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## <Book Review>

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Nathan McGovern. *Holy Things: The Genealogy of the Sacred in Thai Religion*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Peter A. Jackson\*

*Holy Things: The Genealogy of the Sacred in Thai Religion* is an ambitious composite of intersecting analyses. Nathan McGovern critiques the notion of syncretism in Thai religious studies, presents a history of rituals seeking boons from *sing saksit* or “holy things,” and locates Thai religious discourses in a deep history of developments across India and Europe. A central argument across these themes is that key concepts in Thai Buddhism and spirit rituals changed dramatically with the impact of Western discourses of religion, rationality, and science.

The starting point of McGovern’s explorations is the question of how Thai Buddha images came to be regarded as *sing saksit* alongside Brahmanical and other deities deemed capable of granting boons. McGovern observes that while most Thais view *sing saksit* as a unified category, scholars have often seen the worship of magical spiritual personalities as a syncretic mix of traditions. In contrast, the author contends that the worship of deities and Buddha images to obtain boons for worldly objectives is not a syncretic accretion but rather emerges from the history of Buddhism itself.

*Holy Things* is the first extended study of *sing saksit* as a central element of Thai magical knowledge, or *saiyasat*, and McGovern examines the discourses surrounding the seeking of boons and the rituals to honor deities when boons are granted. While showing that ideas of syncretism as the supposed pollution of an original pure Buddhism are fundamentally misguided, the author states that Thai religion nonetheless presents situations “for which syncretism is a seductively attractive explanation” (p. 8). In addressing this paradox, he takes readers on an odyssey through the religious histories of Europe, India, and China as well as an exegesis of early Thai texts relating to religious belief and ritual.

Developing from studies of scripture-based traditions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—religious studies has had difficulty developing concepts for religions based more on ritual than

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on doctrines to attain salvation. The goal of worshipping *sing saksit* is to attain advantages in this world, not to be liberated from it, and the fact that Thai rituals differ so much from the founding orientation of religious studies led some to mistakenly regard them as animist accretions to Buddhism. The limitations of religious studies meant that anthropologists were the first to study Thai religiosity as a totality, and McGovern draws implicitly upon their perspectives while using religious studies methodologies to debunk views that Thai religion is syncretic. Indeed, he details beliefs and practices that early religious studies scholars dismissed as superstitious ritual. By studying Thai *sing saksit* within a religious studies frame, McGovern provides historical perspectives often absent from anthropological accounts and offers insights into the sources of religious inclusivism in Thailand.

*Holy Things* is a major work that locates Thai religious history in a transnational sweep from Europe to South Asia and China. McGovern traces how the West emerged from the mixing of Greek and Abrahamic traditions as subsequently transformed in the scientific revolution. Indic traditions are shown to be a mix of Brahmanical and Buddhist forms, while pre-Buddhist Thai spirit beliefs are shown to have deep Chinese influences. Everywhere we look, we find nothing but mixing. There is no pure Buddhism or Thai religion, whether in the past or today, and in critiquing accounts of syncretism McGovern dismantles the common tripartite division of Thai religiosity into a mix of three religions: spirit beliefs (*phi*), Brahmanism/Hinduism (*phram*), and Buddhism (*phut*).

In Part 1, “Contextualizing Holy Things,” McGovern takes readers on a transcontinental exploration, showing similarities between the histories of Christianity, Vedic religion, and Buddhism by referring to deeper Indo-European traditions. In Chapter 2, he uses Jan Assman’s account of “implicit theology” to argue that Buddhism is fundamentally a theological enterprise that incorporated Brahmanical deities in subordinated inferior positions beneath enlightened Buddhas. Chapter 3 traces multiple influences in Siamese/Thai history—Dvaravati Mon, Khmer, Sanskrit, Pali Buddhism—revealing the cultural plurality that has marked Siam/Thailand as “a nexus of cosmopolitan transformation” (p. 61). In Chapter 4, “The Genealogy of the Sacred,” McGovern claims that *saksit*, the operational term in *sing saksit*, was not originally a Buddhist concept but rather was associated with *saiyasat* and Brahmanism.

In Part 2 McGovern studies early Thai texts to trace historical uses of the term *saksit*. While noting that this textual corpus predominantly reflects elite discourses, he nonetheless argues that older non-elite understandings are not completely lost, only that they “have been mediated by elites” (p. 85). However, questions remain about how representative the texts McGovern studies are of the totality of Thai religious discourses. Surviving texts were composed by small numbers of literate kings and monks, as well as poets and scholars associated with royal courts. While these elite authors’ texts are relatively numerous, it is not clear that they do indeed provide access to the premodern folk beliefs that undoubtedly were important

sources of contemporary rituals relating to *sing saksit*.

McGovern's study of Thai texts includes excerpts in Thai script with translations. These Thai excerpts will interest specialists but not those who do not read Thai, and perhaps they could have been placed in appendices to keep the book's analytical focus on McGovern's arguments. The author also assumes readers have a background in Greek scholarship. Numerous religious studies terms and phrases are presented in Greek script without roman transliterations or translations. While giving evidence of the author's erudition, this will be frustrating for those who have not studied Greek.

Some arguments hinge on detailed linguistic analyses across Greek, Sanskrit, and Pali, and several of McGovern's conclusions are open to alternative interpretations. The author traces the etymology of the key term *saiyasat* to the Pali *seyyā*, which means "sleeping" or "bed" and ends in a long "ā" vowel. However, the authors of the *Royal Institute Dictionary* (1982) trace the origin of *saiyasat* to the Pali word *seyya*, which means "excellent" and ends with a short "a" vowel. The fact that *saiyasat* has a short medial "a" suggests that the Thai scholars are more likely to be correct. This appears to challenge McGovern's argument that *saiyasat* was originally understood as the "sleeping doctrine," in contrast with Buddhism (*phutthasat*) as the doctrine of "enlightenment" or "awakening."

McGovern contends that previously there was a distinction between miracles associated with Buddhist merit and the magical *saksit* power accessed through Brahmanical *saiyasat* ritual. He observes that in early Thai sources *saksit* was paired with words for power and authority, such as *amnat*, *kamlang*, and *rit*, while Buddha images were rarely described with this term even though they are now often described as *saksit*. McGovern argues that while Buddha images were originally symbols of the Buddha's transcendent wisdom, they came to be viewed as *sing saksit* capable of granting boons because of Western influences on Thai religious discourses. *Saksit* was chosen to translate "holy" in Thai versions of the Bible, and McGovern argues that as a result Buddha images came to be considered *saksit* personalities:

[A]n idiosyncratic shift in the meaning of a single word [*saksit*] has opened up an entirely new conceptual space for the practice of Thai religion . . . [I]t has made it possible for spirits, gods, and Buddha images to be considered together under a single category: "holy things," or *sing saksit*. (p. 23)

McGovern contends that this has not occurred because of religious syncretism but rather as a result of mixing "conceptual categories by which Thai Buddhists understand what they are doing—the result of a long history of interacting discourses (Pali Buddhist, Sanskritic Hindu, and modern Western) on the Siamese/Thai nexus" (p. 23).

The author gives the impression that older understandings of *saiyasat* and *sing saksit* as

magically powerful have been fully replaced by the view that they are holy things. However, ethnographic studies show that older views of *saksit* remain alongside contemporary understandings and that questions remain about how much Buddhist Thais do indeed understand *saksit* to mean “holy” in the Christian sense argued by McGovern. Arguably, there has not been any replacement but rather an overlay of historical discourses of *saksit*, and a more accurate comprehensive title of McGovern’s book could perhaps have been *Magically Powerful Holy (Saksit) Things*.

While McGovern shows that notions of syncretism are misguided, studies of Thai religion nonetheless continue to engage with questions of mixing, hybridity, and pluralism because novel categories of supernatural beings are repeatedly added to the Thai pantheon. For example, McGovern describes the intensification of interest in Brahmanical deities among many Thais. He traces this “Hindu enthusiasm” to the construction of a shrine to Brahma at the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok in the 1950s. However, this one event is unlikely to explain the full scope of the Hindu enthusiasm in Thailand today or to account for why other Indic deities, notably Ganesh, have become even more popular focuses of ritual sentiment.

While McGovern debunks recourse to notions of syncretism, there nonetheless remains a need for a theoretical vocabulary to conceptualize the dynamism of Thai belief and ritual. The author does not present any alternative analytical frame. Syncretism does not die in Thai religious studies, despite repeated efforts by scholars such as McGovern to bury it, because the country’s religious forms are so multiple that we struggle to describe their vital evolution. McGovern asks, if the notion of syncretism is wrong then “why does it feel so right?” (p. 207). He answers that there *has* been mixing in Thailand, just not of religions: “There has always been a mixing of people and ideas in Siam due to its location on the nexus of transforming cosmopolitan structures and the inevitable interaction of discourses” (p. 207). This formulation relocates the question of Thai religious complexity from religion per se to cultural mixing and the interaction of discourses of Buddhism, Brahmanism, Christianity, and scientific rationalism. While shifting the analytical frame, this still leaves open the question of how to theorize the mixing of discourses in Thai history. McGovern does not address this question, although he uses several terms such as “mixing,” “interaction,” and “amalgam” instead of syncretism. He seems to leave the task of developing a theoretical vocabulary for Thai complexity to scholars outside religious studies. Syncretism may be dead, but McGovern states we still need to talk about “mixing” in Thailand, even if his own field of religious studies cannot tell us how to do this. Oddly, he appears to leave the question of what comes after syncretism in Thai religious studies to scholars in fields such as cultural studies and anthropology.

Despite *Holy Things*’ analytical limitations, McGovern’s extensive scholarship across religious traditions and his detailed footnotes, appendices, and comprehensive bibliography mean the book will be a rich resource in Thai religious studies, anthropology, and sociology. The book

could perhaps have made even more important contributions if it had taken a multidisciplinary perspective and considered anthropological studies of *sing saksit*. Anthropological accounts are mentioned but not engaged with. This is a missed opportunity. Admittedly, McGovern seeks to show the relevance of religious studies approaches to topics that, with a few exceptions, were previously the domain of anthropologists. Nonetheless, a fascinating future project would bring his findings into conversation with the anthropology of Thai religion to draw even more comprehensive pictures of Thai ritual and belief.

*Holy Things* is an important contribution to conversations that recognize the “problem” of understanding Thai religion does not lie in Thai religion but in the conceptual limits of the disciplines in the international academy. Thai religiosity exceeds the boundaries of any single discipline. The way forward for Thai religious studies lies in mixing, or syncretizing, the “pure” disciplinary fields of religious studies, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. Whether university departments can overcome their anxious policing of disciplinary boundaries to let this take place is a question for another day.

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