality of Asia, in which cosmic and metacosmic religions intermingle with socio-economic, political factors. These religions have the potential to being either liberative or enslaving in their relation to the issue of poverty, which is ambivalent in itself. However, to Pieris, both inculturationists and liberationists have oversimplified this complex bipolarity of religion and poverty in Asia. He proposes enreligionization, therefore, to integrate the Christian thrust of liberation and inculturation into a radical orthopraxis, a participatory experience in the liberative aspects of other religions; along with the common struggle for the liberation of the poor, in the journey towards the fullness of humanity (humanum). In this sense, we call his approach a dialogical integrationist radical orthopraxis. As a practical example of enreligionization, Pieris has focused on the ‘core-to-core dialogue’ between Buddhism and Christianity; and it is for this practical purpose that he expounds the concept of the Buddhist gnosis and Christian agape in depth, as we will see in the following section.

3. Buddhist Gnosis and Christian Agape

As a Buddhologist, Pieris recognizes that he is under the influence of an academic tradition which searches for the original message of the Buddha in the Pali canon. He emphasizes, however, that the ‘early Buddhism of the Pali texts’ or the ‘doctrinal Buddhism’ is not the Buddhism that Asian Christians encounter in day-to-day life. To Pieris, it is rather a living Buddhist tradition full of symbols and practices that Christians are called to engage in:

Every practicing Buddhist—robed or not—is an unbreakable link in a chain of individuals who have passed on the tradition as they received and understood it. In their hearts they treasure a collective memory formed by many generations of recluses and exegetes, ascetics and activists, artists and artisans, poets and prophets, and above all, by millions of devotees, male and female, who have, each in a specific way, translated theory into practice and the written text of the scriptures into the living contexts of their social history. The memory of this tradition, sustained to this day by a monastic institution, so pervades and permeates the “Theravada” cultures of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia as to form what can be vaguely designated as the “Buddhist Ethos”—that is, the religious atmosphere, which Christians in such cultures are invited […] to breathe freely.

This ‘Buddhist Ethos’ of Theravada society, according to Pieris, consists of three important facets: the doctrinal system, the religious institution, and the salvific

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95 See Pieris, Love Meets Wisdom, p. xi. The European perception of Buddhism as idolatry, atheism or nihilism has changed since some pioneering scholars initiated more objective studies of the Buddhist materials in the early 19th century. Starting with the study of Sanskrit and Tibetan Buddhism, scholars came to recognize the Pali canon as a more reliable source for original Buddhism. Hence the academic quest for the earliest, purest, and most rational Buddhism rapidly spread with the translations of the Pali texts in the final quarter of the 19th century. The scholarly effort to grasp the meaning of the original Buddhist doctrine became an academic tradition and continues amongst many contemporary Buddhologists, especially in Sri Lanka.

96 Ibid.
He remarks that the doctrine or the Dhamma of the Pali canon has been taught with added-on philosophical interpretations in the monastic tradition: the Pali scholiasts have developed a complicated system of ‘phenomenalistic realism’ in their analysis of saṃsāric existence; but, the nibbāna-oriented Buddhist soteriology has never been lost in Theravada tradition.98 He also remarks that the Sangha is the institutional symbol of the Arahant ideal; it is one of the Three Gems (ti-ratana)—the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, revered as the ultimate values in Buddhism. He emphasizes, however, that the Buddhist monastery is not only a physical embodiment of these supreme values, but also a place for the Buddha cult, expressed in various religio-cultural symbols.99 He points out that the object of this cult is the transcendent Buddha; in him the ideal of nibbāna reveals itself as a realized goal rather than as a receding horizon.100 Hence, to Pieris, this cult of the Buddha is a cosmic expression of the metacosmic goal; and pedagogically more effective to engage the masses.101 However, to him, the most significant Buddhist factor touching the heart of Asian people is the continuous existence of a number of monks and lay people who have sincerely practiced the Buddhist path or the Noble Eightfold Path, through which the nirvanic experience of the Buddha has become a living possibility for generations.102 Pieris calls the primordial liberative experience of the Buddha, which has been continuously realized by his followers, the ‘salvific experience’ or the ‘core experience’ of Buddhism.103

Thus, to Pieris, the original Buddhist spirituality can be found not only in the Pali scriptures but also in the inculturated forms of the Buddhist core experience, alive in everyday practice. Hence, he argues that the most appropriate Christian engagement with Buddhism is to enter into a ‘core-to-core dialogue’.104 He remarks that the core of any religion is the liberative experience which gave birth to it; and this primordial

99 See Ibid., pp. 53-4.
100 See Ibid. p. 56.
101 See Ibid.
102 See Ibid., p. 45.
103 See Ibid., pp. 56-60.
experience continues to be available to the successive generations by constantly recreating the proper *psycho-spiritual mood* in its *socio-cultural manifestations*.\(^{105}\) Pieris points out that Christians express their core experience in the language of *agape* or ‘redemptive love’, while Buddhists express their core experience in the language of *gnosis* or ‘liberative knowledge’.\(^{106}\)

Pieris contends that the major obstacle to a core-to-core dialogue between these two religions is the prejudice that each one has toward the other’s epistemology: Christian thinkers are too often *anti-gnostic* and Buddhist intellectuals *anti-agapeic*, in their formal positions.\(^{107}\) He remarks that Christians have a tendency to project onto Buddhism an ‘ahistorical’ and ‘apolitical’ character, associating it with the Hellenistic forms of gnosticism; with the Weberian caricature of Buddhism as a ‘world-denying asceticism’ is a sophisticated extension of this basic *anti-gnostic* prejudice of Christians.\(^{108}\) He argues, however, that they are not aware of the social role of Buddhism that has been an active agent in socio-political changes in Asia. Conversely, their Buddhist counterparts often read into Christian *agape* their concept of ‘affective spirituality’ derived from the theopathic religiosity of certain sects in Hinduism and from the esoteric cults in Buddhism.\(^{109}\) Pieris emphasizes that these Buddhist intellectuals are to be helped by Christian partners to learn a more positive view of *agape* as understood in Christianity. To him, core-to-core dialogue is possible only when both partners accept the fact that there is a *Christian gnosis* which is necessarily agapeic; and there is also a *Buddhist agape* which remains gnostic. In other words, to Pieris, the ‘idiomatic exchange’ is an important condition to the core-to-core dialogue: Christians must recognize the *agapeic gnosis* within their own tradition; Buddhists must learn the *gnostic agape* within their own spirituality.\(^{110}\)

Pieris presents *agapeic gnosis* within Christian orthodoxy in three phases: (1) the

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\(^{105}\) See Ibid., pp. 110-1.

\(^{106}\) See Ibid., p. 111.

\(^{107}\) See Ibid., p. 111.

\(^{108}\) See Ibid., p. 112.

\(^{109}\) See Ibid.

\(^{110}\) See Ibid., p. 113.
‘love of neighbour leading to the knowledge of God’ as found in the Pauline and
Johannine biblical theology; (2) the ‘love of God mediating the knowledge of God’
as in the non-Thomist medieval theories; (3) the ‘knowledge of God producing love
of God’ as in the Thomist theology.\textsuperscript{111} He remarks that in biblical soteriology, love
is Christian gnosis because one who does not love one’s neighbour does not know
God (1 John 4, 7) and divine knowledge is worthless without love (1 Cor. 13, 2); the
mutual knowing between God Father and Son, and between the Son and his disciples,
is rooted in the mutual loving between them in the Spirit.\textsuperscript{112} However, according to
Pieris, with the evolution of so called ‘mystical theology’ in medieval times, the
gnostic idiom was more fully integrated into Christian spirituality, emphasizing the
direct (not-mediated) awareness of God or the direct love of God; and the process of
cognitio was further analyzed into scientia (intellectual knowledge) and sapientia
(salvific knowledge).\textsuperscript{113} He points out that the love of neighbour, a crucial aspect in
biblical soteriology, became a mere prelude or a corollary to the love of God in
medieval theologies; and the sophisticated analysis of knowledge and love was
derived from the desire to attain a passive, mystical, and contemplative union with
God.\textsuperscript{114} However, to Pieris, the authentic ‘source and summit’ of Christian life is not
the personal contemplation in God, but a ‘mysticism of service and love’ following
biblical spirituality.\textsuperscript{115} He remarks, however, that the primacy of gnosis over agape is
clear in Thomist orthodoxy: what produces love of God is the sapiential, experiential,
or affective knowledge, given as a grace by the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{116} Thus, to Pieris, the
core experience of Christianity is not agape alone but agape in dialogue with
gnosis.\textsuperscript{117}

This language of Christian gnosis or the agapeic gnosis, argues Pieris, is based on
the concept of ‘person’, a pivotal term predicating both ‘God’, the redeemer, and

\textsuperscript{111} See Ibid., pp. 114-6.
\textsuperscript{112} See Ibid., p. 114.
\textsuperscript{113} See Ibid., p. 115.
\textsuperscript{114} See Ibid. See also Pieris, ‘The Contemplation-Action Paradigm’, in \textit{God’s Reign for God’s Poor},
pp. 7-18 (p. 10).
\textsuperscript{116} See Pieris, ‘Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism’, p. 116.
\textsuperscript{117} See Ibid., p. 119.
‘soul’, the redeemed individual.\textsuperscript{118} He remarks, however, that these words are ‘sheer nonsense’ to the Buddhist who conceives the ultimate truth in non-personalist terms. To Pieris, this is the most serious language barrier between the two religions; and it is this barrier that he sees as the acid test for Christians: whether or not they can break through it by learning the \textit{gnostic} idiom in depth.\textsuperscript{119} He considers the Christian Neoplatonists’ apophatic spirituality, developed on the fringes of Christian orthodoxy, the closest to the \textit{gnostic} idiom of Buddhism. He remarks that in these Neoplatonists’ \textit{gnostic} view, the ultimate reality, both fullness (\textit{plerōma}) and emptiness (\textit{kenosis}), is neither personal nor impersonal; it is rather a ‘contentless knowing’ or ‘knowing as such’.\textsuperscript{120} In other words, the \textit{gnostic} experience of God or knowing of God is beyond those personalist or impersonalist categories: it is a knowing that does not admit a knower or a known; similarly, in the Buddhist idiom there is neither God nor soul.\textsuperscript{121} To help appreciate a possible Christian understanding of the Buddhist denial of God and soul, Pieris introduces the distinction between an \textit{icon} and an \textit{idol}: theological concepts, such as God, Person, Trinity, Creator and Redeemer, do not offer us a true description of God but are ‘signs’ by which we may reach God; to accept them as definite descriptions of God, by reason or authority, is \textit{idolatry}; these concepts must be regarded as \textit{icons}, which are neither God nor images of God; they are rather vehicles of his presence and power, a means by which God comes to us and acts on us.\textsuperscript{122} To Pieris, this is what

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\item \textsuperscript{118} See Ibid., p. 117.
\item \textsuperscript{119} See Ibid., p. 119.
\item \textsuperscript{120} See Ibid., p. 118.
\item \textsuperscript{121} In his \textit{Mahāyāna Theology}, Keenan presents a similar view: God is known not by affirming the divine essence as the Almighty, but only in unknowing, by emptying the mind of all images and words; God can be characterized neither as being nor as nonbeing, neither as personal nor as impersonal. He points out that the Buddhist notion of the ultimate is in deep harmony with this apophatic tradition of Christian theology. To him, it is a mistake that Christians always and everywhere have upheld an essentialist idea of selfhood. He argues that the common Christian assertion of human contingency (creatureliness) means that human beings do not possess their being, but only participate in it from moment to moment as the Buddhist no-self theory maintains. Hence, to Keenan, the differences between the Buddhist teaching on no-self and the Christian doctrine of soul are not mutually exclusive, but derived from different historical and cultural contexts; and the differences between Christian and Buddhist understandings of the ultimate are also cultural and historical, not mutually exclusive. He insists that the Christian doctrine that objectifies God is a matter of skillful use of conventional theological language, not of identifying absolute categories. See John, P. Keenan, \textit{The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology} (New York: Orbis, 1989), pp. 197-205. For another illuminating discourse on the same issue, see Lynn A. de Silva, \textit{The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity} (Colombo: the Study Centre for Religion and Society, 1975).
\item \textsuperscript{122} See Pieris, ‘Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism’, p. 119, quoted from Hilary
Buddhists are telling Christians through their phrase of no God, no soul.

To better understand this position, we must look at early Buddhist teachings, where the salvific experience of final liberation is expressed in ‘non-personalist’ terms, predominantly in gnostic categories but not excluding the agapeic aspects. In early Buddhism, the ordinary way of cognition \((viññāna \text{ and } saññā)\) is considered a proliferating process \((papañca)\), deeply linked to the notion of self \((atta)\) with the unwholesome emotions of craving \((tañha)\), conceit \((māna)\) and dogmatic belief \((diṭṭhi)\); this cognitive process leads one to bondage and suffering \((dukkha)\). It is emphasized that in order to attain final liberation \((nibbāna)\), this ordinary process of cognition must be transcended by the higher knowledge \((abhiññā, pariññā, \text{ or } paññā)\).

True Buddhist knowledge or wisdom \((paññā)\) is to penetrate the reality with full comprehension \((pāramī)\); it is the emancipating insight \((vippasanna)\) to see things as they are \((yathābhūtam)\) as impermanent \((anicca)\), suffering \((dukkha)\), and unsubstantial \((anatta)\). It is a self transforming knowledge that comes only through the sincere practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. At the end of this path, one can attain the twofold highest knowledge \((sammañña \text{ and } samma-vimutti)\); and the final stage attained by such a comprehensive wisdom \((paññā)\) is called nibbāna. It is asserted that the arahants, who have attained nibbāna, are full of compassion \((karunā)\) to others.\(^{123}\)

Pieris remarks that the core experience of nibbāna is often described in the Pali canon as the complete eradication of three evil roots: (1) \(rāga\) which is an erotic, sensual, selfish and acquisitive desire, the opposite of Christian agape; (2) \(dosa\) which is hatred and ill will, again the very negation of agape; and (3) \(moha\) which is delusion, slowness of mind, and ignorance of the saving truth. Thus, he emphasizes that two out of these three unwholesome roots are the absence of what Christians call love \((agape)\) and the third is the absence of gnostic.\(^{124}\) In the gnostic idiom of the Pali

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\(^{123}\) See In-gun Kang, ‘The Realistic and Practical Nature of Early Buddhism’, unpublished MA thesis (Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, 2007), pp. 18-26, 31-6, 44.

\(^{124}\) See Pieris, ‘Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism’, p. 117.
texts, the most positive notions are evoked by negative language; so, the most frequent definition of nibbāṇa is arāga, adosa, and amoha—that is, non-selfish love, non-hatred (forgiving love), and non-delusion (liberative knowledge). Hence, Pieris calls it the ‘Buddhist agape’ or the ‘gnostic agape’. In other words, the constitutive dimension of the Buddhist nirvanic experience is gnosis; but, it cannot take place without agapeic love.\textsuperscript{125} He also recalls that, in all Buddhist schools, wisdom (paññā) and compassion (karuṇā) are regarded as complementary terms referring to the essence of final liberation.\textsuperscript{126} To Pieris, the former is ‘salvific knowledge’ implying disengagement from saṃsāra or the world of sin and sorrow; and the latter is ‘redeeming love’ which engages the Buddha in the psycho-social life of people; hence, the Buddha’s posture toward the world is summed up in gnostic detachment (paññā) and agapeic involvement (karuṇā).\textsuperscript{127} Pieris emphasizes, however, that love (karuṇā) has no salvific value in itself in the Buddhist soteriology; it is always sapiential knowledge or wisdom (paññā) that reaches the ocean of nibbāṇa, although it is always accompanied by love.\textsuperscript{128}

Thus, to Pieris, the dominant idiom for the Buddhist experience of liberation is gnosis, into which the language of love (karuṇā) is integrated; whereas the dominant idiom of Christian soteriology is agape, into which the language of wisdom (sapientia) is integrated. He argues that the major obstacle to dialogue is not idiomatic differences but the failure to acknowledge the reciprocity of these two terms as the legitimate ‘salvific’ languages of the spirit, either the human spirit as in Buddhism or the divine Spirit as in Christianity.\textsuperscript{129} Therefore, he advocates a Buddhist-Christian dialogue, which takes place at the level of the liberating core of each religion. He emphasizes that, to enter into this core-to-core dialogue, one must be aware of the three levels or stages of each religion: (1) the primordial experience that has originated a given religion; (2) the collective memory of that experience, stored up in religious traditions, rites, beliefs and practices; (3) the interpretation of

\textsuperscript{125} See Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} See Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} See Ibid., pp. 117-8.
\textsuperscript{128} See Ibid., p. 118.
\textsuperscript{129} See Ibid., p. 111.
that experience in philosophical, theological, and exegetical schools.130

Pieris points out that dialogue at the third level is a necessary preparation for the core-to-core dialogue at the second level. But, in order to make a breakthrough into the core experience of the other religion, one must go beyond the interpretative stage, and consult the collective memory of that religion by engaging with its scriptures, rituals, and spiritual-social practices. This is what he calls *communicatio in sacris*—a participatory experience in other religious traditions to appreciate one’s own inner dynamics.131 He gives two concrete examples: one is the Christian experience of Buddhist meditation under the guidance of a competent monk, as Pieris himself had during his doctoral studies; the other is the experience of the Christian Workers’ Fellowship—Buddhists celebrating the Easter rites with Christians, and Christians joining Buddhists during the Vesak festival, both groups perceiving the ‘liberative core’ of each religion in their common struggle for social liberation.132 He holds that, at the core level of encounter, Christians recognize their own *gnostic* experience along with a more prophetic (*agapeic*) tradition, while Buddhists also learn their own *agapeic* aspect along with a more mystical (*gnostic*) tradition. In other words, to Pieris, the core-to-core dialogue integrates the mystico-ritual encounter into the socio-prophetic commitment. He is convinced that this integration truly happens within the *basic human communities*, where Christians join Buddhists in their *gnostic detachment* (voluntary poverty); and Buddhists join the Christian *agapeic involvement* in their social action against forced poverty.133

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130 Ibid., p. 120. For the detailed explanation of these three stages in Buddhism and Christianity, see Pieris, ‘Comparative Study of Buddhism and Christianity: Notes on Methodology’, in *Prophetic Humour in Buddhism and Christianity*, pp. 107-23.


133 See Ibid., p. 135.
The three key concepts, *cosmic-metacosmic, enreligionization, and gnosis-agape*, are distinguished but intrinsically correlated to each other, shaping the basic features of Pieris’ dialogical integrationist radical orthopraxis. As we have seen, his constant engagement with Buddhism goes beyond the academic, intellectual, or interpretative level; it enters into the participatory experience of the Theravada tradition in Sri Lanka, which is ingrained in the lives of the rural poor with the dynamic of *cosmic-metacosmic* religiosity. His own experience of *double baptism*—Buddhist meditation and the Christian Workers’ Fellowship—confirms his theories of *enreligionization* and core-to-core dialogue (*gnosis-agape*). On the basis of his experiential, practical and liberative insights, Pieris has worked to establish a theology which makes sense to Asian people living in their particular complex socio-political and religio-cultural situation. The essence of the Asian complexity is that neither *poverty* nor *religiosity* can be reduced to purely ‘economic’ or ‘cultural’ categories. As Pieris sharply points out, Asian religions are inextricably interwoven with the issue of poverty; and the Christian praxis for the liberation of the poor in Asia is possible only through humble immersion into the liberative streams of other religions. This is a new hermeneutic which challenges the one-sided claims of both inculturationists and liberationists in the circle of Asian theology.

The implications of Pieris' new hermeneutic for our thesis are significant. In our search for an interreligious liberative spirituality, especially a Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action in modern Theravada society, we have found Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialist approach as a prominent Buddhist model of radical orthopraxis which integrates the forest monk tradition with Buddhist social activities. From Pieris’ dialogical integrationist perspective, however, Buddhadāsa does not sufficiently engage with the concrete context of the suffering poor; he is not rooted in the different levels of living experience among the poor. As we noted in the last part, Buddhadāsa disregards popular religious practices in the Theravada tradition as superstitious belief, which he thinks has deadened the Buddhist core experience of...
liberation. His radical orthopraxis, therefore, is based on the particular view of the cultural heritage of his upbringing. To some extent, his view reflects an atomized, functional, and reductionist concept of culture and religion as developed in the West over the last two centuries. The main point of this view is to distinguish religion from culture and reduce it to a mere aspect of human culture. As we have seen, however, Pieris points out that religion and culture have never split in Asia; they are well integrated into a single system of religiosity. Nevertheless, Buddhadasa tries to purify Buddhism of ‘cultural’ elements, which he regards as unscientific and non-Buddhist customs. Hence, his radical orthopraxis is an attempt to distil a ‘pure’ form of the original Buddhist practice from the cultural heritage added later on in history.

In contrast, to Pieris, popular religious practices are not problematic but a liberative drive of the poor. He emphasizes that the primordial experience of any religion must be communicated in various forms of cultural idioms and practices, so as to be regenerated according to historical context; if a religious tradition fails to communicate its core experience to following generations, it disappears from history. In his view, all Asian religions reveal the story of people’s engagement through a particular metacosmic religion with its own cosmic cultural roots. To Pieris, therefore, radical orthopraxis does not mean to eradicate the cosmic roots of a metacosmic soteriology—which is actually impossible, but to discern the liberative aspects of a given religious culture and mobilize them for human liberation. Thus, his radical orthopraxis is based on a more holistic, relational, and integral concept of culture and religion. To Pieris, it is inconceivable to pursue liberation without engaging with the real context of the life of the poor, which is full of popular religious practices, containing both liberative and enslaving elements.

Thus, Pieris emphasizes the religio-cultural and socio-political significance of the grassroots community among the poor as the key for liberation, whereas Buddhadasa stresses that liberation must begin with a Buddhist practice of mindful awareness and develop into engaged praxis. Both agree that the religious practice or radical orthopraxis builds up the virtue of holy living, which is not simply directed towards transcendental reality but towards the good of the whole, in awareness of the close
harmony of all created reality. They differ, however, in how the personal-spiritual development is related to the wider commitment for socio-political liberation. Buddhadasa promotes a puritanical Buddhist perspective where social engagement is to be a consequence of personal enlightenment. His inclusivist Dhammic view of other religions and interreligious dialogue is also derived from his conviction that the human mind of each individual is the locus of liberation. By contrast, Pieris is convinced that liberation begins with the experience of love and justice in the communities of the poor, in which we learn the dynamic interactions between different religions, without imposing one’s own upon the other. To him, the locus of liberation must be the basic human communities, where the Christian ideal of God’s Kingdom is to be realized through the radical praxis of enreligionization, the core-to-core dialogue with other religions.

This is a new, or ‘revolutionary’ in his own term, ecclesiology, explicitly claiming that the ecclesiological concept of ‘people of God’ must include both Christians and non-Christians. The three key concepts examined have been presented as the hermeneutical basis of this radical theological position. The next chapter will explore how Pieris has developed such a radical ecclesiology, following the spirit of Vatican II which asks for the renewal of the Church by going back to the Christian sources (reditus ad fontes); and how he propounds his innovative interreligious Christology out of the living experience of the new Christian identity in the basic human communities.
Chapter VI

An Interreligious Theology for Liberating Praxis

This chapter aims to systematize Pieris’ theology by exploring his ecclesiological and Christological thought in depth. The previous chapter presented him as a dialogical ‘integrationist’ who has striven to establish a truly Asian theology by bringing both the liberationist and inculturationist approaches into a holistic radical orthopraxis. The basis of this integration is his innovative hermeneutical insights into the poverty-religiosity dynamics which refer to the liberative potential of the cosmic-metacosmic religiosity of the Asian poor. This chapter will show how Pieris applies this dialogical integrationist approach to his radical ecclesiology and Christology. In his search for an Asian way of doing theology or theopraxis, Pieris has discovered the importance of the Church’s humble immersion into the religious experience of the non-Christian poor. The implication is radical: the Church, as the servant of the Kingdom of God, must work with not just baptized Christians, but all the people who live by the spirit of God’s Kingdom. To him, this vision will only be possible when the Church becomes a communion of the basic human communities or the Kingdom communities, the locus of the twofold liberating praxis: the gnostic detachment and the agapeic involvement. Pieris calls this a ‘Christopraxis’ from which his liberation Christology of religious pluralism has been derived. He emphasizes that the salvific meaning of Christ is not to be drawn from metaphysical speculation but to be discovered in the process of liberating praxis, which is always ‘interreligious’ in Asia. He has promoted a symbiotic model of interreligious collaboration for the liberation of the poor, which does not dilute the unique identity of each religion. Thus, in his ecclesiology and Christology, Pieris integrates theory with praxis and Christianity with other religions in the holistic vision of God’s Kingdom which is already present and operative among the poor in Asia.

This chapter examines how Pieris develops such a radical stance out of his critical
reading of the situation of the post-Vatican II Church in Asia. In his opinion, the
Asian churches have not undertaken the continuous renewal that the Supreme
Magisterium of the Second Vatican Council advocated. To him, a key to the renewal
is to become the churches of Asia rather than to remain the local churches in Asia.
This means that the Asian Church must be released from a Romanized and
Westernized form to become a truly universal communion of churches (ecclesia
ecclesiarum) which are culturally diverse, theologically pluralistic, and liturgically
localized.¹ In this chapter, we present Pieris’ ecclesiology as kenotic, emphasizing
his strong conviction that, for its renewal, the Church is to humble itself to become
immersed in the Asian reality of poverty and religiosity. Pieris’ Christology will be
examined as derived from his radical return to the biblical sources as well as his
constant engagement with the Asian religions, especially with Buddhism. We will
demonstrate that, through his own experience in the basic human communities, Pieris
has developed a Covenant Christology which is faithful to the core of Christian
soteriology, while reverential to the liberative core of other religions. In this
Christology, Jesus is presented as the embodiment of the twofold love command,
culminated in his double struggle on the cross: struggle to be poor (gnosis) and
struggle for the poor (agape). To Pieris, it is a Christology that does not compete
with the claims of other religions but complements and challenges them in the one
path of liberation.

Thus, in this chapter, we present the entire scheme of Pieris’ theology as an
‘interreligious’ theology which intends not only to explain the Christian faith in the
Asian context, but to evoke the ‘liberating praxis’ among his Christian and non-
Christian readers. The first two sections deal with the key questions of his
ecclesiology and Christology respectively: (1) A Kenotic Church of Asia: how is the
truly Asian Church, inspired by Vatican II, to reflect the kenosis of Christ? (2) A
Liberation Christology of Religious Pluralism: how does Pieris’ Covenant
Christology cohere with the orthodox faith of the Church and the Asian context of
many religions and many poor? In the third and final section, some critical views on

¹ See Aloysius Pieris, ‘Vatican II as an Exodus from Bondage through Wilderness to Freedom of
Pieris’ theology will be examined for a general evaluation of his radical orthopraxis. The main criticism against Pieris is that he is too radical and anti-traditional. We will argue, however, that Pieris is a truly Catholic theologian who is faithful to his own religious tradition, and yet creative in his approach to other traditions. Finally, we will contrast his dialogical integrationist radical orthopraxis with Buddhadāsa’s puritan Dhammic essentialist approach in preparation for our final chapter, which will bring both these thinkers’ models into creative dialogue.

1. A Kenotic Church of Asia

Since the late 1960s, Pieris has been struggling to help the lay, religious and clerical leaders of the Asian Church actualize the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II in the Asian context. To him, the Second Vatican Council was God’s Kairos, a new Pentecostal event that brought a great hope not only to the Church but also to all the people on earth, especially to the world’s poor. It was the first ever Council of the World-Church, aimed at renewing the Church in all its dimensions through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, so that the Church might truly become a readable sign of God’s Reign in the contemporary world. In this council, according to Pieris, ‘the Church replaced its traditional defensiveness and siege mentality with a dialogically positive approach towards the world beyond the visible confines of the Roman Communion, i.e., other churches, other religions and the secular reality’. To Pieris, it was the Council that went back to the origins of Christianity (reditus ad fontes) in order to rediscover the spirit and structure of the nascent Church and the apostolic

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3 In an influential article, Rahner describes the Second Vatican Council as ‘the first major official event in which the Church actualized itself precisely as a world Church’. He points out that at Vatican II we have for the first time a gathering of the world episcopate, including the indigenous bishops from Africa and Asia, not as an advisory body for the pope but rather, with him and under him, the final teaching and decision-making body in the Church. See Karl Rahner, ‘Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II’, trans. by Leo J. O’Donovan, *Theological Studies*, 40 (1979), 716-27.
tradition as a model for the continuous renewal of the modern Church.5

Pieris argues, however, that the task of incessant renewal of the Church has been halted by the Vatican reactionary curialists in the post-Paul VI era.6 In his view, the hierarchical exercise of power returned and the communion model of Church advocated by Vatican II has remained an unrealized ideal. He remarks that, in Asia, many of the great Church leaders who struggled to implement the vision of Vatican II have passed away and the numbers of conservative bishops have increased. Nevertheless, he believes that God will continue to renew the Asian Church through the basic human communities, in which he sees signs of hope. He considers these frontier communities of the local churches to be the locus of the ‘ecclesiological revolution’ that the Second Vatican Council implied and the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC) has advocated in its documents over the last thirty years.7 As his theory of double baptism anticipates, these communities will bring the kenotic spirit to the whole Asian Church in their humble praxis of interreligious commitment for the liberation of the poor. To Pieris, it is only in the kenotic spirit and praxis that the Church can become an authentic and credible sign of salvation in Asia.

Pieris’ new vision of the kenotic ecclesiology is rooted in the early Church model, revived in the Second Vatican Council. The opposite model is the medieval pyramidal ecclesiology which Pieris believes still operative in the minds of many conservative Church leaders. He points out that even some decrees of the Vatican II documents retain remnants of this medieval ecclesiology because of the conservative reactionary interference during the process of formulating the final drafts.8 He remarks, however, that the Vatican II documents generally reveal the ‘paradigm shift’

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8 See Pieris, ‘The Priest, the Liturgy and the Church: Some Thoughts for the Year of the Presbyter’, in Give Vatican II a Chance, p. 158.
in the three ecclesiological areas: (1) the Church is understood not as the hierarchy but as the People of God; (2) true liturgy is interpreted as the worship of God, oriented towards what Pieris calls the ‘liturgy of life’; (3) the role of priest is emphasized as not on cultic ministry (sacerdos) but on pastoral leadership (presbyter) in the service of God’s word and God’s people.9

Regarding the first point, Pieris emphasizes that the medieval understanding of the Church as ‘hierarchy’, in the sense of the pyramidal structure of ‘sacred rule’, is not found in the New Testament or in the earliest Christian literature. He remarks that the neologism ‘hierarchy’ occurs for the first time in Pseudo-Dionysius as late as the 5th century, portraying the scale of ‘dignity’ and ‘power’ attributed both to celestial beings and the ecclesiastical rulers.10 He points out that the term has become the official designation for the pope, bishops, priests and deacons, distinguishing this clerical class from the laity. He also remarks that the Catholic Church teaches papal primacy as the ‘successor of Peter’ and the authority of bishops as ‘the [sole] successors of the Apostles’; he argues, however, that these clichés are misleading statements that call for qualification.11 In the earliest tradition, according to Pieris, the local bishop of Rome was never called ‘successor of Peter’ or ‘Vicar of Christ’ (Vicarius Christi), but ‘Vicar of Peter and Paul’ (Vicarius Petri et Pauli).12 Hence, he holds that each pope was the successor only of the previous bishop of Rome and the first bishop was not the successor but the vicar of the two apostles who were regarded as the foundation, not the founders, of the Church of Rome, which existed before Peter and Paul arrived there.13 This does not mean that Pieris denies the pastoral leadership of the pope over the whole Church. He rather emphasizes the precise meaning of that leadership in the light of the early Christian tradition:

9 See Ibid., pp. 157-98.
10 See Ibid., p. 159.
11 Ibid. p. 160.
12 Pieris is critical of the inappropriate title, Vicarius Christi, applied to the pope and even to the local bishops today. In his opinion, this title was given by Jesus only to the poor: namely, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the homeless, and the imprisoned (Mt 25, 31-46). See Pieris, ‘Two There Are, Your Holiness: Some Items Suggested for the Next Pope’s Agenda in Line with John Paul II’s Invitation in Ut Unum Sint’, in Give Vatican II a Chance, p. 101.
13 See Pieris, ‘The Priest, the Liturgy and the Church’, p. 160.
Peter, the weak and impetuous character, transformed into a rock and appointed leader over The Twelve by the historical Jesus, cannot exercise his ministry without Paul, the challenger, who had been anointed as the apostle of the frontier by the Spirit of the Risen Lord. Let the pope, once more become the Vicarius Petri et Pauli, in accordance with ancient tradition. […] A centre sensitive to the frontier is the only guarantee of a frontier amenable to the centre. […] The restoration of the Pauline ministry is possible only with the assistance and critical collaboration of the local churches which are in communion with Rome.14

Pieris remarks here that the leadership of the nascent Church was based on the dynamic relationship between the centre and the frontier missions, symbolized by Peter and Paul. He emphasizes that neither of these two apostles was succeeded by a bishop (episcopos) or a presbyter (presbyteros); and nor is there any clear scriptural evidence to show that any of the Twelve Apostles installed himself as the head of a local church as do bishops today.15 In his view, the ‘Twelve Apostles’ cannot have any successors in a strict sense because The Twelve symbolize the New Israel, the Church of Christ, analogous to the Twelve Tribes of the First Israel.16 To him, this Church was a communion of people, the Laos, being gathered to bear witness to Christ’s life, death and resurrection which inaugurated God’s Reign on earth.17 He holds that the ‘mission’ and the ‘authority’ given to this nuclear Church (The Twelve) were continued by various ministries which can be categorized into two groups: the ‘static’ ministry of a localized community leadership, given to overseers (episcopoioi) or elders (presbyteroi); and the ‘mobile’ ministry of a trans-local missionary leadership, exercised by messengers (apostoloi), preachers (prophetai), and teachers (didaskaloi).18 Thus, to Pieris, it was itinerant ministers such as Paul and Barnabas who went to the frontiers, founded ‘churches’, and handed them over to the bishops

15 See Ibid., p. 103.
16 See Pieris, ‘The Priest, the Liturgy and the Church’, p. 161.
17 See Ibid.
(episcopoi) or the pastoral priests (presbyteroi). He emphasizes that this frontier ministry of the nascent Church certainly included many women among its missionaries and Church leaders.\textsuperscript{19}

In the early Church, therefore, argues Pieris, the bishops did \textit{not succeed} the Twelve Apostles but \textit{continued} certain, not all, ministries derived from the mission entrusted to the nuclear Church (\textit{The Twelve}); various ministries were performed by different categories of people endowed with \textit{different charisms}.\textsuperscript{20} He points out that the leadership functions of bishops and presbyters meant no difference in rank or power; by the end of the second century, however, the bishops seemed to have absorbed other ministries into their office.\textsuperscript{21} He remarks that the episcopal monolith was definitely entrenched from the fourth century, with the great wave of Latin-Romanization, branding the office of the bishops and priests with the almost indelible identity-mark it retains even today.\textsuperscript{22}

Hence, according to Pieris, the Church came to be identified with ‘hierarchy’, while ‘obedience to the Church’ meant the submission of all others to the bishops, the sole successors of the Twelve Apostles; the laity came to be mere subjects, recipients and spectators, who participated in silence in the sacramental liturgy that dispensed the means of salvation.\textsuperscript{23} In his view, \textit{monasticism} was an alternative \textit{lay} movement, which resumed the suppressed frontier missions of the early Church, on the margins of the hierarchy; however, even monasticism succumbed to the hierarchical tendency, following the second wave of feudalization in the Middle Ages. Pieris describes this situation of the pyramidization of the Church as follows:

So we have since then not only a clerical elite engaged in ‘sanctifying others’ through the administration of sacraments but also a religious elite pre-occupied with ‘sanctifying themselves’ through ascetical practices. The laity were the

\textsuperscript{19} See Ibid., p.106.
\textsuperscript{20} See Pieris, ‘The Priest, the Liturgy and the Church’, p. 162.
\textsuperscript{21} See Ibid., p. 160.
\textsuperscript{22} See Ibid., p. 162.
\textsuperscript{23} See Ibid., p. 163.
non-professional clients who lived at the base of the pyramid profiting by the ritual ministrations of the clergy and the spiritual ministrations of the monks. Also in the area of faith, the same elite group assisted by the emergent class of theologians determined the doctrines and dogmas which ensured the correctness of belief among the laity.24

To Pieris, it is the Second Vatican Council that brought a radical change to this medieval paradigm, despite the persistence of old habits of thought in some decrees of its documents. He asserts that the Council struggled to flatten the pyramidal structure of the hierarchy and to spell out the ‘communion ecclesiology’ as the ideal the Church is to realize (LG, 9, 13, 15, 49-51); hence, in its documents, the Church is redefined not as the hierarchy but as the People of God, consisting of the laity, religious and clergy, who share in the priestly, prophetic and royal functions of Christ (LG, 30-31).25 Pieris also emphasizes that this Council advocated the principles of the ‘universal call to holiness’ (LG 39-42) and the ‘common indefectible faith’ of God’s People (sensus fidelium) (LG 12), in contrast to the medieval understanding of class-based holiness and faith.26 In his opinion, however, this ecclesiology remains a mere ideal, unrealized even to this day:

Millennially solidified structures resist radical renovation. An honest attempt was made in the post-Vatican II era to establish a permanently collaborative communion between the primacy of the pope and the collegiality of the bishops, between the episcopate and the presbyterium, and between the presbyters and laity. But the purely consultative role that the bishops play in the Synods, the ministerial priests in the presbyterium and the laity in Parish Councils demonstrate that this reform does not reflect the ‘communion model’. Besides, even this half-hearted reform is restricted to three levels in the pyramid: pope/bishops, bishops/presbyters, and presbyters/laity! We must hope for and work for that grace-filled day when laymen and lay-women chosen

24 Ibid., p. 164.
25 See Ibid., p. 165.
26 See Ibid., p. 166.
from each local church would join their bishops and presbyters to deliberate
together on ecclesial and other matters with the Bishop of Rome in a manner
that manifests a *discipleship of equals*; that day, the communion ecclesiology
of Vatican II will have registered a modest beginning!  

Pieris sees a small sign of hope in the New Roman-Rite Missal (*Novus Ordo*) of Paul
VI in 1970, which made room for a new model of celebrating the Eucharist and other
sacraments. To Pieris, the New Rite (*Novus Ordo*) is not a set of rubrics such as
governed the Tridentine Mass, but a new orientation which lays the emphasis on the
Word of God and the People of God in the enactment of the Paschal Mystery, in
accordance with the renewing spirit of Vatican II. He remarks that the Word of God,
which used to be read in Latin by the priest for himself individually in the past, came
to be *proclaimed* and *explained* in the vernacular language of the people; and, just as
the early Church celebrated the Eucharist around a table, not on a high altar, the New
Rite has brought the table back to the centre of the People of God. He points out
that, unlike the Tridentine Rite in which the clergy identified with the ‘Church’
saying mass in Latin towards an altar, the New Rite emphasizes that a priest cannot
turn his back to the People. To Pieris, this means that a priest ‘has to face them, hear
their voice, learn from them, share their anxieties, and provide them with
nourishment from God’s Word and the Bread of Life’. Hence, he argues that the
recent clamour for the restoration of the Latin mass, associated with the conservative
trends of ritualism and individualism, is exactly opposite to all these innovative
liturgical reforms. Pieris is convinced that the Second Vatican Council has inspired
the Church to celebrate a *true liturgy* in the sense of the *worship of God* through
Christ in the Spirit by the whole priestly People of God.

There is a ritualistic phrase, however, which Pieris considers one of the deficiencies

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27 Ibid., p. 167.
21-4.
29 See Ibid., pp. 22-3.
30 Ibid., p. 23.
or inaccuracies in the Vatican II documents: ‘the liturgy is the *summit* toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the *font* from which all her power flows’ (SC, 10). In other words, liturgy is the *source* and *summit* of all the Church’s activities such as the works of love, piety and apostolate (SC, 9). Pieris insists that this exaggerated statement must be understood in the context of the pre-Conciliar liturgical movement, led by Benedictine monks, which emphasized the *common liturgical prayer of the Church* as the ‘source and summit’ of authentic Christian spirituality, against the medieval emphasis on *contemplation* or *personal mystical prayer* as the ‘source and summit’ of the experience of God. He argues that this statement should be complemented by the unambiguous affirmation of *the common baptismal priesthood of all the faithful*, which admits both the *rite of worship* and *daily life as worship* (SC, 14; LG, 10). To Pieris, this Council has left ample room for the Church to develop an *authentic worship* to God by living out the Paschal Mystery *non-ritually* in our day-to-day life, enacting the ‘liturgy of life’.

Pieris elucidates the meaning of ‘authentic worship’ by contrasting the two biblical concepts ‘liturgy’ and ‘worship’. He remarks that the Greek term *leitourgia*, whence the English ‘liturgy’, is translated from the Hebrew word *sheret*, referring to the Levitical ‘rites and rituals’ as part of the temple cult or the pagan cults; in contrast, the Hebrew word for ‘worship’ in the Scriptures is *abodah* which means work, labour, or service, referring to the core biblical concept of ‘worship/service of God’ (*abodat YHWH*). He points out that the command to ‘serve’ (*abad*) the Lord is interchangeable with the command to ‘love’ (*ahab*) the Lord in the Bible; so, to *worship* God means to *love* and *serve* the Lord. Hence, to Pieris, human works performed as ‘service’ become true *worship*; on the contrary, exploited labour is not service but *slavery*. He remarks that this is why the prophets denounce any rites and rituals which were not concerned with justice towards the oppressed; to them, true worship is fidelity to the covenant, obedience to God, and the practice of justice.

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32 See Pieris, ‘The Priest, the Liturgy and the Church’, pp. 170-1.
33 See Ibid., p. 172.
34 See Ibid.
35 See Ibid., p. 173.
36 See Ibid.
37 See Ibid., p. 175.
rather than external sacrifices (Amos 5, 22-24; Isaiah 1, 10-20). In the same line, argues Pieris, Jesus preached an anti-temple, anti-ritual type of worship (John 4, 19-26): that is, the fidelity to the new covenant, the twofold love commandment. He points out that Jesus summed up his message of **abodah** at the last supper by washing the feet of his disciples; and in narrating this event, the author of John’s gospel cleverly de-ritualizes the Eucharist, showing **service and worship in one**. In other words, to Pieris, it is in **worship as loving service** that the true discipleship is measured; all rites and rituals are subordinate to that supreme goal. Hence, to him, the ‘liturgy of life’—the day-to-day involvement in love and service, especially towards the needy through whom Jesus reveals himself—is the real ‘source and summit’ of both personal prayers and liturgical activities.

These new paradigms of Church structure and liturgy, argues Pieris, also ask for changes in the concept of priesthood. He remarks that the Second Vatican Council tried to articulate both the old concept of ‘cultic priest’ (**sacerdos**) and the new concept of ‘pastoral priest’ (**presbyter**) in two separate documents. To Pieris, this means that the Council Fathers themselves began to learn the new concept, and call for the Church to continue this learning process through its own implementation of what Vatican II recovered from the early Christian practice. He points out that the first meaning of priest is accepted in the New Testament but applied only to Christ and to the whole Church as his body: Christ is the Chief Priest (**archiereus**) and every Christian is a co-priest with him; furthermore, Christ and Christians are not only ‘co-priests’ but also ‘co-victims’ who offer themselves to God. Hence, Pieris argues that the later idea of the **cultic priest** who offers the Eucharist sacrifice **on behalf** of the lay people was completely alien to the nascent Church. In his view, this is why Vatican II returned to the early Christian belief in the **one victim-priesthood** of

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38 See Ibid., p. 174.
40 See Pieris, ‘The Priest, the Liturgy and the Church’, pp. 176-7.
41 See Ibid., p. 177.
42 The names of these two documents are: *Optatam Totius* (Decree on Priestly Training) which uses the cultic term **sacerdos** for priest; and *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests) which consistently refers to priests as pastoral **presbyteri** rather than **sacerdotes**. See Ibid., p. 178.
43 See Ibid., p. 179.
the Church together with its head (Christ); and in the *common priesthood* of all the faithful who are called to *self-oblation* for their ‘reconciliation’ with God and among themselves.\(^{44}\) To Pieris, only as the *communion of reconciled people* can the Church become a ‘universal sacrament of salvation’ in the world (GS, 45).\(^{45}\)

It is the other concept of priesthood, according to Pieris, that indicates the early Christian understanding of priest as *presbyteros* (elder), translated from the Hebrew *hazqenim*, a technical term for ‘community leader’ exercising a pastoral role.\(^{46}\) He remarks that this original usage of the term was positively adapted to designate the Christian ministers, whose mission was to shepherd the local churches. He emphasizes that the primary role of these *pastoral priests* was not to perform the cultic liturgy, but to lead God’s *priestly* people as their *pastors*, or more precisely, as their ‘servants’ (*diakonoi*).\(^{47}\) To Pieris, the liturgical role of the presbyter was the *consequence* and *not the purpose* of his ordination.\(^{48}\) He remarks, however, that the Church’s assimilation of Rome’s pagan ritualism and sacerdotalism increased the clerical monopoly of the liturgy and the trend of the priestly ordination exclusively for the purpose of offering the Eucharistic sacrifice.\(^{49}\) He asserts that Vatican II recovered the early Christian concept of *presbyter*, with its emphasis on the *prophetic mission* of the priest to *preach* God’s Word, thereby to *build up* the People of God (PO, 4). To Pieris, this means that all presbyters must follow the example of Jesus, the Word and the Prophet, who chose to be a ‘suffering-servant’ rather than a triumphant ruler; who enjoined his disciples to be *servant-leaders*, unlike the rulers of gentiles in the Roman Empire (Mt 20, 25-28).\(^{50}\)

Thus, to Pieris, all three points of the new ecclesiological paradigm—the Church as the People of God; liturgy as the true worship of God; and pastoral priesthood as the servant-leadership—indicate the *modest* and *humble* spirit of Vatican II. He points

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\(^{44}\) See Ibid., p. 180.

\(^{45}\) See Ibid.

\(^{46}\) See Ibid.

\(^{47}\) See Ibid.

\(^{48}\) See Ibid., p. 181.

\(^{49}\) See Ibid., p. 182.

\(^{50}\) See Ibid., p. 185.
out that this Council referred to the Church as ‘sinful’ and ‘needing constant reform’ while affirming that the Kingdom of God is a much bigger reality than the Catholic Church; its documents acknowledge the positive values of other churches and other religions in God’s salvific plan for the whole of humanity; and the Church is described as a ‘Pilgrim Church’ or a mere ‘seed’ of God’s Reign which slowly grows and strains towards the completed Kingdom (LG, 5. 16. 48; NA, 2). It is in this humble recognition of the Church’s own limitation that Pieris sees the most outstanding contribution of this Council to the local churches in Asia. He remarks that since the 1970s, there have been many Asian versions of the Eucharist being celebrated in small circles, which anticipate the new ‘dominant-free’ or ‘de-clericalized’ communion model of the Church that Vatican II inspired.\(^{51}\) Thus, Pieris and his Asian colleagues have striven to develop the Asian version of a *kenotic* ecclesiology, by participating in the *Asian reality*, by celebrating their discoveries *liturgically*, and by reflecting *theologically* on their experiences.\(^{52}\)

Pieris recognizes, however, that the churches *in* Asia have suffered a *crisis* of ‘authority’ or ‘credibility’ and the cause of this crisis is not only the past missionary activities associated with colonial imperialism, but also the failure of the indigenous clergies in their mission to establish a truly local Church *of* Asia. So, he argues that the churches *in* Asia cannot automatically become the churches *of* Asia merely by shifting leadership from the Western missionaries to the local clergies; in other words, ‘an indigenous clergy is not necessarily a sign of an indigenous church’.\(^{53}\) To Pieris, the real sign of the truly Asian Church is its *kenotic* presence in the Asian reality and its constant *witness* to the Christ in poverty and humility:

> The Church has to recuperate its humble position in the plan of salvation. Like all human mediations, it is subjected to the law of growth and decay, of sin and

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\(^{52}\) See Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, p. xv.

grace, of death and resurrection. To pretend otherwise is self-deception and a
denial of the Cross and the status of servant that Jesus took for himself and for
all those, people as well as institutions, who want to follow him to the end. The
Church in Asia has been poor often, persecuted in many places and for long
periods of time, powerless and almost invisible in not a few places. To their
credit, many bishops and other religious figures in Asia have been happy with
this humble being of the Church. This is the image of the Church of Christ that
makes most sense in Asia; a Church at home in the poverty of the masses and
the never discriminating hospitality of hope.\textsuperscript{56}

This ideal of a humble (\textit{kenotic}) Church of Asia, according to Pieris, can be realized
effectively through pastoral work, which is basically and radically an encounter, an
ongoing effort to become \textit{empty of the self} in hearing about the other’s worries, joys,
questions, despairs, and hopes.\textsuperscript{55} He points out that the relationship between pastoral
‘service’ and ‘emptiness’ makes absolute sense in the Buddhist tradition of selfless
wisdom (\textit{paññ\ñ}) and compassion (\textit{karun\ñ}).\textsuperscript{56} He argues, however, that many Asian
ecclesiastics have lost their authority because of their yearning for visible success,
influence and power; their interest is more in the Church’s norms, obligations and
doctrines than in communion, service and hospitality.\textsuperscript{57} Hence, he insists that it is
only by changing their attitude to becoming a \textit{self-emptying} and \textit{self-giving} leader
that they can recover their lost credibility; most non-Christian Asians will never
understand how a ‘humble Church’ can so easily dismiss ‘other ways of salvation’ or
put them down as ‘lesser than ours’.\textsuperscript{58} He holds that, in the interreligious encounter,
Christians are to be transformed from judging others to being judged themselves.\textsuperscript{59}
To Pieris, this is not a crisis but an opportunity for the Asian Christians to establish
the \textit{kenotic} communities—the foundation of the authentic Church of Asia.

\textsuperscript{55} See Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{56} See Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} See Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} See Ibid., 66.
The key to this truly Asian Church is the radical orthopraxis of *enreligionization*, which in the last chapter we explained is to be the humble Christian immersion into the Asian reality of poverty and religiosity, with the spirit of *double baptism* and the liberative praxis of *gnostic* detachment and *agapeic* involvement. Pieris is convinced that this praxis of liberation has been taking place in the *basic human communities* at the periphery of the official churches. To him, this means that there is a tension between the *centre* and the *frontier* missions, just as there was in the early Church. He asserts that the official churches in Asia can retrieve their lost authority only when they become the *centre* of the communion of basic human communities, whose members are Christian and non-Christian *frontier* workers along with the poor, most of whom are non-Christians.  

Hence, the Church leaders must humble themselves and *learn from the Asian poor*, who constitute the majority of these new ecclesial communities and of the total population of Asia: this is what Pieris calls the *magisterium of the poor*, the third magisterium besides the other two magisteria of the episcopate and the theologians.

To Pieris, ‘the poor’ primarily designates those who are destitute, dispossessed, displaced, and discriminated against. He emphasizes, however, that they are not poor in the Marxist sense of ‘social class’ (proletariat) but in the biblical sense of the oppressed, marginalized, pauperized and humiliated ‘non-people’ (*anawim* or *ochlos*) who are called by God to be a ‘people’ (*laos*). He remarks that ‘the poor’ in the Gospel indicates those who are *socially excluded* (lepers), *religiously ostracized* (prostitutes and publicans), *culturally subjugated* (women and children), *socially dependent* (widows and orphans), *physically handicapped* (the deaf and dumb, the maimed, and the blind), *psychologically tormented* (the demoniacs and epileptics), and *spiritually humble* (the God-fearing simple folk and repentant sinners). To Pieris, it is not enough to consider the poor mere recipients of Christian ministry or

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the perpetual objects of its compassion; they must be seen as those through whom God shapes our salvation history.\textsuperscript{64} To him, this is by no means to justify, sanctify, or ‘romanticize’ the poor in their misery; they are rather sinners and powerless, as the above list demonstrates. Yet, in his view, the fact remains that God chose and still chooses them as God’s Covenant partners, not above others but for others:

Being poor and powerless and being rejected as sinful and worthless is the criterion of their election! This seems to be the general pattern of election recorded in the Bible. […] A divine election is not a reason for exclusivism because election is for mission, that is to say, one is chosen not above others but for others. The powerless are chosen to confound the powerful, the poor are summoned to mediate the salvation of the rich, and the weak are called to liberate the strong. […] The salvation of the poor depends on their fidelity to the mission for which they are elected. […] This is not an easy task for them. Hence those who are poor by circumstances have to be “conscientized” into their God-given role and awakened from their passivity by the ministry of those who are poor by choice.\textsuperscript{65}

Thus, to Pieris, biblical liberation is not a mere class struggle but the God-encounter between the two groups of the poor, the voluntarily poor and the forced poor, who are commissioned to build a ‘community’ that bears witness to the presence of God’s Reign on earth and its permanent growth until the end of the world. He recalls that Moses was called to this mission and renounced his privileged position; identifying himself with the oppressed, he led them to become a Messianic People. He points out that this people (Israel) often failed in the mission for which they were chosen; but, there were always the Prophets and the ‘remnant poor’ who carried out their mission. He emphasizes that the Church also was founded as a community of ‘the little ones’ even though, within a few decades, it began to be transformed into the powerful Roman Church; God continues to call on prophetic communities from the

\textsuperscript{64} See Pieris, ‘A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?’, p. 122.  
\textsuperscript{65} Pieris, The Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary, p. 21.
remnants who never give up the hope for salvation that comes with the secrets of God’s Reign (Mt 11, 25-30).66

Pieris holds that the basic ecclesial communities in Latin America and the basic human communities in Asia are the contemporary examples of the Kingdom-community. To him, the renewal of the Church as a whole depends on the growth of these grassroots basic communities (ecclesiolae) in which he finds seeds of an ecclesiological revolution.67 Pieris argues that, in Asia, the goal of the Church’s evangelizing mission can be achieved only through the basic human communities:

To evangelize Asia, in other words, is to evoke in the poor the liberative dimension of Asian religiousness, Christian and non-Christian. For the unevangelized poor tend to reduce religion to an opiate, to struggle without hope, and to submit too easily to the religious domination of the elite class. The Asian dilemma, then, can be summed up as follows: the theologians are not (yet) poor; and the poor are not (yet) theologians! This dilemma can be resolved only in the local churches of Asia—that is, in the grassroot communities where the theologians and the poor become culturally reconciled through a process of mutual evangelization. This reciprocal exposure to the gospel consists in this, that the theologians are awakened into the liberative dimension of poverty and the poor are conscientized into the liberative potentialities of their religiousness. Thus, if there is any model of a local church for Asians, it should be in those Asian communities.68

Pieris has advocated this kenotic, interreligious and prophetic ecclesiology to help the Church leaders find the right direction in the evangelizing mission in Asia. At the level of local magisterial documentation, the Asian bishops fully support the new ecclesiological vision and praxis that Pieris and his Asian colleagues promote, as
witnessed in the document of the FABC in 2000. To Pieris, it is the vision of God’s Reign for God’s poor drawn from two inseparable biblical insights: (1) wherever God is loved and served, it is the poor that rule, and not poverty; (2) wherever the poor are loved and served, it is God who rules, not Mammon. He emphasizes that this belief in God’s covenant with the poor against Mammon must be the foundation of any theological thought and praxis in Asia. In his opinion, this vision and belief asks the Asian Christians to become ‘humble companions’ of their fellow Asian pilgrims of other religions in the journey towards the full realization of justice and peace on earth. He holds that this is the paschal journey of the Christian kenosis to meet the ‘suffering Christ’ in the Asian poor, expressed in various names: the Indian Christ of the broken people (Dalits); the Korean Christ of the han-ridden people (Minjung); and the breast-feeding Christa of Asian women. To Pieris, it is only in the kenotic Church of the basic human communities that such forms of Asian Christology can emerge and appeal to the Asians. His own version of Asian Christology is called ‘Covenant Christology’ or ‘Liberation Christology of Religious Pluralism’, which is faithful to the core of the Christian tradition and makes sense in the Asian context, as will be examined in the following section.

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70 Pieris, God’s Reign for God’s Poor, p. 36.

71 See Pieris, ‘Does Christ Have a Place in Asia?’, in Fire and Water, pp. 69-73.
2. A Liberation Christology of Religious Pluralism

In Chapter V, we noted that Pieris is critical of the two models of Christological thought in Asia: the Christ against religions and the Christ of religions. The former originated from the Western missionaries during the colonial period and continued among the developmentalists and liberationists in the 1960s and 1970s. The latter was initiated by Indian theologians in the late 19th century, and has been prevalent among the inculturationist scholars and ashramites. To Pieris, both models have failed to appeal to the mind and heart of the Asian poor. The inculturationist Christ is not concerned with the harsh reality of the suffering people in Asia, while the liberationist Christ is ignorant of the religious experiences of the non-Christian poor in Asia. While criticizing their limitations, Pieris integrates the positive insights of these two models into a holistic, interreligious and liberative Christopraxis. This dialogical integrationist approach is also found in his reinterpretation of the orthodox Christology of the Church: his critical view of the traditionalist position, set in the Chalcedonian formula, however, does not defy the very truth behind that formula; Pieris rather integrates the same truth into a radial Christopraxis, drawn from the biblical message of love, and from his dialogical engagement with Asian poverty and religiosity. It is through his own experience of interreligious radical orthopraxis in the basic human communities that Pieris has been able to deconstruct old paradigms and construct a new paradigm of Asian Christology.

Pieris starts with the contention that the phraseology of the Chalcedonian dogma does not appear to be relevant to the life of Asia for two reasons. Firstly, its highbrow idioms borrowed from Greek philosophy present too abstract a definition of Christ, which is ‘irrelevant and peripheral from the point of view of what really constitutes the uniqueness of the person and mission of Jesus’. Secondly, its presentation of Christ as a god-man can be mistaken as ‘an incarnation of one of the many “cosmic

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72 See Chapter V, pp. 168-73.
73 Pieris, The Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary, p.12.
powers” (devas) to whom some Asian religions refuse to grant a salvific status’.\textsuperscript{74} Thus, to Pieris, ‘the Chalcedonian formula sounds meaningless when translated (if translation is possible) into many Asian languages’.\textsuperscript{75} Despite these critical and provocative words, Pieris does not mean to reject the orthodox truth of the Chalcedonian doctrine; on the contrary, he strives to elucidate the real meaning of that truth in a new Christological formula, which appeals to the Asian people. In his sincere belief in Jesus as truly God and truly Human, Pieris expresses his solidarity with the orthodox faith of the Church, formulated in Chalcedon.\textsuperscript{76} He nevertheless argues that Chalcedon gives only a basic framework for the profession of the Christian faith, not a complete formulation of everything that needs to be said. What he is against is the Western Patriarchate that considers the Chalcedonian formula to be the absolute and complete doctrine which defines the ‘uniqueness of Christ’, essential to the profession of the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{77}

Pieris argues that the salvific meaning of Christ is rather to be drawn from the universal reference of that uniqueness, as discerned in the biblical account of Jesus as the new covenant, the embodiment of the twofold love commands which sum up the Law and the Prophets, the whole range of revelation and salvation.\textsuperscript{78} He points out that this message of love, the core of Christian faith, is absent from the abstract Chalcedonian formula. To Pieris, the distinction is clear: traditionalists, thinking within the Chalcedonian frame of mind, uphold that faith is primarily to believe the truths revealed by God and accurately formulated by the Church, for the satisfaction of an intellectual search (fides quaerens intellectum); in contrast, the new paradigm holds that true faith is fidelity to the Covenant with God who is our Love and our Salvation—it is the faith that hopes for liberation (fides sperans salutem) as promised by the faithful God.\textsuperscript{79} He asserts that any intellectual understanding of Christ that does not lead to a soteriological praxis is meaningless; and the salvific Truth of Christ is to be revealed to the poor and the humble, who hear, recognize and

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p. 13.  
\textsuperscript{75} Pieris, ‘Universality of Christianity?’, \textit{VJTR}, 57 (1993), 595.  
\textsuperscript{76} See Pieris, \textit{The Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary}, p. 14.  
\textsuperscript{77} See Ibid., pp. 14-5.  
\textsuperscript{78} See Ibid., p. 15.  
\textsuperscript{79} See Ibid., pp. 16-7.
respond to the Word of love and hope.\textsuperscript{80} He remarks that Vatican II also confirmed this new position in describing Mary, the model of the Church, as standing out among the poor and the humble of the Lord who confidently await and receive salvation from Him (LG, 55). Pieris then presents a Covenant Christology, based on the biblical message of love, which is articulated in two formulas:

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Love is God’s own Self as well as God’s own Word to us};
\item \textit{God’s Word to us is Jesus, both eliciting and embodying our love for God and neighbour}.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{enumerate}

The Word here, stresses Pieris, is to be conceived in the Hebrew and biblical sense of \textit{dabar}, not in the Greek philosophical concept of \textit{logos}. He notes that there are two different methodological approaches in Christology: the \textit{logos} model of speculation adopted by traditionalists and the \textit{dabar} model of commitment that liberation theologians have advocated.\textsuperscript{82} He remarks that the former is concerned with explaining and interpreting the mystery of the Incarnation; whereas the latter asks for liberating praxis, following and serving the Crucified-Risen Christ.\textsuperscript{83} Pieris promotes the second model, claiming that ‘the Word became flesh’ does not just mean the pre-existent \textit{Logos} became humanity or ‘human nature’ in abstract, but the \textit{Dabar} of God became the concrete ‘human person’ in a situation of brokenness: Jesus was born a broken person among the broken people (\textit{anawim}).\textsuperscript{84} He points out that the crucifixion of Jesus was a decisive moment when the soteriological meaning of Incarnation was fulfilled; and that ‘the earliest reflections on the incarnation were an after-thought of those who had grasped the meaning of the Cross as the summit of the redemptive process and as the privileged locus of exaltation’\textsuperscript{85}. To Pieris, it is on the Cross that the fundamental unity between Christology (who God is) and

\textsuperscript{80} See Ibid., pp. 19, 23.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., pp. 10, 12.
\textsuperscript{82} See Ibid., p. 11. For a discussion of three different models: \textit{logos, dabar} and \textit{hodos}, see Pieris, ‘The Problem of Universality and Inculturation with Regard to Patterns of Theological Thinking’, in \textit{Fire and Water}, pp. 138-46.
\textsuperscript{84} See Ibid., p. 24. See also Pieris, \textit{God’s Reign for God’s Poor}, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p. 23.
Soteriology (what God does for us) is revealed.86

These two models, according to Pieris, reflect the tension between God-above and God-ahead—that is, God’s Word as logos enters history from the divine sphere above versus God’s Word as dabar creates the world history in the process of fulfilling the promise of salvation ahead.87 He remarks that the above-below or descent-ascent language in the Bible is derived from the ancient concept of the universe, believing that God is above in the highest heaven and the humans are below, with the dead lying further down in the nether-world. He points out that the above-below language in modern theology does not refer to this obsolete world-view any more, but indicates the distinction between what Rahner calls the ‘vertical Christology of incarnation’ and the ‘horizontal Christology of salvation history’.88 Pieris further remarks that the idea of God from above dominates not only the Chalcedonian doctrine but also the avatāra doctrine of Indic religiosity.89 Hence, he stresses that the vertical concept of ‘descent’ must be balanced by the horizontal concepts of ‘emergence’ and ‘convergence’ which express the idea of God’s salvific presence ahead in history.90

Pieris notes that the main emphasis of the Bible lies in the God-ahead model, even though the God-above ideas, under Greek influence, lurk as a counter-presence in the Johanine statements of Logos and the Pauline hymnic references to the pre-existence of Christ.91 He argues that those who composed or appropriated such hymns did so because they wanted to say something about Jesus, rather than because they wanted to speculate about a divine being prior to history.92 In his view, the early Christological debate between from above and from below is based on the confusion caused by the habit of using ontic idioms which had unwittingly intruded from Greek

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86 See Ibid., p. 25.
87 See Ibid., p. 41.
89 See Ibid., pp. 39-40.
90 See Ibid., p. 40.
91 See Ibid., p. 43.
thought. To Pieris, the most constructive way to establish a genuine Christology is to avoid such ontological debates and go back to the predominant biblical idioms of the God-ahead model:

I do not intend to deny or ignore the pre-existence of Christ but merely caution that Christology had better not be based on what we humans speculate about the pre-existence of the Word in ontic terms. Therefore, it stands to reason that in keeping with the biblical tradition one must place the emphasis not so much on God-Above appearing in human form but on God-Ahead recognized as Yahweh, the faithful God (the Maternal Father of Jesus) by means of a forward movement of hope towards the fulfillment of Her Word of Promise in Jesus, the Christ and as Jesus, the Christ.94

Here, Pieris uses feminine terms to refer to God in order to emphasize the consistent biblical image of God’s love (hesed) and fidelity (emet) to the covenant with ‘Her poor people’ (anawim).95 He remarks that Jesus is the ‘new covenant made flesh’ in whom God and the victims of injustice are one inseparable salvific reality.96 Hence, in this Covenant Christology, the ‘person’ of Jesus is not merely conceived as an ‘individual substance’ in harmony with two natures, but encountered as a ‘corporate person’ who incorporates the poor as his own body.97 Pieris asserts that the Covenantal Word of Promise, once enfleshed as Jesus, is now growing in history as a corporate person, gathering covenant partners, and moving towards reaching total Christhood.98 He holds that the authentic Christology must lead to the authentic ‘Chistopraxis’ in two senses: to follow Jesus through a ‘personal struggle to be poor’ as Jesus did in his days of the flesh; and to serve the Christ of Today as we know him now—the eschatological Judge in his proxy, through a ‘political struggle for the

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93 See Ibid., pp. 43-4.
94 Ibid., 44.
95 See Ibid., p. 10.
97 See Pieris, The Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary, p. 32.
98 See Ibid., pp. 32, 40-1.
poor’, the victims of nations (Mt 25, 31-46). It is at this juncture of thought that Pieris presents two pithy axioms as the third formula of Covenant Christology, integrating the twofold love commandments:

(1) Jesus is God’s Two-edged Word in Conflict with Mammon—love of God.
(2) Jesus is God’s Covenantal Word of Promise to the poor—love of neighbour.

The first axiom refers to Jesus who loved God with all his heart and mind (Mt 22, 37); who worshipped and served God alone (Mt 4, 10). To Pieris, this means that Jesus entered into an ‘irrevocable conflict’ with Mammon, the Anti-God (Mt 6, 24). He points out that Mammon does not only mean the accumulation of wealth but the inner greed for success, power and prestige: whenever other creatures are used as tools for fulfilling ‘my’ selfish craving, ‘I’ becomes a slave to Mammon; anything, even a good thing, that claims absolute allegiance is Mammon. Hence, to Pieris, ‘Yahweh alone, no other gods’ (Ex 20, 2-3) refers to the God of liberation who condemns any form of Mammon-worship as idolatry—absolutization of what is relative, including our own selves and religions. He remarks that the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness was a symbolic foreshadowing of his life-time struggle to discern Abba’s will in the face of the ‘many temptations’ from Mammon; the whole mission of Jesus is characterized by the growing intimacy with his Abba and the constant repudiation of Mammon that eventually led him to physical violence and death on the cross by the Mammon-worshippers or the money-polluted religious leaders of his day.

This God-Mammon conflict, however, does not refer to a conflict between God and the world. To Pieris, God-lovers are necessarily world-lovers who, in their purity of heart, find God in all things and enjoy all things in God. He remarks that God created the world as a beautiful cosmic order of plenitude, pluralism, and even

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100 Ibid., p. 45.
101 See Pieris, God’s Reign for God’s Poor, p. 38-9. See also Chapter V, footnote 20.
102 See Ibid. p. 40; and Pieris, ‘To Be Poor as Jesus Was Poor?’, in An Asian Theology of Liberation, pp. 15-6.
103 See Pieris, ‘Chastity as Total Consecration to God’, VJTR, 58/9 (September 1994), 552-3.
pleasure (Gen 2, 9). He points out that the healthy cosmic order of a *shared abundance* is not unique to biblical revelation; it is rather the *common ideal* of all religions, both cosmic and metacosmic. To Pieris, it is the universal and original revelation conserved especially in the sacred world view of the cosmic religiosity. He remarks that, in the Bible, God holds human beings ‘co-responsible’ for taking care of the creatures (Gen 1, 26); and calls them to be ‘co-creators’ who must ‘work’ or ‘serve’ (*abad*) the earth (Gen 2, 5.15). Hence, to Pieris, God is our partner in the struggle against plutocracy and technocracy, which violate and vitiate the cosmic order; it is at the hands of Mammon-worshippers that the world suffers scarcity, injustice, and ecological crisis.

Pieris points out that, in the world of globalization, Mammon is called *Capital*, which alienates human beings not only from God but from one another through its compulsive drive for consumerism (waste) and its gigantic social order that exploits the needy (want). He asserts that we can learn from Jesus two skills to discern how to reduce *waste* and eliminate *want*: the one is the struggle *to be poor* that the rich young man failed to follow (Mt 19, 21-22) but at which Zacchaeus succeeded (Lk 19, 8); the other is the struggle *for the poor* that God launched against the proud, the powerful and the rich (Lk 1, 51-53), and Jesus announced as his mission (Lk 4, 18-21). To Pieris, this is what Ignatius presents in his *Spiritual Exercises* as the proper way to ‘know’ and ‘follow’ Jesus—namely, the meditation on ‘Two Standards’ describes the seductiveness of the Mammon-system as it tempts people to covet riches, vainglory, and pride; in contrast, the Christ asks people to *struggle* to live in spiritual poverty, actual poverty, and humility (*SE*, 135-47).

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105 See Ibid., p. 4.
106 See Ibid.
107 See Ibid.
110 See Pieris, ‘To Be Poor as Jesus Was Poor?’, p. 19.
Here ‘the struggle to be poor’ is another expression of the first axiom—Jesus, the irreconcilable God-Mammon conflict. To Pieris, it refers to the non-idolatrous spirituality of interior freedom from greed and selfishness, shared by all world religions, including non-theistic Buddhism, Jainism, and Taoism.\(^\text{111}\) He remarks that all these Asian religions aim at ‘liberation’ without postulating a ‘liberator’; and their path of liberation is radical self-renunciation, ‘no less radical than denying oneself and taking up one’s cross which Jesus laid down as the conditio sine qua non of discipleship (Mk 8, 34)’.\(^\text{112}\) To Pieris, these gnostic religions demonstrate that non-theism also can be anti-idolatrous and offer their own version of liberation or salvation; therefore, sin against the first commandment (love of God) is idolatry, not atheism as such.\(^\text{113}\) He asserts that the root of all evil is not ‘isms’ such as atheism, polytheism, or monotheism, but idolatry which St Paul identifies with greed (Col 3, 5).\(^\text{114}\) Hence, to Pieris, the first axiom is a Christian formulation of the common spirituality of all religions—the greedless living or the beatitudinal life (Mt 5, 3-11; Lk 6, 20-26).\(^\text{115}\)

Pieris argues that the true meaning of ‘conversion’ is the fundamental commitment to this common spirituality—a selfless, greedless, non-idolatrous, or anxiety-free life. This is what he calls a soteriological absolute, a radical turning (metanoia) towards the Kingdom of God or its equivalent in other religions.\(^\text{116}\) Pieris insists that such conversion is a universal requirement for salvation; and it is the very opposite of proselytism.\(^\text{117}\) Hence, to Pieris, the primary focus of any interreligious dialogue must be a sincere response to the common calling to the soteriological absolute; only those who practice the common spirituality can properly exchange the unique soteriological paradigm specific to each religion and contribute to the mutual enrichment.\(^\text{118}\)

\(^{111}\) See Piers, The Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary, p. 47.
\(^{112}\) See Ibid., pp. 47-8.
\(^{113}\) See Ibid., p. 48; and Pieris, God’s Reign for God’s Poor, p. 39.
\(^{114}\) See Pieris, ‘A Liberational Christology of Religious Pluralism’, p. 5.
\(^{115}\) See Ibid.
\(^{116}\) See Ibid., pp. 2-3.
\(^{117}\) See Piers, The Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary, pp. 48-9.
On this premise, Pieris gives two examples of Buddhist-Christian exchange. The first is the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. He remarks that this path of liberation is nowhere developed to such sublime perfection as in Buddhism; it is unique to Buddhism. Therefore, he asks for the Christians who live in a Buddhist ethos to discover their own version of mindfulness, though obviously it would not be an exact equivalent of Buddhist mindfulness. Pieris himself has advocated the Silent Eucharist or the Mindful Eucharist to help participants enter fully into the mindful awareness of God’s salvific presence in the Mass. The second is the Christian emphasis on the justice dimension and the specific role of the poor in liberation or salvation. Pieris asserts that there is no such God in any other religion who turns ‘Her’ option for the poor or covenant with the oppressed into the salvific path, which also constitutes the ultimate proof of ‘Her’ claim to be Saviour-God or Christ. To Pieris, this is unique to the Christian faith. He remarks that in the process of interreligious dialogue, Buddhists are to be challenged by such Christian conviction and driven to discover their own social teachings.

This is what Pieris calls a symbiosis of religions, happening in the basic human communities: each religion, challenged by the other’s unique approach to liberative praxis, discovers and renames itself in its specificity. He points out that, in this mutual exchange, people of other religions help Christians clarify their religious identity and spell out the ‘uniqueness of Christ’, in a way which the academic theologians will later explain as Christology. This kind of uniqueness, argues Pieris, does not claim its superiority over other religions; it rather inspires others to rediscover their own uniqueness.

The second axiom of Pieris’ Christology demonstrates a new understanding of the uniqueness of Christ, or more precisely, the uniqueness of Jesus, which emerges

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121 See Pieris, *God’s Reign for God’s Poor*, p. 84. Pieris often uses the feminine term (She/Her) to refer to God.
123 See Pieris, ‘Political Theologies in Asia’, p. 263.
from such an interreligious dialogue—*Jesus, the irrevocable defence pact between God and the poor*. He remarks that the first axiom implies the soteriological principle, ‘no salvation outside of the Reign of God’, which refers to the common spirituality of all religions; and the second axiom sharpens this principle in a specific way, claiming ‘no salvation outside God’s covenant with the Poor’. He points out that the second is unique to the biblical faith: Yahweh is the God of all slaves who struggle for freedom anywhere and everywhere; ‘Her’ covenant with the oppressed was ratified on Sinai and renewed by Christ on Calvary. Hence, to Pieris, to confess Jesus as the Lord is to proclaim him as the new covenant or the dabar of God, who has fulfilled God’s promise to the poor on the Cross in the extreme manner that was a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles (1Cor 1, 23):

The Cross, therefore, is *Good Friday, Easter Sunday and Pentecost, all in one*. The Promise is fulfilled at a cost to a God who loved the losers of this world so passionately as to win for them their Kingdom by suffering defeat with them. For there was no other way worthy of God to confound the powers of this world. Thanks to this event, we are a covenanted people, proclaiming Christ as the “Word of Promise” coming from God to the Poor in response to the “Word of Protest” rising from the Poor to God. Christ is both words in one: the one Breathful Word (“pneumatophor”) speaking to as well as speaking from within the victims of Mammon, whatever their religion. This God, who never asks the poor to change their religions but only to join Her in the battle against idolatry, speaking in them and through them, is indeed “Good news to the poor”! To proclaim it by word and deed is our specific mission! It is the essence of our Christology.126

Pieris asserts that the Paschal Mystery or the Death-Easter-Pentecost event is the supreme expression of the twofold love commands. To him, the Crucifixion was the

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124 See Pieris, *The Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary*, p. 50.
126 See Pieris, *The Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary*, p. 53.
precise moment when Jesus fully realized his love of God and Neighbour as the *essence* of his Christhood.127 He remarks that Jesus died in loving obedience to the Father (Phil 2, 8) and out of his great love for us (Eph 5, 2; Jn 15, 13); and this recalls Jesus’ central teachings that the whole of revelation and salvation should be recapitulated in the two love commands (Mt 22, 37-40). He points out that Jesus presented the love of others as oneself as the true way to love God (Mt 7, 12; Jn 4, 20). To Pieris, however, the most significant passage is that in which Jesus defined the authentic meaning of love of neighbour as our involvement with the victim of robbery and violence, whom we meet in our life’s journey (Lk 10, 29-37). He points out that Jesus himself opted to become that neighbour by being a victim of injustice and violence on the cross; so God’s alliance and identification with the oppressed is revealed in a *new covenantal relationship*.128 Hence, to Pieris, ‘the Cross is not only salvation offered by Christ to us but also our covenantal participation in his redemptive act.’129

Thus, to Pieris, Christhood and discipleship converge on the Cross. He argues that just as the Crucifixion was Jesus’ second baptism (Lk 12, 50), our cross-bearing discipleship is our own baptism; hence, the *absolutely* necessary condition for salvation is not baptism as a sacramental ritual, but as a personal or collective praxis of the *crucifying demands of service* (Mk 10, 42-45).130 In the same line, Pieris interprets Jesus’ mission mandate (Mt 28, 18-20) as our task of converting *nations* into *disciples* of God’s Reign and teach them the *love commandments* through our own example of love and service; the term ‘baptism’ is not to be understood in the narrow sense of water-ritual baptism—a means of a ‘proselytism’ which Jesus ridiculed (Mt 23, 15); it rather refers to a ‘true baptism’ or ‘conversion’ (*metanoia*) to the *non-idolatrous* spirituality and a *cross-bearing* commitment to the world of justice and love.131 In Asia, argues Pieris, the cry heard from the Cross is not the

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127 See Ibid., p. 57.
130 See Ibid., p. 59.
131 For a detailed discussion of the issue of conversion and mission mandates, see Pieris, ‘Two Mission Mandates Calling for Conversion: *Preach the Dhamma* (Vin I. 21); *Proclaim the Gospel* (Mk 16: 15-16; Mt 28: 18-20’), *Dialogue*, n.s., XXXII/XXXIII (2005-2006), 1-57.
triumphalist slogan often repeated in Church documents, ‘Asia, open your doors to Christ’, but ‘Church, open your heart and your possessions to the poor; for what you do to them you do to me; I AM THEY!’.

Pieris asserts, therefore, that the Christian belief in *God crucified in Christ who is One Body with the oppressed* defines the uniqueness of Christians whose mission is to struggle for the victims of injustice. This is what the second axiom of Pieris’ Christology means, which runs counter to the ‘rabid fundamentalism of evangelicals on one extreme and to the well-meant irenism of some dialogists on the other’.

Pieris points out that Christian fundamentalists preach the Crucified-Risen Jesus but ignore the fact that the victims of injustice form one body with Christ; some dialogists, on the other hand, are afraid of placing too much emphasis on the social conflict which constitutes the Cross of Christ, so that they compromise Christ’s uniqueness by adopting the non-confrontational idioms of gnostic religions as equivalent to the Christian message. Thus, to Pieris, both groups have failed to proclaim the heart of Christian faith:

I would have ceased being a Christian theist if Yahweh of the Bible was incapable of anger that threatens hell-fire on oppressors in the name of their voiceless victims—not in order to destroy them forever (that would be hatred), but to elicit their conversion and thus bring relief to the outcasts. For prophetic anger is an expression of redemptive love. The parable of the Last Judgement (Mt 25) is Good News to the poor, because the threat of eternal damnation jolts the non-poor from their complacency before the plight of their oppressed brothers and sisters. God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures does not address the powerful and the powerless in the same language; nor should we!

The Hitlers, Pinochets, and Bushes had their way because their pastors failed and even feared to announce Jesus Christ as God’s Defence Pact with the

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132 Pieris, *The Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary*, p. 54.
134 Ibid.
135 See Ibid.
oppressed! For Christian fundamentalists dilute the notion of “God’s Wrath” by spiritualizing it and removing it from the Covenantal justice of God so that the violence against the poor disappears from the concerns of their God and from their theology of “atonement” or “appeasement of God’s wrath”. What these fundamentalists have done through a misguided evangelism, we dialogists could do through genuine irenism.136

Pieris remarks that some of his colleagues, such as Thich Nhat Han, Rita Gross, and Paul Knitter, have honestly expressed their uneasiness about the biblical notion of divine anger against the victimizers.137 In his opinion, this uneasiness seems to be based on three unexamined assumptions. The first is the false equation of anger and hatred. To Pieris, it is clear that the forgiving love in Christianity does not exclude prophetic anger; what is excluded is rancour. He points out that even in the Buddhist Scriptures there are monk-saints ‘burning’ with holy indignation against their errant colleagues (Vinaya III, 137. 138).138 The second is a dubious methodological assumption that all religions can be interpreted by one absolute principle such as Dhamma or the Truth. Pieris argues that this inclusivist approach accommodates the distinctiveness of other religions in the name of interreligious harmony. To him, genuine dialogue must be based on the co-recognition of differences unique to each religion; and even irreconcilable differences can offer a meaningful message for all dialogical partners.139 The last source of misapprehension is the failure to understand the nature of God’s defence strategy illustrated in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Pieris remarks that there are two kinds of resistance to violence: Jesus, in his life and work, exercises God’s wrath against the wicked who exploit the weak poor; but in his passion on the cross, the same Jesus offers forgiveness rather than divine wrath to his own persecutors.140 Hence, to Pieris, God’s option for the oppressed is not an option for violence, but a divine protest against it: Jesus’ passion and death defy his violators by ‘engraving in the annals of human history that it is deicide to rob the

136 Ibid., p. 6.
137 See Ibid.
138 See Ibid., pp. 6-7.
139 See Ibid., p. 7.
140 See Ibid.
Pieris’ Christological thought and praxis culminates with his final remarks about the Triune God dwelling amongst us. He emphasizes that one cannot speak of Jesus as the Christ apart from the Father and the Spirit. He points out that the idea of God as a *Triune community of Persons* can contribute to the renewal of ecclesiology and missiology towards a communion model of a dominant-free Church; while inspiring Christians to have the right spirituality—that is, becoming a person-in-a-community rather than remaining an individual-in-a-crowd. Nevertheless, he argues that, in a Buddhist society, the Hellenistic notion of the person is problematic because the very concept of *individual substance of rational nature* is exactly opposed to the central doctrine of *anatta* in Buddhism. Here again, Pieris finds another good reason to go back to the biblical source because the Hebraic and Pauline conception of the human being is very close to that of Buddhism. In the Bible, according to Pieris, the individuating factor is not that of matter or body, as in Hellenism, but the Spirit or God’s *ruah* that calls each person by name out of profound love. The body (*soma*) refers not only to the physical body but to the psycho-physical combination of *psyche* and *sarx* which parallel the name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*) in Buddhism. Thus, in the biblical notion of the person, the body (*soma*) is the symbol of ‘solidarity’ which binds each individual to the whole of nature, history, and cosmic order. But this psycho-physical body is neither a permanent substance nor a perfect instrument of the Spirit: it must be redeemed and transformed.

Hence, to Pieris, *Christ is the Body of the Triune God* who enters into *solidarity* with the socio-human and cosmic reality in order to redeem it into the ‘One Body fully transfigured by the Spirit’ (*soma-pneumatikon*). To him, this is the true meaning of resurrection, our final emancipation. He holds that Christians are called to anticipate

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141 Ibid.
142 See Pieris, *The Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary*, pp. 60-1.
143 See Ibid., p. 63. See also Lynn A. De Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (Colombo: the Study Centre for Religion and Society, 1975), pp. 72-84.
145 Ibid., p. 64.
the *Future* in their *present encounter* with the Triune God through the liberating praxis for the poor and in the liturgical experience of reconciliation with God and one another.\(^{146}\) It is in the Asian liturgy being celebrated in the small communities that Pieris and the participants have experienced such Trinitarian movement within them: (1) *Silence*—God, the ineffable mystery, the totally Other, Abba; (2) *Word*—What comes forth from Silence and leads back to Silence; (3) *Spirit*—The Breath of Speech, harmony between Word and Silence. Pieris describes this experience as follows:

When *we listen* to the Word, it is Silence that pervades us. When we *respond* to Silence, it is the Word that invades us. That by which we listen and respond is the Breath that animates us. The *Spirit* of a good liturgy is the very Spirit of God, namely the harmony between Word and Silence. Words which neither originated in silence nor hush us into silence are mere noise. Verbosity in a liturgy indicates the absence of the Spirit. When we try to quieten all our interior noises, arrest all our compulsive thinking which proliferates into words, then surely the Spirit *is sensed* within and amongst us. For, contrary to the traditional scholastic philosophy, we can be profoundly aware of something without having to think about it. Constant persevering effort at this kind of ‘thought-less’ awareness is rewarded with a Pentecost wherein the Spirit turns all words into *The Word*, by allowing all our thoughts to fade back into supreme Silence, who is our loving Abba-Amma. This is a radical way of communing with the Triune God and communing among ourselves: silence, breath, word.\(^{147}\)

Pieris emphasizes that every prayer, breathed out by the Spirit from the abyss of God’s Silence, is always a *poetic* and *evocative* Word that stirs our imagination, kindles the fires of selfless love, and impels us to action on behalf of the silent poor: these words of protest never fail to reach God’s ears (Ex 2, 23-25). To Pieris, God is

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\(^{146}\) See Ibid.

the Silence of the Asian poor whose cries are muffled by the noise of the Mammon-worshippers. These powerless and voiceless poor form one body with the Asian Christ who constantly challenges the Asian churches to transform into the dominant-free or kenotic communities reflecting the interior life of the Triune God. It is only in the liberating praxis of the basic human communities that Pieris anticipates the end-time community of the Total Christ with hope—a hope based upon the promise of God; visualized in Jesus Christ on the Cross; and lived and witnessed among the poor and the humble who yearn for salvation. As Waldenfels aptly points out, ‘Pieris makes himself the voice of people who have lost their voice to protest and their power to counteract against their sufferings…often in a hope against all hope’.

In summary, Pieris has developed his kenotic ecclesiology and Christology of religious pluralism out of the twofold Christopraxis active in the basic human communities. The first praxis is the struggle to be poor in parallel with the Buddhist path of gnostic detachment. This praxis inspires us to proclaim Christ as the One who demands conversion from Mammon-worship rather than conversion from other religions. To Pieris, it is by giving up both the craving for and the actual possession of wealth and prestige that one can realize such inner freedom or beatitudinal life—what he calls the common spirituality of all religions. The second praxis is the struggle for the poor or the agapeic involvement in the struggle against forced poverty. Pieris argues that, in the process of this interreligious liberating praxis, Christians must confess their unique faith in Jesus as the Crucified-Risen Christ who is God's defence pact with the poor. Hence, to him, the meaning of struggle for justice goes beyond mere work of charity for the poor; it is rather a definite condition for our final salvation. Pieris emphasizes, however, that the Christian mission for justice and peace must be pursued as a seed that dying brings forth life, rather than a weed that kills the religious identity of others. Other religionists can join such a struggle for the liberation of the poor without compromising their faith. To Pieris,

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148 See Ibid., p. 213.
149 See Ibid., p. 215.
3. Pieris’ Critics and His Radical Orthopraxis

We have examined how Pieris has drawn a truly Asian theology from his radical orthopraxis, characterized as a dialogical integrationist approach to Asian reality. He integrates the core of the biblical message—the twofold inseparable love commandment, into the contemporary theological issue of inculturation and liberation in Asia. In his unique synthesis, Pieris argues that the Christian praxis in Asia must be an interreligious commitment for the liberation of the poor, which enriches the liberative potentials of each religion without diluting the distinctive or constitutive dimension of their soteriology. His kenotic ecclesiology and liberation Christology of religious pluralism reveal his capacity to integrate Christian orthodoxy into the interreligious liberating praxis relevant to the Asian context. To his critics, however, Pieris is too radical and anti-traditional, relativizing the absolute Christian truth and deadening the spirit of the Church’s evangelizing mission. What is at stake here? Pieris has realized that the Chalcedonian idioms are not acceptable to the Asian mentality, so that direct translation creates a misunderstanding of the very truth behind the Chalcedonian formula. His object is not to undermine the unique and universal reference of the Christ event; rather, he is keen on elucidating the deeper meaning of the universality of Christ using a language that appeals to the Asian mind and heart. Besides the Christological issue, some scholars have shown their critical views of Pieris’ biblical hermeneutic. In this section, some of these criticisms will be examined with the counter argument that Pieris is a truly Catholic theologian, faithful to his own religious tradition and creative in his approach to other traditions.

Pieris’ theological thought and praxis have generally been accepted positively by
theologians both in the East and the West. He is widely regarded as one of the most stimulating, original, and creative thinkers in Asia.\(^{152}\) His work often touches the heart of readers and brings about a powerful transformative experience, as some have confessed.\(^{153}\) This proves that Pieris has succeeded in what he intended to do with his theological writings: to interpret the Word not in an explanatory manner (a *logos* model) but in a way of evoking the liberative praxis or obedience to the transforming Word here and now (a *dabar* model). As Barnes says, ‘he has that enviable capacity to present theology not as a body of knowledge to be assimilated but as a task of transformation to be done by rich and poor alike’.\(^{154}\) It is not only Christian theologians but also Buddhist scholars and activists who compliment Pieris on his extraordinary ability to integrate academic scholarship into interreligious praxis. For example, Tilakaratne presents Pieris as the ‘best living authority’ on Acariya Dharmapala and as an ‘ideal model’ for the younger generation of Buddhist scholars.\(^{155}\)

Thus, Pieris’ strength lies in his ability to theologize his own radical orthopraxis and to inspire his readers to follow the same praxis. This praxis-oriented hermeneutic derives from his creative interpretation of the Bible, as exemplified in his theory of *double baptism*. However, Levison and Pope-Levison raise two critical questions about this theory: firstly, ‘how can one know the mind of Jesus, that he gradually adopted the religiosity of the poor?’ In other words, they criticize Pieris for violating ‘a cardinal principle of the historical-critical scholarship by delving uncritically into the self-consciousness of Jesus’\(^{156}\); secondly, they criticize him for violating an established guideline of Jewish-Christian dialogue by caricaturing early Judaism

negatively in order to commend Jesus’ values over it.\textsuperscript{157} In defence of Pieris, Gutzler argues that although it might be impossible to enter the consciousness of Jesus, it is possible to look at the experience in the Jordan and understand its importance to the direction of his life, and that of his followers, as they are portrayed in the gospel.\textsuperscript{158} She concedes, however, that Pieris does not draw overtly on the insights of the biblical scholarship concerning the historical Jesus; and this is a definite lacuna in his work.\textsuperscript{159}

However, as thoroughly examined in these chapters, Pieris has developed his own liberative, praxis-oriented hermeneutic, which is not exclusively concerned with the scientific, rational understanding of the biblical stories. In his personal email to me, Pieris confirms that historical-critical scholarship has not given us any absolutely reliable results.\textsuperscript{160} He points out that after all the hard work of searching for the historical Jesus, those scholars have only a good approximate erudite conjecture. In his view, the Jesus of history cannot be disentangled from the Jesus proclaimed as Christ. He warns that academic or so-called scientific mastery of the original sense of a text must not defeat the soteriological or liberative origin and purpose of the Sacred Writ. It is clear that Pieris’ biblical hermeneutic is ‘liberation-oriented’, which he has learned from his own experience of the inter-textual encounters between the Bible and the Pali Tipiṭaka.\textsuperscript{161} As Gutzler aptly points out, in his innovative biblical hermeneutic, Pieris draws on the ‘world behind the text’ and the ‘world of the text’ as impetus to the prophetic voice needed for our times; the ‘world before the text’ is his main concern and his greatest strength.\textsuperscript{162} To Pieris, a thorough

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\item \textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 15.
\item \textsuperscript{159} See Ibid., p. 242.
\item \textsuperscript{160} Pieris’ email reached me on 13 June 2011. In it, he answers two main questions: the biblical hermeneutics in his Christology and the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. The argument following in these pages is based on this email as well as other sources.
\item \textsuperscript{162} Gutzler uses here the threefold hermeneutical category proposed by Schneiders: the world behind the text (historical-critical); the world of the text (theological meaning for the community for whom the text was written); and the world before the text (meaning for the community reading the text today). See Gutzler, ‘The Soteriology of Aloysius Pieris: An Asian Contribution’, p. 235; see also Sandra M. Schneiders, \textit{The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture} (San
knowledge of the Bible—its source language, its socio-historical contexts, the Semitic mentality, and the mannerisms of its compilers—should be geared to actuate the in-built *liberative potential of a given text* for the sake of readers and listeners *who yearn for freedom* from all forms of socio-spiritual bondage here and now.\textsuperscript{163}

Thus, to him, the real meaning of the text is to be elucidated in the actual praxis of engagement with the present world.

The second question raised by Levison and Pope-Levison is about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. On this point, Gutzler remarks that the scholarly debate continues about the meaning, composition and purpose of the various religious groups present during the time of Jesus; and if Pieris located Jesus *as a Jew* within the religious, social and political context of first-century Palestine, his argument about the choices made by Jesus could become stronger.\textsuperscript{164} In her opinion, Pieris seems to unconsciously appropriate supersessionism or fulfillment theory with respect to Judaism which he would never think of applying to other Asian religions.\textsuperscript{165}

Although it is true that Pieris in his rhetorical presentation tends to highlight Jesus’ criticism of his contemporary Judaism, this has to be seen in the context of interpretation he is giving. He certainly grants that the Pharisees whom Jesus clashed with were not representative of all the Pharisees in early Judaism. To Pieris, what matters is that the attitude of those who clashed with him was anti-soteriological and overtly rejected by Jesus. As for the Sadducees, argues Pieris, it is the Jewish sources that are critical of their socio-economic, doctrinal positions. Hence, Pieris’ criticism of various factions within early Judaism must not be interpreted as anti-Jewish, just as within early Christianity there were unhealthy trends and references to them need not be necessarily construed as anti-Christian. As we have remarked, Pieris


\textsuperscript{165} See Ibid., p. 245.
maintains that interreligious dialogue must seek to discover and reinforce the liberative aspects of each religion while challenging the others to eradicate the enslaving aspects. He has never applied a fulfillment theory to Judaism or to any other religion. His argument is clear and consistent: the whole of Jesus is Christ; but, Jesus is not the whole of Christ (totus Christus sed non totum Christi). To Pieris, ‘Christ’ is a biblical term for the Salvific Absolute which is also recognized outside the bible by many other names. He argues that Jesus is not the one fulfilling Judaism or other religions; rather, he is the one who calls for co-redeemers, including all of us, to become together the Total Christ—the Total Tathåta, Sanatana Dharma, Olam Ha-Ba, or God’s Reign. To Pieris, many religions, including Judaism and Christianity, are involved in the process of ‘Christogenesis’, which is a Christian term for the movement towards the Final Salvation.

Thus, Pieris is consistent in his Christological thought and praxis, derived from his liberative praxis-oriented biblical hermeneutic and his incessant engagement with other religions. However, Gomez, a Spanish theologian working in the Philippines, is critical of Pieris’ interreligious Christology. In his article, titled ‘the Uniqueness and Universality of Christ’, Gomez criticizes Pieris and other Asian theologians for relativizing and eroding the absolute truth of Christian faith. He argues that those Asian theologians begin ‘from a sincere will to dialogue but end in a relativistic Christology and a “demissionizing” Christianity’. He holds that Christians may humbly relativize their religion; yet they have to confess Jesus as the pivot of Salvation for all men of all times. To Gomez, the terms ‘unique’ and ‘universal’ mean the decisive, final and determinative effect of Christ on every person. Hence, in his opinion, Asian philosophies must ‘die and rise’ purified in Christ, so as to serve theologians in their quest for an indigenous Christology. The following words summarize his view:

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167 Quoted from his personal email to me (13 June 2011).
169 Ibid., 4.
170 See Ibid., 19-21.
171 See Ibid., 21.
Hinduism seems to have failed to develop a concept of person, without which much of the mystery of Christ will remain impervious. The different Buddhist schools also present such a “conceptual gap” that misunderstanding of basic Christian realities becomes an almost unavoidable hazard. Chinese classical thought leads unawares to renewing subordinationism and, by applying the ying yang dialectics to the Incarnation, one may easily deny the transcendence of the Divinity, which Chalcedon strove so much to safeguard. The challenge, though, has to be risked in humanity. It is a consequence of the Incarnation that any rethinking of theology ought to start with Christology.172

In response, Pieris wrote an article in which Gomez is accused of promoting cultural colonialism and theological imperialism.173 Pieris insists that the sound principle of interreligious dialogue has to be applied also to the inter-ecclesial dialogue—the dialogue partners ‘must study, experience and master each other’s religious language and theological idiom’.174 In his view, Gomez imposes the Chalcedonian and post-Chalcedonian concepts, such as ‘person’ and ‘subordinationism’, onto the Asian thought, without trying to study and understand Asian idioms.175 Gomez passes judgment on Asian theology for the sake of saving the Chalcedonian dogma; but, to Pieris, ‘it is not the Asian paradigms but the stigma of cultural imperialism that could damage the Chalcedonian dogma’.176 Here is the point of his counter argument: the saving truth of Christ has been expressed in various ways even in the New Testament; and the Chalcedonian formula was a brilliant achievement of the human mind expressed in the Greco-Roman idiom of the fifth century; however, ‘to impose that model on other cultures is nothing less than theological imperialism’.177 Pieris holds that we are dealing with a different language game; and when the conceptual idioms are in conflict, there springs the ‘temptation to decide on one game for all, or impose

172 Ibid., 9.
174 Ibid., 169-70.
175 See Ibid., 163.
176 Ibid., 172.
177 Ibid., 164.
the same rules for all games”. To overcome this temptation, Pieris calls for a basic agreement on two principles which can be taken as a summary of his answer to Gomez’s criticism:

The first is that “the breadth, the length, the height and the depth of Christ” (Eph. 3:18) is such that no single paradigm can exhaust its comprehensibility; many conceptual models are needed and these are already available in the cultures around us—and what is more, all these paradigms in so far as they are potential Christological formulae, already constitute part of the mystery of Christ. […] The second principle is a corollary of the first. No paradigm is the patrimony of one single church because it is the manifestation of the same spirit that binds the Churches together. […] This means that, […] there must be a species of inter-ecclesial dialogue by which the paradigms which are new manifestations of the whole Church, not by appropriation (which is not feasible) but by appreciation. […] The Church is essentially Pentecostal, and what one church speaks in its own tongue should be understood by the others in their own. It is a mission for which each church must discover charismatic persons called by God to maintain inter-ecclesial dialogue on the basic Christian realities.179

The controversy between Gomez and Pieris demonstrates that one of the most crucial theological issues today is the uniqueness of Christ in relation to other religions. As examined in this chapter, Pieris does not ignore the importance of the uniqueness of Christ but rediscovers its deeper meaning and reformulates it in a language that appeals to the Asian mind and heart. Both Gomez and Pieris are concerned with the same issue, but address their concerns from different perspectives. Gomez is keen on the Christological truth expressed in the Chalcedonian ontological concepts, whereas Pieris is anxious to explain the same truth as a salvific or liberative path and goal, intelligible to the peoples of Asia. Both agree that Jesus is the unique embodiment of
divine revelation and salvation. To both of them, Jesus is the only absolute norm in Christology and all other norms are relative.\textsuperscript{180} This is the ‘basic Christian realities’ or the ‘basic Christian truth’ that both thinkers conceive in unity. To Gomez, however, the Chalcedonian formulation of that truth is to give a framework for all other Christian thoughts; whereas to Pieris, it remains the basic Christological paradigm which is not to say that it is the given and complete form for all Christologies.

Pieris’ Christology is not the Asian version of Chalcedon but a new expression of the truth behind the Chalcedonian formula. This does not mean that Pieris is against the orthodox faith of the Church; on the contrary, he strives to save the faith, which is in crisis today. He knows how to bring the core of Christian faith to the complex Asian situation. To Pieris, Jesus is to be confessed fully Christ in the sense of \textit{plenitude} of salvation and revelation; but also in the sense of \textit{kenotic} Christ who reveals himself through the non-Christian poor. Furthermore, his Christology ends in a profound insight into the Triune God with a deep analysis of the concept of ‘person’ in both a biblical and Buddhist sense. Hence, Pieris is radical in the sense of getting back to the original source of Christian faith; but he is not anti-traditional in the sense of relativizing and eroding the Christian belief in the uniqueness of Christ. Pieris does not deaden the Church’s evangelizing mission either; he rather reinforces it by rectifying its direction from proselytism to the true conversion towards the Kingdom of God. Therefore, it is safe to say that Pieris is truly a Catholic theologian who is faithful to the core of biblical, dogmatic truth; as well as creative in communicating that truth to the contemporary people in Asia, both Christians and non-Christians.

This thesis has presented Pieris as an integrationist who strives to bring together the best of the liberationist and inculturationist approaches to his radical orthopraxis: the twofold Christopraxis of the \textit{kenotic} Church. This integrationist attitude is another proof of his orthodoxy as a Catholic theologian. For Catholic theology in general has a tendency to integrate various positions into more synthetic and holistic principles: unity in diversity, transcendental truth in immanence, and universality in particularity. This point becomes clearer when we contrast Pieris with Buddhadasa, a puritan

\textsuperscript{180} See Ibid. 162.
Dhammic essentialist. Buddhadāsa is also holistic in his exposition of Dhammic socialism based on his creative insights into nature and society. The key to his radical orthopraxis, however, is the cultivation of the void-mind (chit-wâŋg) which he emphasizes as the heart of Buddhism. To Buddhadāsa, the most important matter is to recover the purest form of Buddhist practice and to reform the non-essential, ritualistic, and superstitious practices. His approach can be characterized as ‘either or’, demanding a resolution between Dhammic purity and the cultural practices. By contrast, Pieris’ approach is to be characterized as ‘both and’, striving to achieve the perfect integration between the inculturated truth and the liberative praxis.

This distinction between Pieris and Buddhadāsa is also found in their attitude to their own religious traditions. Both go back radically to the original sources in order to find out the guiding principles for contemporary problems. To Pieris, however, the core experience of the original sources is always found in the inculturated forms in tradition; consequently, he struggles to understand the traditional manifestations of the original Christian experience. By contrast, Buddhadāsa is convinced that the core experience of liberation is found only in the early Buddhist discourses; so that he rejects not only the traditional practices, but also many parts of the Pali scripture itself as non-essential additions. To Buddhadāsa, Dhamma is the essence of all religions and religious differences are mere convention; whereas to Pieris, religious differences are the constitutive dimension of the soteriological absolute, which itself has many names. Here again, Pieris tries to find a balance between the particularity of each religion and the common spirituality of all religions. As we have noted, his holistic and integrating approach is derived from his profound knowledge and praxis of both Buddhist and Christian spiritualities.

In short, Pieris is a qualified Buddhologist and a truly Catholic theologian who seeks to ‘integrate’ not only the early Christian tradition into contemporary Catholicism, but also the early Buddhist tradition into contemporary inculturated Buddhism. Furthermore, he seeks to ‘integrate’ both a renewed Catholicism and a renewed Buddhism into an interreligious liberating praxis. This dialogical integrationist radical orthopraxis contrasts with Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialist approach. In
the next chapter, through a comparative analysis of these two approaches, we will show that both thinkers offer significant models of liberative interreligious praxis, appropriate to Theravada society in the modern world. Finally, from this creative and constructive dialogue, we will draw a common spirituality of human liberation for our own radical orthopraxis in the face of the challenges of globalization.
Buddhist-Christian Dialogue and Action
In the Theravada Countries of Modern Asia:

A Comparative Analysis of the Radical Orthopraxis of
Bhikkhu Buddhadasa and Aloysius Pieris
Chapter VII

Buddhist-Christian Dialogue and Action in the Theravada Countries of Modern Asia:
A Comparative Analysis of the Radical Orthopraxis of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa and Aloysius Pieris

We have examined two significant models of radical orthopraxis, Buddhadasa and Pieris’, in order to answer the question of the relationship between religious faith and action in the shifting context of South and Southeast Asia. In this final chapter, we will provide a comparative analysis of both models, to discover areas of convergence within their divergent perspectives thereby deepening our understanding of religion as transformative spirituality. Comparative work is intrinsically problematic because the point of comparison is always arbitrary. However, we can see clearly that there is an interesting point of convergence between these two very different thinkers: they bring the original sources of their respective religious traditions to reform and renew the contemporary living community of faith, seeking to engage with the wider society. The real issue is not the texts they interpret but how they go about it—the return to the liberative praxis of the originating communities of each tradition, which enables the contemporary praxis of liberation. As we have seen in the previous chapters, within the overarching culture of South and Southeast Asia where Christians and Theravada Buddhists are in constant dialogue, it is clear that our two thinkers, coming from different perspectives, nevertheless have a similar social concern. Both are aware of the growing sensitivity to social change in a rapidly modernizing environment in Asia: what modern people believe and follow is not religion as abstract truth or as traditional customs any more, but the practical truth that engages with everyday life and motivates social action for a better world. In response to this modern aspiration for social change, both thinkers emphasize the primacy of praxis over theory, striving to reinterpret their respective traditional doctrines from the perspective of a liberative action which is at once spiritual and
political. Their main concern is not to establish a theoretical explanation of religious truth, but to bring about a transformative experience of that truth in their contemporaries’ lives. In other words, to both of them, religious truth must provide spiritual vision and motivation for human liberation, anticipating not only the ultimate individual emancipation after death but, more importantly, the actual realization of the personal-social transformation here and now. Hence, the point of dialogue between these two thinkers is the religiously inspired human liberation to which each one has a different but, as we shall show, complementary approach.

This thesis presents Buddhadasa’s approach as essentialist, promoting a puritanical Dhammic society in which social engagement is expected as a consequence of spiritual practice. Pieris’ approach is presented as integrationist, emphasizing the holistic vision of God’s Kingdom in which spiritual practice is regarded as an inextricable part of the religio-cultural, socio-economic and political liberation. It is to be argued, however, that these two different approaches are neither contradictory nor competitive; they are rather enhancing each other in a creative way, revealing the dynamic relationship between person and society in the pursuit of human liberation. Each model contains positive insights to contribute to the other’s radical orthopraxis. In this chapter, we will show how both models of radical orthopraxis act as counterpoint movements, challenging and reinforcing each other, while sharing the common features of liberative spirituality and the common vision of a humanistic community, in which the personal, social and ecological levels of human liberation are well balanced. From this comparative analysis, we will attempt to construct an integrated model of Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action—a more relevant interreligious liberating praxis for the suffering people in contemporary Theravada society, which will have significant implications for interreligious dialogue and action in the global context as well.

The chapter will be divided into three sections according to the three dialectic stages of comparison: (1) the common issue and vision that both thinkers share; (2) two ways of human liberation, which illustrate their different approaches to that issue and vision; (3) the points of convergence, complementarity and analogy, which lead to a
1. The Common Vision of a Humanistic Community

The most remarkable point of commonality between Buddhadasa and Pieris is that both thinkers are highly critical of the dominant socio-economic political systems of modern Asia. Rejecting both the communist socialism and the liberalist capitalism, they share the common vision of a humanistic community which is not drawn from the secular political ideologies but inspired by religious principles. Both thinkers are convinced that the socialist ideal is better than capitalism for the future of humanity. In their religiously inspired socialist vision, they agree on the need for the fundamental shift in our consciousness, behaviours and social structures which are conditioned by the selfish and unjust streams of the modern capitalist society. Their universal vision for human liberation goes beyond the boundary of the South and Southeast Asian context: it has a prophetic character relevant to the contemporary challenges and crises of the globalized world. As Sivaraksa aptly points out, in the era of globalization, a spirit of ‘capitalist triumphalism’ has been predominant throughout the world, promoting the competitive ‘free market’ system and the irrevocable consumerist culture.1 This global consumerist capitalism is not tolerant of cultural difference, socio-economic diversity, and alternative models of human development. This lack of tolerance of other forms of human aspiration and civilization has become the dominating source of conflict and violence as dramatically illustrated by the events of September 11, 2001 and the consequent US-led war against terrorism. The widespread culture of endless consumption, created by transnational corporations, accelerates the global environmental crisis; while the limitless accumulation of wealth in the hands of a small number of the powerful capitalist groups widens the gap between the rich and the poor. In the face of these

crises of globalization, religion has a double potential either to be a source of more problems and conflicts with its fundamentalist ideologies or to be a liberative force with its transformative spiritualities. It is clear that Buddhadāsa and Pieris are two prominent examples of transformative spirituality, expressed in their respective radical orthopraxes, which shows us how to move from a spiritual vision of religious truth towards a practical social change.

The common ground of their shared spirituality of human liberation is found in their great sensitivity to human suffering, both at existential and social levels. The depth of human misery (dukkha) is analysed by Buddhadāsa from a Dhammic perspective, and the universal character of the suffering of the poor is emphasized by Pieris from a biblical perspective. Concretely, both thinkers are aware of the enormous suffering that people undergo in the unjust socio-political systems of the modern Thai and Sri Lanka. Instead of delving into a theoretical explanation of the mystery of suffering, both thinkers strive to find practical guidelines for freedom from suffering in their respective religious traditions. This does not mean that their insights are theoretically weak. On the contrary, as we have seen, both thinkers are well versed in theories of religion and society; thereby developing their own creative insights into how religion can inspire people to pursue human liberation, balancing personal, social, and ecological dimensions. Both thinkers share the profound understanding of the dynamics of human suffering and the relationship between its particular experience and its universal implication—the interconnected reality of suffering as disclosed in the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (Paṭiccasamuppāda) and in the biblical teaching of the body of Christ in which if one member suffers, all suffer together (1 Cor 12, 26). As John May points out, there is a structural similarity between Buddhism and Christianity in their presentation of human suffering as at once personal and universal.² Buddhadāsa and Pieris share this common insight of both religious traditions, which inspires people to transform one’s own personal

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² May remarks that the unknown author of Job was transmuting his own very personal sufferings into timeless poetry in Israel at about same time as the Buddha was plumbing the depths of human suffering and disclosing its universal cause in India. To May, this universal understanding of particular human suffering gives the base of communication between Buddhists and Christians who struggle for human liberation. See John D’Arcy May, ‘What Do Socially Engaged Buddhists and Christian Liberation Theologians Have to Say to One Another?’ Dialogue, n.s., XXI (1994), 14.
suffering into compassion for the suffering of others and into liberative action to get rid of the real causes of human suffering.

Hence, to both Buddhadāsa and Pieris, the enemy of human liberation is selfishness, which disregards the suffering of others in self-seeking desire. This is the deeper reason why both thinkers are critical of liberal capitalism, a system which stimulates endless selfish desire under the guise of individual freedom and entices people to compete with one another for a happier life but actually leads them to suffering. Similarly, they criticize communist socialism for its brutal violence and oppressive regimes which have caused enormous suffering to people in the name of liberation and equality. Both thinkers present an alternative model of human community, in which individual freedom is to be balanced with personal responsibility for the good of society as a whole and social systems are to be organized by the fundamental principles of peace and justice, promoted by all major religions. Both thinkers agree that their common vision will be realized only through community movements—a movement promoting grassroots communities as a counter-society against the dominant socio-political systems of modern society. These communities, represented by Suan Mokkh and Tulana, also show both thinkers’ eco-friendly vision which contains significant insights to overcome the environmental crisis today. Facing the various forms of ecological problems at the global level, environmentalists are increasingly realizing that scientific research and public policy are not sufficient to change people’s behaviour for a sustainable future; religious ethics and spirituality must be engaged to transform human consciousness and action to care for the earth.\(^3\) Buddhadāsa and Pieris have aptly responded to this call of the times by establishing community centres which demonstrate their common vision of an eco-friendly human society and their shared spirituality of selfless commitment for human liberation.

In short, both Buddhadāsa and Pieris agree on what the root problems of modern society are, still at work in the twenty first century: ideological conflict, social

\(^3\) See Donald K. Swearer, ‘Buddhism and the Challenges of the Modern World’, paper for a speech at the centenary of Buddhadāsa’s birth (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2006), pp. 1-14 (p. 6).
injustice, and environmental crisis. They also agree on the need for religious engagement in the struggle against those problems. In response to the challenges of the absolutist political ideologies—communism and capitalism, both thinkers strive to elaborate a religiously inspired humanism which seeks to establish a more just and peaceful society. Their humanistic vision is even more relevant to the post-Cold War world where religio-ethnic and cultural fundamentalisms flourish as the new forms of political ideologies, creating violent conflicts in many countries. As we saw in the previous chapters, both Buddhadāsa and Pieris stand firm against such trends and draw profound insights from their respective religious traditions to promote the universal spirit of tolerance, nonviolence, justice and peace. The deepest motive of their liberative action for social change is their great compassion towards the suffering people. They agree that the root of human suffering is egoistic greed, which is now more enhanced by materialistic consumerism or Mammonism in the global capitalist society. Their community movements shed light on the problems of socio-economic injustice and environmental crisis, which have reached an extremely serious level today. Both thinkers, however, have different ways of dealing with these issues, different ways of human liberation, which are not contradictory but complementary to each other, as we shall show in the following two sections.
2. Two Ways of Human Liberation

Suan Mokkh and Tulana symbolically represent the dynamics of convergence and divergence between Buddhadāsa and Pieris. Both places are centres for embodying their respective yet shared vision of a humanistic community which seeks human liberation in harmony with nature, in contrast to the dominant socio-economic systems of modern Asia. Both centres are full of symbolic arts which reveal their different approaches to human liberation: most statues and paintings at Suan Mokkh draw on Buddhist inspiration, derived from Buddhadāsa’s teachings of the individual spiritual praxis and enlightenment; whereas those at Tulana demonstrate Pieris’ concern for interreligious learning and social justice. As we have seen, Buddhadāsa emphasizes the incessant practice of the pure Dhamma which aims to achieve personal liberation (chit-wāng) in the daily activities of the community. This is what is meant by the name Suan Mokkh, ‘the garden of liberation’. In contrast, Pieris always stresses the integral human liberation which is to be realized only through interreligious dialogue and collaboration for justice and peace. The name ‘Tulana’ refers to the continuing ‘discernment’ of the liberative aspects of religions and the enormous effort needed to reach ‘balance’ between the interior and social dimensions of liberation. Thus, the very names of each centre show the different models of radical orthopraxis promoted by Buddhadāsa and Pieris: one is the Dhammic essentialist model; the other is the dialogical integrationist model. The locations of each centre also confirm this distinction: Buddhadāsa searched and found a forest in the vicinity of his hometown as the most appropriate place for cultivating and spreading pure Dhamma; whereas Pieris found a proper place for engagement with the rural poor, not far from the capital city, in order to help the poor youth to integrate their interreligious learning into the struggle against socio-economic injustice.

These two different models of radical orthopraxis are basically conditioned by the

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4 See Chapter I, p. 36.
5 See Chapter IV, p. 145.
two particular historical contexts as examined in Chapter I and IV: the ever-changing modern Thai society in which the traditional Theravada beliefs, values and practices are challenged to be rethought; and the postcolonial modern Sri Lanka in which people have suffered from the ethnic war, terrorism, and poverty. The traditional Thai Sangha has lost its influence over the people newly emerged from the modernized intellectual middle class. In the context of the two political traditions, the absolutist and the democratic, these modern Thais have asked for a reformist inspiration from the Buddhist leaders.⁶ As for the Christian churches in Sri Lanka, they have faced a double challenge: the Buddhist mistrust of their sincerity to abandon the triumphalist spirit of the colonial Christianity; and the Marxist criticism against the oppressive privileged class, in which many Christian elites are also included. Furthermore, the long lasting Tamil-Sinhala conflict and violence have left serious social scars both outside and inside the Christian communities.⁷ It is within these particular historical situations that both thinkers are engaged in their respective forms of religiously inspired liberative action.

Buddhadāsa’s response to the problems and the demands of modern Thai society is to reform traditional Buddhist practices, anticipating that a reformed Buddhism will bring about a reformed society. It may be useful to analyze his approach in the conceptual categories suggested by Bellah.⁸ In Bellah’s view, there have been four types of religious response to modernization in Asia:

1. Conversion to Christianity, which is limited to a small number but has had a strong impact on social change through Christian educational institutions.

2. Traditionalism among non-elite groups, who consider change to be neither necessary nor desirable.

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⁷ See Chapter IV, pp. 132-4.
(3) Reformism, a movement that reinterprets a particular religious tradition to show not only its compatibility with modernization, but also its demands for important aspects of modernity.

(4) Neotraditionalism, which is often adopted by traditional elite groups as an ideology designed to keep social change to a minimum and defend the status quo as far as possible.  

These fourfold religious responses, according to Bellah, may shade into one another and are often combined with the three influential secular ideologies—liberalism, nationalism and socialism. He remarks that the two main alternatives frequently chosen by Asian religious elites are reformism and neotraditionalism. Reformists are convinced that religion must not be a hindrance to social and cultural modernization but rather a driving force to foster it. Hence, to Bellah, reformists or modernists usually promote ‘a return to the early teachers and text, a rejection of most of the intervening tradition, [and] an interpretation of the pristine teaching…as advocating social reform and national regeneration’. He points out that reformism always implies an ‘intense self-criticism of tradition’; whereas neotraditionalism uses ‘modern ideas and methods to defend traditional cultural values, which are held to be superior to those of any other tradition’. He remarks that the aggressive traditionalists are hostile to any form of modern Western culture, while the moderate traditionalists passively ignore the foreign-domestic modernizers and their works. In his view, these mild traditionalists usually shade into the neotraditionalist movement which consciously utilizes modern ideas and organizations for the sake of traditional value commitments. Thus, to Bellah, in the face of modernity, religious elites in Asia are often divided either into reformism, which advocates the substantial change of religious practices and institutionalized value systems in accord with modern

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10 See Ibid., p. 215.
12 Ibid., p. 213.
13 Ibid., p. 201.

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culture; or into neotraditionalism, which regards modern components only as instruments for advocating non-modern or anti-modern values and ends.¹⁵

Buddhadāsa’s radical orthopraxis clearly stands for reformism, without excluding a neotraditionalist concern for defending Buddhism. In fact, his approach is more sophisticated than the reformism and the neotraditionalism categorized by Bellah. For Buddhadāsa does not simply accept and adapt modern values, but keeps criticizing the negative aspects of modern society from the Dhammic point of view. He does not simply defend the Buddhist tradition from the modernist attack either; his entire life and work involve the reform of the traditional Buddhist beliefs and practices which are not in accord with the core of Dhamma and the modern scientific mentality. In other words, his is a critical Dhammic essentialist approach balancing the dynamics of both reformism and neotraditionalism: he is going back to the sources of Buddhism, but neither in order to defend tradition for its own sake as neotraditionalist does, nor to simply reject a living tradition of faith for adapting modernization as reformist does. His approach is not just a rigid return to the pure Buddhist sources but a struggle to retrieve what those sources actually point to—a liberative praxis of the early Buddhist community, which enables contemporary Buddhists to critically and creatively engage with modernity.

Buddhadāsa’s radical orthopraxis, therefore, is a unique approach that aims to transform both the adhammic traditional Theravada practices and the selfish-materialistic modern social behaviours, through a radical reinterpretation of basic Buddhist principles. His radical orthopraxis, however, is not primarily concerned with the institutional reform of the Sangha or the structural transformation of modern Thai society. Although his Dhammic socialism deals with the need for change in the contemporary socio-political systems, his main concern always lies in the spiritual praxis of the void-mind (chit-ñāṇa) which aims to cultivate personal and social peace (nibbāna).¹⁶ To Buddhadāsa, social change is to be a consequence of individual transformation; and structural change is to be oriented toward establishing

¹⁵ See Ibid., p. 208.
a society in which the spiritual praxis or the practice of Dhamma is fully encouraged.

By contrast, Pieris is always keen on promoting the structural transformation of both the unjust socio-political systems and the hierarchical institutional churches. Pieris does not belong to Bellah’s category on Christianity—a powerful Christian minority which propagates modern values through educational institutions. As we have noted, he is rather critical of the Christian hegemony, spreading the Western values and cultures in the name of modernization. He is also critical of the Christian churches’ alliance with the oppressive political power during the colonial period and their continuing association with the unjust socio-economic power of the postcolonial period. There can be no doubt that Marxism and Liberation Theology are the two main sources from which Pieris has drawn his awareness of the structural injustice in the dominant socio-economic political systems. However, Pieris is not merely a Marxist-inspired liberation theologian. His radical orthopraxis is rather rooted in his sharp understanding of the Asian reality of poverty and religiosity, in the light of the biblical message of ‘double baptism’.  

Both Marxism and Liberation Theology are focused on the socio-economic injustice imposed on the poor masses. Pieris learned from them the importance of the struggle against forced poverty; and has further developed the idea by giving it a decisive soteriological significance as expressed in the second axiom of his Christology: Jesus is the defence pact between God and the poor. However, as noted in Chapter V, Pieris is critical of both the Marxist bias against religion and the liberationist prejudice against the non-Christian religions.  

His creative analysis of the poverty-religiosity dynamics holds at once the psycho-spiritual and the socio-political dimensions of every religion in their liberating and enslaving aspects.  

This is a unique integrationist approach to human liberation that Pieris has developed through his radical return to the sources of both Buddhist and Christian traditions and through his constant engagement with the complex situation of the religio-ethnic

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17 See Chapter IV, p. 144; Chapter V, pp. 173-5, 185; Chapter VI, p. 191, 202, 223.  
18 See Chapter VI, pp. 211, 214-5, 217.  
19 See Chapter V, pp. 168-70.  
and socio-political conflicts in Sri Lanka. In other words, the driving force of his creative engagement with the Asian reality of poverty and religiosity is the liberative experience and praxis of the living tradition of both religions. His critical view of the traditional Western theologies and his dialectical integration of the inculturationist-liberationist tensions are paradoxically influenced by ‘ressourcement’—a movement going back to the sources of tradition. To Pieris, these inspiring sources are not mere scriptures but the living praxes of the community of faiths, which convey the core experience of liberation/salvation through collective memories and constant interpretations.

Thus, Pieris brings the energizing hearts of both religious traditions into the contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action for the total liberation of the poor, oppressed and marginalized. To Pieris, the ceaseless commitment to social justice is at the heart of Christian faith; and only the conscientized poor know and speak ‘the language of liberation, the language of the spirit, and the language of the true religion’. He is convinced that Mammon works through the unjust structure of the socio-economic political systems, whereas God inspires his people to struggle for the fundamental transformation of those systems. His radical orthopraxis aims to bring about a revolutionary change in the ecclesial structure from the hierarchical model to the communion model, in which basic human communities are considered to be the foundation of the new Church structure. This is by no means to say that

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21 The term ‘ressourcement’ means ‘return to the sources’, which refers to a movement for renewal in 20th-century Catholic theology culminated in the Second Vatican Council. The main point of this movement is that if theology is to move beyond a sterile, self-referential rationalism, and to be a source of renewal for the Church as a whole, it must read not just texts concerning the ‘great ideas’ of the dogmatic tradition but also the spiritual, liturgical, and classic texts of the entire tradition; above all, it must give primacy of place to the sacred text of the Scripture. In the process of a contemplative, historically conscious, and renewal-oriented reading of the texts, the Christian Scripture comes to be contextualized as the textual framework of a living tradition of hearing and responding to God’s revealing Word; and the Church itself comes to be understood as a living community of faith around text and interpretive traditions. Thus, what is emphasized is that theology is not simply reasoning about the Church’s teachings, but a self-conscious search for God as he reveals Himself in the Scripture and in the life of the Christian community. See Brian E. Daley, ‘Knowing God in History and in the Church: Dei Verbum and Nouvelle Théologie’, in Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology, ed. by Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 333-51.


23 See Pieris, ‘Faith Communities and Communalism’, in Fire and Water, p. 112.

24 For the meaning of the term ‘Mammon’ as used by Pieris, See Chapter V, Footnote 20.
Pieris is not concerned with individual praxis. Pieris does recognize the importance of the spiritual praxis for individual transformation, as noticeable in his constant emphasis on voluntary poverty, the struggle to be poor, and gnostic detachment. However, as a Christian theologian, his primary concern always lies in the communal action aimed at the fundamental transformation of the unjust social structures.

Thus, in response to their particular historical contexts, Buddhadāsa and Pieris have developed two different forms of radical orthopraxis. One is the reformative Buddhist action which emphasizes the personal Dhamma practice from which societal change is to arise. The other is the liberative Catholic dialogical action which stresses the interreligious collaboration for the change of the unjust societal structure to which the poor are to be awaken. Both thinkers search for the source of their inspiration by going back to the origin of their respective religious traditions. This means that two different world views or two different soteriological paradigms are exposed in their radical orthopaxes: that of the early Buddhist discourses (sutta[s]) and that of the Christian Scriptures. The former presents individual mind (citta) as the locus of human liberation (nibbāna), the ultimate freedom from suffering (dukkha) and the bondage of the ever-rounding rebirth (samsāra). The latter presents the People of God as the locus of human liberation, the ultimate realization of God’s Kingdom—the community of justice and love. In their application of these two different paradigms to the contemporary South and Southeast Asian contexts, both thinkers demonstrate their ‘creative fidelity’ to each religious tradition, as we noted in their innovative hermeneutics (Chapter II and V).

Buddhadāsa’s hermeneutic of the two levels of language is faithful to the Buddha’s own pedagogical device to help people enter into the Dhamma practice: the skilful use of an ultimate language (phasa tham) and a demotic language (phasa khon). His hermeneutic is also in the same line with the Theravada theory of the two levels of truth (paramattha-sacca and sammuti-sacca). However, in his application of this theory to the reinterpretation of the traditional Buddhist cosmology and the doctrine

25 See Chapter II, p. 74; footnote 92.
of *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, Buddhadāsa goes sharply against the Theravada commentarial tradition. He has two lines of critique: the one towards the *Abhidhamma*; and the other towards Buddhaghosa. In his view, the *Abhidhammic* interpretation of the Buddhadhamma is too abstract and philosophical, irrelevant to the ordinary life; on the other hand, Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* is too influenced by the traditional cosmological concepts.\(^{26}\) To Buddhadāsa, the heart of the Buddhadhamma is neither abstract philosophy nor superstitious cosmology, but the liberative practical message to inspire people to practice the Buddhist path and attain liberation (*nibbāna*) in this very life. He never says that the *Abhidhamma* is wrong; he also admires Buddhaghosa as a great teacher.\(^{27}\) However, he does not agree with them in the main point of the Buddhadhamma: *Paṭiccasamuppāda* is to be practiced, not merely explained.

Buddhadāsa’s creativity is conspicuous in his reinterpretation of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* as the momentary interdependent event of arising and passing away of the human suffering (*dukkha*); and in his application of the same doctrine to Dhammic socialism. It is through his reinterpretation of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* that Buddhadāsa succeeds in linking the individual pursuit of spiritual enlightenment (*chit-vatāng*) and the wider good of society (Dhammic socialism). For Buddhadāsa, the personal freedom from ‘I’ and ‘mine’ is possible only through the mindful awareness of the voidness (*suññatā*) in all things, the all-pervasive interdependent reality. In other words, the person with the void-mind (*chit-vatāng*) clearly understands his/her social nature, as a selfless interdependent being, and tries to establish a society in which everyone is expected to recognize the good of the whole as more important than the good of the individual.\(^{28}\) Buddhadāsa interprets the interdependent reality (*idappaccayata*) of nature as ‘socialist’; thereby, he ensures that his socialist ideal is not imported from the Western ideologies but sprang from his own understanding of the doctrine of *Paṭiccasamuppāda*. However, as we pointed out in Chapter III, his Dhammic

\(^{26}\) See Chapter II, pp. 50, 61, 69-70.

\(^{27}\) Buddhadāsa says, ‘For the most part you will see that Buddhaghosa is a man of very great knowledge and of very great benefit... I hold him in respect for about 90 to 95 percent of what he wrote… But four or five I don’t agree with, *Paṭiccasamuppāda* for example… it outweighs all the rest in significance’. Buddhadāsa, *Paṭiccasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination*, p. 78.

\(^{28}\) See Sallie B. King, ‘Conclusion: Buddhist Social Activism’, p. 407.
socialism is a Buddhist vision, a principal theory, not a concrete political programme. It is the task of the next generations to develop his Dhammic socialism into the more appropriate forms of political theories in each context. A good example is the ‘Market Dhammic Socialism’ suggested by Puntarigvivat. Since Buddhadāsa opened the way to connect the Buddhist doctrine to the political theories, others can easily apply the principles of Dhammic socialism into the concrete situations.

Just as Buddhadāsa’s essentialist Dhammic perspective shows his creative fidelity to the early Buddhist tradition, Pieris’ integrationist hermeneutic of enreligionization and his interreligious theology of liberation reveal his creative fidelity to the early Christian tradition, recovered by Vatican II. As we noticed in Chapter VI, Pieris’ fidelity to the orthodox faith of the Church does not prevent him from searching for a new Christological thought and expression beyond the Chalcedonian formula. His radical approach, in fact, deepens the truth of the Chalcedonian dogma: it elucidates the soteriological meaning of the God-Man Jesus by appealing to the core of the biblical message—Jesus is the embodiment of the covenantal love between God and His People. To Pieris, God’s People refer first and foremost to the poor and the humble who await God’s salvation. The significance of his new Christological paradigm lies in its fidelity to the fundamental Christian spirituality (agapeic involvement for justice) and in its creativity to communicate with other religions (gnostic detachment from Mammon). In other words, Pieris succeeds in applying the simple but profound biblical message, the twofold love commandment, to his twofold Christological axiom: (1) Jesus is the irreconcilable conflict between God and Mammon (love of God); and (2) Jesus is the irrevocable defence pact between God and the poor (love of neighbour). Pieris creatively refers the first axiom to the common spirituality of all religions (interior freedom) and the second axiom to the particular Christian spirituality (social liberation). It must be emphasized again that this twofold axiom does not merely explain Christological theories but intends to evoke a liberative Christopraxis. The heart of this praxis is the Church’s kenotic

30 See Chapter VI, pp. 207-8.
31 See Ibid., pp. 212-3.
32 See Ibid., p. 211.
solidarity with the liberative streams of other religions for the total liberation of the poor. Through his kenotic ecclesiology, Pieris shows his faithfulness to the early Christian spirituality promoted by Vatican II (the communion model of church) and his creative Asian sensitivity to other religions (the basic human communities). His pursuit of ‘ressourcement’ is thus undertaken through his sincere communication with the living community of other traditions.

There can be no doubt that the most important source of Pieris’ creativity is his engagement with Buddhism: he has learned the soteriological significance of gnostic language through his thorough study of Buddhist scripture and philosophy, his sincere experience of Buddhist meditation, and his constant dialogue with various groups of Buddhists. As we noted in Chapter V, Pieris integrates Buddhist gnosis with Christian agape and the metacosmic religiosity of both religions with the cosmic spirituality of the poor; and brings them together into the holistic radical orthopraxis of the struggle to be poor and for the poor. His radical orthopraxis, therefore, can be characterized as a Buddhist-Christian liberative spirituality, pursued in a holistic integrationist approach to the Asian reality. The concept of ‘the poor’ is a hermeneutical key to understand his Buddhist-Christian spirituality of interior freedom and social liberation. Pieris presents ‘the poor by option’ as the people who live in the common spirituality of all religions, especially referring to the Buddhist gnostic detachment; and ‘the poor by circumstances’ as the people who suffer from the various forms of oppression and marginalization, for whom the Christian agapeic involvement is asked. Pieris sees the unique character of the Christian spirituality in its particular emphasis on the soteriological significance of the poor, chosen to be God’s covenantal partner.

However, Pieris is aware that some Hindu texts, as Amaladoss points out, also entail the mythical reference to God’s intervention (avatara) in the lives of suffering people in order to liberate the oppressed and re-establish justice (dharma). Pieris recalls that even in the Buddhist scriptures, there are some messianic texts

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33 See Chapter VI, pp. 202-3.
prophesising the future Buddha Maitreya who will appear in the company of a Universal King of Righteousness to bring deliverance to the suffering people.\textsuperscript{35} He also remarks that in almost all cosmic religions, there are gods and goddesses of justice to whom the poor have recourse.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, he acknowledges the work of biblical scholars showing that the motif of ‘option for the poor’ is found even among the ancient Israel’s neighbouring pagan nations.\textsuperscript{37} Pieris nevertheless contends that God as revealed in Christ is the One who has made that option or covenant to be the salvific path in which we humans are imperatively called to participate.\textsuperscript{38} He asserts that this kind of reciprocal involvement is not found in any other religions and that the Christian mission is to bear witness to this faith.\textsuperscript{39}

Thus, to Pieris, the biblical faith in God’s preferential option for the poor is a unique spirituality that Christians can contribute to interreligious exchange. He observes that many of his Buddhist, Hindu and Marxist friends in the basic human communities have been deeply moved by this unique character of God’s love for the poor. Through his own experience among the poor, Pieris is convinced that the suffering poor, no matter their religion, are the locus where the Christ reveals himself. He is also aware of the importance of the liberative ‘cosmic spirituality’ behind the primitive, superstitious and animistic forms of the popular religious expression of the poor. This explains why Pieris is critical of the anthropological term ‘animism’ applied to the tribal religions of the poor, which he considers pejorative. To him, the cosmic spirituality of the poor is as important as the metacosmic spirituality, in the process of pursuing the integral human liberation.

This positive approach to the popular cosmic religiosity of the poor is another crucial point on which Pieris contrasts with Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialist approach. To Buddhadāsa, as we noted in his critical reinterpretation of the traditional Buddhist cosmological concepts, the essence of human liberation is the experience of nibbāna in this life; and the popular religious beliefs and merit-making ceremonies are mere

\textsuperscript{35} See Ibid., p. 86.
\textsuperscript{36} See Ibid., p. 85.
\textsuperscript{37} See Ibid., p. 83.
\textsuperscript{38} See Ibid., p. 84.
\textsuperscript{39} See Ibid., pp. 88-9.
superstitions which obstruct the way of human liberation. Buddhadasa is critical not only of the popular forms of religious practices but also of the ordinary Buddhist belief in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. In other words, his hermeneutic of Dhamma language (phasa tham) asks for a radical reinterpretation of the demotic concept (phasa khon) of the Triple Gems (ti-ratana) of Buddhism. To him, they are not three different objects of Buddhist worship but the one reality of pure Dhamma, to be actualized in the minds of the noble practitioners.40 Thus, the popular religious beliefs and practices of the poor, accepted by Pieris as they retain their liberative potential, are rejected by Buddhadasa as an obstacle for human liberation.

There is a more subtle difference between the two thinkers in their understanding of unity and diversity of religions. Both thinkers agree that there is a common ground for all religions: Buddhadasa talks of the core of Buddhism which is the same core of all religions; Pieris also mentions the common spirituality of all religions which he calls a ‘soteriological absolute’.41 To both of them, this common core of all religions refers to the selfless, greedless, and anxiety-free life. However, Buddhadasa’s Dhammic essentialist view reveals his inclusivist approach to other religions, which is in sharp contrast to Pieris’ integrationist pluralistic approach. To Buddhadasa, there is only one ultimate truth shared by all religions beyond their different names. He tends to disregard the historical specificity and the cultural diversity of each religion as mere out-coverings of the common essence. His hermeneutic of the two levels of language is also applied to this matter: in Dhamma language (phasa tham), there is the ultimate unity in all religions; but, their diversity is recognized conventionally in demotic language (phasa khon).42 By contrast, Pieris emphasizes the importance of the particularity of each religion; even the common experience of the soteriological absolute itself is conditioned by various historical and cultural factors. In other words, to Pieris, the ultimate religious experience of human liberation itself is already an interpreted experience.43 He argues that interreligious dialogue and collaboration should not dilute the particular characters of each religion.

40 See Chapter II, p. 54.
41 See Chapter III, pp. 105-6, 108-9; Chapter VI, p. 213.
42 See Chapter II, p. 55.
43 See Pieris, Love Meets Wisdom, pp. 120-1.
in the name of the common truth or the peaceful relationship among religions. To Pieris, genuine dialogue is to challenge and contribute to each other through the unique spirituality of each religion, while keeping the common spirituality of selflessness in their liberative praxis.

In summary, the two forms of radical orthopraxis, developed by Buddhadāsa and Pieris in their particular historical contexts, reveal two different ways of religiously inspired human liberation. One is the reformative Buddhist way which promotes a Dhammic essentialist thought and praxis, aiming to achieve the personal and social transformation in accordance with the fundamental principles of the Buddhadhamma. The other is a dialogical Catholic way which promotes a holistic integrationist thought and praxis, aiming to achieve the interreligious collaboration for the integral human liberation and structural change in accordance with the vision of God’s Kingdom. In the following section, we will show that these two approaches have their convergent and complementary points which deepen our understanding of the dynamics of human liberation. We will also show how the analogies between these two models of radical orthopraxis provide some significant implications for our own Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action; and for interreligious dialogue and action in general in both the local and global contexts.

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44 See Chapter VI, pp. 217-8.
3. An Integrated Buddhist-Christian Radical Orthopraxis

In order to elucidate the analogical correlation between the two forms of radical orthopraxis, it may be useful to review some of the main points that we have made in the previous sections:

- The common motive of both thinkers’ liberative action is their compassion towards the suffering people in modern Thailand and Sri Lanka.

- Their shared vision is to transform society into a human socialist community, different from the given models of communism and capitalism.

- They agree that religion has to take a proactive role in the process of social change and human liberation.

- The main sources of their theories and praxes of human liberation are their respective religious scriptures.

- Buddhāsa focuses on the pure Buddhist source and brings essentialist Dhammic insights into his radical orthopraxis; while Pieris refers to both the biblical and Buddhist sources for his integrationist approach.

- Buddhāsa’s emphasis on personal liberative praxis contrasts with Pieris’ stress on communal action for social justice.

- The popular religious culture of the poor is regarded by Buddhāsa as an obstacle for human liberation; while its liberative potential is positively estimated by Pieris.

- Both thinkers are proactive in their promotion of interreligious dialogue and
peaceful coexistence of religions; but, Buddhadasa’s Dhammic inclusivism contrasts with Pieris’ symbiotic pluralism.

The main analogically correlated theme that we can draw from these points is the dynamic of spiritual detachment and social engagement, which leads us to a deeper appreciation of what religion is and how religious truth interacts with social change. Both thinkers demonstrate that the only way in which their respective traditions can engage with the social reality of life today in Asia is by paradoxically going back not to written sources, not to commentarial sources, but to what it is that animates the originating tradition, which is praxis—a praxis of transformative spirituality in the living community. In other words, both thinkers identify religion as transformative praxis and as liberative spirituality, intrinsically involved in interior freedom and social liberation.

Therefore, the main point of convergence between the two radical orthopraxes is change: a change of the traditional religious life, a change of the psycho-spiritual life, and a change of the socio-economic political life. This means that both thinkers disclose a significant cultural shift arisen within both religious traditions during the second half of the last century: in response to the signs of the times, the urgent need for the fundamental renewal and transformation of the traditional religious beliefs and practices was appreciated not only by the post-Vatican II Catholic Church, but also by the reformist Buddhists in Asia. As John May points out, this new aspiration for change is a threat to the hierarchical authorities, whether within the Buddhist Sangha or the Vatican curia, who try to sanction the permanent power and institutional stability by emphasizing the absolute religious truths beyond the reach of social change.45 It is an inevitable outcome, however, that when the patterns of human action change, the established society changes with its taken-for-granted meanings and values.46 Change comes from action: religious truth is not merely an object of abstract theory but the permanent source of inspiration for people’s

46 See Ibid.
commitment to spiritual and social transformation. Our two thinkers and their radical orthopraxes are outstanding examples of this transformative spirituality, showing how religious insights inspire liberative movements for social change and how personal and social dimensions interact with each other in the pursuit of human liberation.

In the previous section, we noted that Buddhadāsa and Pieris uphold different primary concerns while recognizing the inseparable relationship between the spiritual praxis for individual transformation and the liberative action for social transformation. As we have already remarked upon, Buddhadāsa’s first priority is to help people attain spiritual peace (nibbāna) through the correct practice of the void-mind (chit-whelming); whereas Pieris gives his primacy to the agapeic commitment for social justice. It must be argued, however, that their different emphases are not contradictory but complementary to each other: one challenges and inspires the other’s dynamic of spiritual detachment and social engagement. In other words, through their imaginative conversation, Pieris can challenge Buddhadāsa to enhance his Dhammic socialism by adding a fine analysis of the structural injustice of capitalist society and by emphasizing the need of the communal struggle against the organized greed rather than simply appealing to the rich to abandon their personal greed. In turn, Buddhadāsa can challenge Pieris to be aware of the danger that the poor are easily misled by superstitious beliefs and practices while social activists are not free from their hidden desire for power and prestige; so the constant cultivation of interior freedom (chit-whelming) is essential in the process of their struggle for social justice. Thus, their two forms of radical orthopraxis are neither contradictory nor competitive; they are reinforcing each other with a dynamic balance between detachment and engagement.

This means that, through a reverential dialogue, both thinkers can help each other maintain their creative fidelity to the twofold liberative spirituality of their respective religious traditions: the early Buddhist spirituality of non-attachment (virāga) and compassion (karuṇā); and the biblical Christian spirituality of conversion (metanoia) and love (agape). As Harris aptly points out, the Buddhist concept of detachment
(virāga) does not refer to the passive withdrawal from society but to the mindful awareness of the true nature of things; and compassion (karuṇā) refers not only to the sublime state of mind in meditation, but to the liberative action to relieve the suffering of others. On the other hand, as Pieris always emphasizes, the biblical concept of conversion (metanoia) does not refer to the change of religion but to the fundamental turning from Mammon-worship to God’s Kingdom; and love (agape) refers not only to the charitable work for the needy, but to the liberative action to bring justice to the poor. In the Cakkavatti Śīhanāda Sutta, the Buddha also teaches in a repeated sentence that widespread poverty (dākkhina) is the source of all kinds of social vices; thereby the whole society becomes a society of wild beasts, where people use weapons against one another. As Harris remarks, this sutta presents the lack of compassion for the poor as the root of social disintegration; and shows how socio-economic injustice and the exploitation of the poor lead to great catastrophes.

Thus, the early Buddhist scripture does deal with the issue of poverty and injustice, while the Christian bible does talk of the spiritual freedom from greed and mental defilements (Col 3, 5). Hence, we can say that the root of analogy between Buddhāsa and Pieris is the Buddhist-Christian spirituality of detachment and engagement, detectable in the scriptures of both religions which are resonant with each other.

To both of our thinkers, the locus of this twofold spirituality of human liberation is community—a living community of faith, engaging with both the originating sources of tradition and the contemporary world. This is a crucially important point that illustrates how their shared vision is to be achieved and how we can develop our own radical orthopraxis, by overcoming their limitations and integrating their abundant insights. Buddhāsa’s community is basically a community of individuals struggling to attain the void-mind (chīt-wāriṅ). These individuals, however, are not isolated rational entities but a community of selfless persons, who strive to eradicate the roots of their self-seeking desires and to act in accordance with the Dhammic

49 See Harris, ‘Detachment and Compassion in Early Buddhism’, p. 7.
socialist principles. The measure of success or failure of this community, therefore, is not only the individual achievement of spiritual enlightenment but also its religious-social impact on the wider Thai society. There is no doubt that Buddhadāsa and Suan Mokkh have been a seminal influence on the development of socially engaged Buddhism in Thailand: many prominent Buddhist activists and grassroots communities, involved in the issues of poverty, gender discrimination and environmental destruction, have expressed their indebtedness to Buddhadāsa. Some of them, like Sulak Sivaraksa, are actively associated with the international community of Engaged Buddhism, together with the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh.\(^50\) Thus, Suan Mokkh is not an isolated forest meditation centre but an exemplary community of integral human liberation, promoting universal Buddhist values and principles which constitute a ‘new form of global ecumenical Buddhism’.\(^51\) These values and principles—wisdom, compassion, mindful awareness, peace, non-greed, non-violence, and the interdependent nature of all things—are the decisive factors that connect Suan Mokkh not only to other Buddhist communities, but also to other religious liberative movements.

Similarly, Tulana is not merely a research centre but a community of spiritual cultivation and social action, inspiring many individuals locally and internationally, while engaging with various basic human communities in Sri Lanka and in Asia. Pieris’ community is basically a community of the poor—the poor in spirit (Mt. 5, 3) and the socially poor (Luke 6, 20). This does not mean, however, that Pieris leaves out the ordinary people of the middle class, who have a good will but are unable to join the actual community of the poor and struggle against forced poverty in Asia. In his humanistic vision of a communion of communities, Pieris challenges people, both Christians and non-Christians alike, to discern what kind of liberative action will be possible in the context of each individual or groups. It might be a form of serious personal commitment to the basic human communities with the full spirit of voluntary poverty; or making a simple but important financial contribution to the liberation groups with the same spirit of voluntary poverty. In the Western context, it


\(^{51}\) See Ibid., p. 2.
might be a more effective and powerful praxis if one can join or support social action groups to challenge the unjust socio-economic political structure of the world. Hence, we can say that Tulana and its associated basic human communities work not only to deliver the poor from their burden of poverty but also to open up the eyes of the rich and ordinary people; and challenge them all to be delivered from their greed. The religio-social impact that Pieris and his interreligious community of liberation have made on the Christian and other religious liberative movements goes beyond the boundaries of Sri Lanka and Asia, as demonstrated by the great numbers of academic theses on Pieris at the doctoral and postgraduate levels throughout the world. Just as Suan Mokkh is connected to global community through Buddhadāsa’s promotion of the universal Buddhist values and principles for world peace, the liberative spirit of Tulana also spreads internationally through Pieris’ incessant crying out for justice and peace.

These correlated features of the liberative spirituality shared by Buddhadāsa and Pieris shed light on our search for a more appropriate form of Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action for the suffering people of the Theravada countries in the era of globalization. Both thinkers’ grassroots community movements for the integral human liberation propose a hope to the local and global citizens, living in a world engulfed in a deep crisis, to an extent never experienced before in history. As Wilfred points out, the prevailing culture of consumerism and the pursuit of pleasure are symptoms of deep insecurity, not of contentment and hope. Both the fear of the developed countries of the unknown future in the economic crisis, and the massive starvation and constant recourse to terrorist suicides in the developing countries signal the desperate aspiration for change in the current globalized free market system, which threatens not only the local cultures and economies but also the future of human existence on earth. People are increasingly aware that globalization is not merely an inevitable process of the complex and multifaceted sets of transnational and trans-cultural interactions; it is also an ideology driven by the neo-liberal

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economists backed by the political and military power of the United States, a New Empire. Against this neo-imperialist domination of the world and its false promises of permanent economic growth of nations, human freedom, and happiness, the voice of the people proclaiming that ‘a different world is possible and even necessary’ is heard everywhere. Susin argues that if this world is to be sustainable, it must be fundamentally changed; and this requires an ethic of living together in peace and keeping the earth habitable, which means an ethic of pluralism and justice. He asks whether religion, spirituality and theology have resources to assist in this urgent need of transformation of the present order of the world. Our answer is yes. As we have seen, this thesis presents Buddhadāsa and Pieris as two prominent models of radical orthopraxis, with their roots in the grassroots communities of the local context on the one hand, and providing a relevant response to the global demand of transformative spirituality on the other.

Our task is to develop their shared spirituality of human liberation and their common vision of a humanistic community into a more realistic agenda to counter the streams of neo-liberal globalization. To accomplish this task, we need a creative imagination based on real hopes, not on an impossible utopian dream. The real hope must come from our unshaken belief in the human ability to overcome crises and our humble acceptance of human limitations that mean we can always make mistakes and fail in our personal lives and social systems. This is a very important paradox: no saints believe that they are holy, but humbly confess that they are always sinners; the ideal Christian community is not the Christendom of the Roman Empire but the early Christian community of the ‘little ones’, broken and persecuted, but filled with the Spirit of love and hope. Just as the early Christians did not have any physical power to face the Roman Empire, we do not have the power to withstand the present empire of globalization. However, our option definitely must not be violent terrorism, which aggravates the situation and stands against our fundamental principles of non-violence and peace. The real source of our hope is to be found in our constant

55 L. C. Susin, ‘Introduction: This World can be Different’, in A Different World Is Possible, p. 9.
56 See Felix Wilfred, ‘Searching for David’s Sling: Tapping the Local Resources of Hope’, p. 93.
encounter and strong solidarity with the victims of globalization, participating and sharing in their painful experience of indignity, deprivation and exploitation. Touching the suffering reality of the marginalized people, no one is to be deceived by the mystification of global capitalism. This is why the grassroots communities of our two thinkers, especially the basic human communities, are crucially important.

Through our immersion into the reality of the poor, the victims of globalization, we experience not only their suffering and pain but also their joy, compassion, and the spirit of sharing. Most importantly, we can find a hope—the real hope that springs from the universal inspiration of humanity, deeply ingrained in the daily, which is always communal, life of the poor. As Wilfred aptly points out, universality is not to be confused with ubiquity: the capitalist culture of competition, consumption and selfishness may be present everywhere with the expansion of free-market; however, it does not mean that this culture qualifies to be universal, which is basically a spiritual quality of God and true humanity—selfless love, goodness, openness, solidarity, and endurance in seeking justice and peace. The poor and the marginalized are replete with these universal spiritual qualities and express them in their daily lives, stories, songs, and dances. This is what Pieris calls a cosmic spirituality of the poor. Thus, while global capitalism constantly creates insecurity and a fragile culture, the poor and the marginalized provide a hope for the whole world, through their life as witness to the genuine universality of human beings. The global capitalists would like to believe that human history has reached its final phase with the triumph of capitalism; however, this is a myopic myth that all past empires also believed. In contrast, the poor know and believe, through their experiences and universal wisdom, that a different world is possible and, indeed, is coming. As an Indian proverb illustrates, ‘There are a thousand suns beyond the clouds’. We have to make this spirit of endurance and unfailing hope part of our own radical orthopraxis, to face fearlessly the challenges and crises brought on by global capitalism.

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57 See Ibid., p. 92.
58 See Ibid., p. 90.
59 Ibid., p. 91.
While committing ourselves to the grassroots communities, we must also actively use the global communication networks, just as the early Christians made use of the roads and communication systems of the Roman Empire. This is an area that our two thinkers are not familiar with. The creation of online communities inspired by the liberative spirituality is the most powerful threat to the new empire, because these communities have the capacity to influence the global flow of transformative ideas and motivate people to act immediately in any and every corner of the world. It is true that we are living in a world of deep crisis and insecurity, accelerated by the hegemonic and homogenizing forces of neo-liberal globalization. However, thanks to the global communication networks, highly developed for the intensification of the flow of trade and investment, we are now able to access each local context of the people and hear the voice of resistance, creative ideas, and hope from the whole world. Hence, the Buddhist notion of the interdependence of beings is felt as real today. As Wickeri says, ‘the global is in the local and the local is in the global’. The famous slogan, ‘Think globally, act locally’, is relevant to our situation, inspiring us to engage in the particular issues of our own local context, which means for us the suffering people in the Theravada society, while at the same time, relating the same issues to other local and global contexts. A real break with the mystification of globalization cannot come from simply rebelling against global capitalism; we must provide a spiritual vision of a more just and sustainable world and establish a community of actual people, who are deeply engaged in the grassroots communities and actively communicate with other liberative communities around the world. This is exactly what the World Council of Churches (WCC) calls for in its document of 2006:

People all over the world experience the impact of imperial forms of power on their communities. Meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the home of the World Social Forum (WSF), we are encouraged by the constructive and positive message of the movements gathering in the WSF that alternatives are possible. We affirm that we can and must make a difference by becoming transformative

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communities caring for people and the earth. [...] Challenged to monitor and transform economic globalization, we call ourselves to action as churches working alongside people of faith communities and movements.\textsuperscript{61}

This thesis has presented Buddhadāsa and Pieris as two exemplary models of these transformative religious community movements, embodying their common vision of a humanistic community, from which we have drawn a liberative spirituality for our own Buddhist-Christian radical orthopraxis. The main point of this spirituality is that human beings are not isolated rational entities, but a community of persons who are called to grow in spiritual praxis and social engagement. Facing the reality of human suffering, at once existential and social, we have to balance our spiritual cultivation of interior freedom with our social commitment for justice and peace. This dynamic movement of looking inward and looking outward is articulated by Pieris in his theory of <i>gnostic</i> detachment and <i>agapeic</i> involvement; in the same line, we can see the interaction between Buddhadāsa’s theories of the void-mind (<i>chit-wāng</i>) and Dhammic socialism. Their grassroots communities, Tulana and Suan Mokkh, are the locus of this twofold spirituality of human liberation. However, as we have shown, in the challenging situation of globalization, we have to reinforce our own grassroots community movements through a deeper immersion into the suffering reality of the marginalized; and an active interaction with other liberative communities through the global communication networks. As many people start to realize, our vision of a more just, a more peaceful, and a more sustainable world is not a utopian dream. It is an imperative realistic option for the future of the whole of humanity and the earth.

Conclusion

The question with which we began this study is concerned with the call of our time to rethink the meaning and role of religion in the face of local and global crises: how can a religious faith with its truth and vision act as a source of hope to the contemporary world? More precisely: how can religions do this in dialogue with each other? As we have argued, the answer is found in the interreligious liberative spirituality of spiritual freedom and social engagement, drawn from the comparative analysis of our two models of radical orthopraxis, which enables us to pursue personal-social transformation both in daily activities and in public spheres, here and now. Throughout this study, we have revealed two ways of religiously inspired human liberation, demonstrating how Buddhadāsa and Pieris radically return to the originating sources of each religious tradition; and how they retrieve and apply the inspirational liberative spirituality of the early living communities of faith to the contemporary praxis of spiritual-social liberation. We have presented their grassroots communities, Suan Mokkh and Tulana, as the locus of this twofold spirituality of human liberation—the praxis of spiritual detachment and social engagement. In our final judgement, these two thinkers, from their different but correlated perspectives and praxes, shed light on our search for a Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action in response to the contemporary problems of socio-economic injustice, religio-political conflicts, and environmental crises.

Through our thorough examination of the two models of this Buddhist-Christian transformative spirituality, we have disclosed the divergent aspects of Buddhadāsa’s Dhammic essentialist and Pieris’ dialogical integrationist approaches, as well as the converging points of their different radical orthopraxes. We have demonstrated that their differences are basically originated from the two different contextual demands: that for the reformist Buddhist inspiration in the rapidly changing society of modern Thailand; and that for the dialogical Buddhist-Christian inspiration in the long-drawn
religio-ethnic, socio-political conflicts of postcolonial Sri Lanka. As we have argued, the common motive behind both thinkers’ radical orthopraxes is their great compassion towards the suffering people in those particular historical contexts. We have noted that the driving force of Buddhadāsa’s radical thought and praxis is his interpretative theory of Dhamma language (phasa tham), drawn from his praxis-oriented reading of the early scriptural and exegetical texts of the Theravada tradition. This Dhammic essentialist hermeneutic is presented as the main source of his critical reinterpretation of the traditional beliefs, his theories of the void-mind (chit-wāng) and Dhammic socialism, and his inclusive pluralistic approach to other religions. In our assessment, this Dhammic essentialist radical orthopraxis contrasts with Pieris’ holistic understanding of the cosmic-metacosmic religiosity and his dialogical integrationist hermeneutic of enreligionization, which evokes the twofold liberative praxis—gnostic detachment and agapeic involvement—drawn from his praxis-oriented reading of the Buddhist and Christian sources. We have shown how creatively Pieris integrates this dialogical hermeneutic into his interreligious, liberative, and kenotic ecclesiology and Christology.

The most important inference derived from our comparative analysis of the two models of radical orthopraxis is that Buddhadāsa’s practical theories of personal (chit-wāng) and social liberation (Dhammic socialism) are perfectly resonant with Pieris’ twofold Christopraxis of the struggle to be poor and for the poor. This reflects the above mentioned integral praxis of spiritual detachment and social engagement, shared by both thinkers in their vision of a humanistic community. As we have argued, their differences—Buddhadāsa’s primary emphasis on the spiritual praxis for individual transformation and Pieris’ prime stress on the communal commitment for social justice—are not contradictory but reinforcing each other. Their differences have been presented as counter-point movements, actually enhancing each other’s radical orthopraxis, in their common struggle to build a more just and peaceful human society. Through our comparative analysis of their divergent and convergent aspects, we have now a more comprehensive and systematic understanding of each thinker’s thought and praxis, which leads us to pursue our own radical orthopraxis of spiritual freedom and social engagement in the face of neo-liberal globalization. We
have finally learned the importance of our local grassroots communities, through which we share the life of the suffering poor while actively communicating with other liberative movements using global community networks.

Despite our comprehensive and systematic examination of Buddhadāsa and Pieris, there are still some areas to be explored in future research. For instance, the ecological significance of their spirituality can be analysed further, focusing on the different concepts they employ: Buddhadāsa’s notion of anurak (anurakkhā in Pali) which refers to ‘caring’ for nature (Dhammajāi) with a pervasive feeling of human empathy (anu-kampā) for all of our surroundings; and Pieris’ emphasis on cosmic spirituality, a ‘sacramental’ world view, which he presents as an antidote to the current ‘gyne-ecological’ crisis accelerated by the self-indulgent individualism of liberal capitalism. Another intriguing research topic will be their views on the gender issue. As we mentioned in the first chapter, in the situation of the prevalent gender inequality in the Thai Buddhist community, Buddhadāsa’s innovative notion of Dhamma-mother (Dhammamātā) has provided ample opportunity for his women disciples to practice Dhamma as equal to his monk disciples, and to nurture the spiritual life of people through their teachings and virtues. As for Pieris, feminism, referring to woman in the Asian religious ethos, has been one of the most important subjects of his theology. In fact, our description of the cosmic spirituality reflects his feminist perspectives. To Pieris, a truly Asian feminism aims at more than winning lost rights or repairing past damages; it is rather to be a self-transcendent struggle for full humanity through a liberative, feminine, and cosmic spirituality in the desacralized modern world. Hence, a comparative analysis of these two thinkers’

views on the women’s role in the interreligious liberative spirituality could be a promising topic for future research.

The present thesis has deepened our understanding of interreligious dialogue and action in general, by presenting religion as transformative spirituality and its role as the liberative praxis of daily spiritual cultivation and the communal commitment for building a better world. Our work suggests that interreligious dialogue is not to be limited to academic seminars, religious events, or spiritual talks, which are irrelevant to the suffering life of the poor and marginalized under the global capitalism. Our two models of radical orthopraxis demonstrate that academic dialogue is not separate from dialogue of life, dialogue of religious experiences, and more importantly, dialogue of social action for justice and peace.\(^7\) We argue that all these four dimensions of dialogue are interconnected to enhance each other: our scholarly conversations motivate social action; our spiritual conversations inspire interreligious liberative praxis for personal-social transformation. From the Christian missiological point of view, our work confirms what the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC) emphasizes: the heart of Christian mission in Asia is the triple dialogue with the poor, cultures and religions; the Church of Asia is a pilgrim Church, walking humbly with people of other religions, towards God’s Kingdom of Justice and love.\(^8\)

This thesis is an exercise in missiology: its concern has been with the issues of motivation for interreligious dialogue and action in the contemporary world. My own context, with which I am now concluding, is my practical work as a member of the Jesuit mission in Cambodia, another Theravada country which has its own particular experience of poverty and religiosity. Through the disaster of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-79), the consequent civil war, and the recent, relatively stable but obviously dictatorial, ruling powers, Cambodian people have suffered from death,

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\(^7\) The four forms of interreligious dialogue—dialogue of life, of action, of religious experience, and of theological exchange—appear in the official documents of the Catholic Church, without claiming any order of priority. The order of the forms varies. See RM, 57; DM, 27-35; DP, 42-6.

starvation, disease, rampant corruption, and injustice. Emerging Cambodia in the era of globalization faces many new challenges in addition to the burdens of the past. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening dramatically and the cultural impact of globalization is striking the main cities. The traditional values and customs have been hurt not only by the wars but also by the current influx of materialistic consumerism and competitive individualism.

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) began to work with Cambodian refugees in the Thai camps in the early 1980s. After accompanying them back into Cambodia in 1990, the JRS and the Jesuit Service (JS) became parts of the Jesuit mission in the country, which has engaged in the social, educational, and pastoral services. The heart of our social service is the vocational skills training school for the disabled, Banteay Prieb—the centre of ‘dove’ (peace). Most students, men and women, are the victims of war and land mines, and some have suffered from polio. They are the poorest of the poor in the country, coming from rural areas. Hence, our work for the disabled is always in cooperation with our integral rural development programmes and the social, pastoral community centres of Catholic churches throughout the country. Traditional belief in spirits (neak ta in Khmer) is deeply engrained in the life of these rural poor, the majority of the whole population, whose identity is often defined by Theravada Buddhism, the national religion. The cosmic and metacosmic religiosity of Theravada Buddhism is a source of joy and consolation for the poor Cambodians amidst their suffering and despair. However, the country suffers from the lack of human resources in every field, especially qualified religio-social leaders, who can motivate people not only to work for economic development but to act non-violently for human rights, justice-based reconciliation, and the civil movements of anti-corruption and environmental preservation. This is why some Jesuits have also been involved in higher education, and many of their students are working with NGOs and Church organizations engaged in these issues. The formation of moral, compassionate, and competent future leaders has emerged as one of the most important tasks of the Jesuit mission in Cambodia.

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10 See Ibid., pp. 25-9.
The spirit of dialogue and collaboration with Buddhism permeates every dimension of our mission activities. Most of those whom the Jesuit mission serves are the Buddhist suffering poor; most Khmer co-workers in our team are also Buddhist; and most cooperative partners in our educational, social, pastoral works are Buddhist monks and lay leaders. Through our working experience, we know how to pursue the dialogue of life and action in a reverential mode. However, only a handful of us know how to partake in the dialogue of spiritual experience and truth sharing. This requires a study of Buddhism in depth as well as a participatory experience of Buddhist meditation and ritual ceremonies. Given the serious lack of qualified Buddhist teachers, either monk or lay, due to the past genocide and war, it is not easy to meet an exemplary Buddhist master who can guide our study and meditation; let alone lead our Buddhist study and spiritual cultivation to social engagement. Fortunately, there was one outstanding master, the late venerable monk Maha Ghosananda, who was often called the ‘Gandhi of Cambodia’. His calm and gentle smile, straightforward yet profound teachings, and compassionate engagement in the Dhamayietra (Peace Walk) movement inspired many Buddhists and non-Buddhists to join his ‘step-by-step’ journey towards justice, freedom and peace, in the midst of the pervasive hatred and violence. The heart of his spirituality is beautifully expressed in his poetic prayer as follows:

The suffering of Cambodia has been deep.
From this suffering comes Great Compassion.
Great Compassion makes a Peaceful Heart.
A Peaceful Heart makes a Peaceful Person.
A Peaceful Person makes a Peaceful Family.
A Peaceful Family makes a Peaceful Community.
A Peaceful Community makes a Peaceful Nation.
And a Peaceful Nation makes a Peaceful World.

11 For the short profile of Ghosananda and the collection of his teachings, see Maha Ghosananda, *Step by Step: Meditations on Wisdom and Compassion*, ed. by Jane Sharada Mahoney and Philip Edmonds (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1992).
May all beings live in Happiness and Peace.

Amen.\textsuperscript{12}

Is this not a perfect echo of our two thinkers’ interreligious liberative spirituality of spiritual-social transformation? Just as Buddhāsa and Pieris do, Ghosananda begins with great compassion towards the suffering people; and just as our two thinkers extend their compassion to the suffering of the whole world and nature, Ghosananda ends his prayer with a sincere wish for all beings of the earth, remarkably with the Christian word ‘Amen’. He is convinced that world peace cannot be realized without the sincere commitment of each person with the inner peace and the outer skills of cooperation. In his own words: ‘Peacemaking is the middle path of equanimity, non-duality, and non-attachment. Peacemaking means the perfect balance of wisdom and compassion, and the perfect meeting of humanitarian needs and political realities’.\textsuperscript{13} This is resonant with our two thinkers’ shared spirituality of spiritual detachment and social engagement. Finally, just as Buddhāsa does, he believes that every man and woman has the same nature of Buddha, Allah, and Christ; so, he invites all the people of other religions to walk together as co-pilgrims towards the peace of the world.\textsuperscript{14}

From the beginning, the Jesuit mission in Cambodia has been carried out in dialogue and collaboration with Buddhists like Ghosananda, not only by physically participating in the annual peace walk (\textit{Dhamayietra}) but, more importantly, by implementing its spirit—compassion, non-violence, reconciliation, justice and peace—at every level of our works. However, this has been done without clear awareness and theoretical support; so, sometimes the importance of this spirit of dialogue is forgotten under the pressure of the immediate tasks that each section of our mission has to undertake. Hence, I hope that this thesis can bring a fresh insight and a renewed awareness of the significance of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action, not only to the Jesuit mission in Cambodia but to all missionary groups in

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 28.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 52.
\textsuperscript{14} See Ibid., pp. 74-5.
Asia and our beloved Buddhist partners as well. As we have argued through our extensive examination of the two models of interreligious transformative spirituality, the greatest duty of all religions today is to build together a global communion of basic human communities, in which the personal, social, and ecological dimensions of liberation are well balanced.

In conclusion, I am very grateful and privileged to have had the opportunity to examine these two great thinkers’ radical orthopraxes comprehensively, and to draw our own Buddhist-Christian dialogue and action for the suffering people in the grassroots basic human communities of Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Cambodia, in solidarity with other liberative movements through the global communication networks. We see the seeds of hope in the poor who have been broken and marginalized; but now being healed, recovered, and empowered to face the threats of global capitalism without fear. As Wilfred says, they look like David before Goliath. But, we know that God will never side with Goliath. We also know, as Ghosananda says, that peace is coming slowly, step by step. Our work on Buddhadāsa and Pieris is to be a small but meaningful step in this journey towards a more human, more just and more peaceful world.

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