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## Abstract

Religion is one of the ancient phenomenon of thought inherited to human beings until at present. Much evidence shows that religion has existed as long as the history of human beings. Religion can be seen not only as the important institution supporting human society but also as a significant difference between human beings and animals. When animals suffer or scare of something, they have nothing to turn to, but human beings find solace in religion. Religion is complicated and can be viewed in two perspectives. First, it is a spiritual belief which relates to individuals as the guidance of human life. Second, it is an institution which relates extensively to society and people which then has an impact on culture, tradition, and law. However, the true element of religion is spiritual belief and faith. Therefore, belief and faith are significant features of religion. Individuals must have freedom in choosing their own choices of belief and faith. No one should be forced to believe in any religion they do not have faith in. Individuals should seek solace in religion of their own choice. Freedom of religion and belief is accepted as fundamental human rights of individuals to have their own choice in believing in what they experience that in accordance with their conscience sense of rightness.

Inner-value of human beings is of their own faith which should not be violated by any type of forces. If individuals are forced to believe in any religion or belief, it means that human dignity and value are rejected. If the freedom of religion and others is accepted by the State, it is protected by law. Individuals must have the right to have or choose religion or belief of their own intentions. Belief and faith in religion are natural rights which existed prior to the State. They are the oldest fundamental rights. Belief and faith relate to freedom of human thoughts in differentiating the rights and wrongs of human nature. Thus, individuals can choose to believe in the right things without force of other persons.

In Thailand, 95% of population is Buddhists. However, when considering the roles and the importance of females in Buddhism, it is found that the major role of

females is only to support religious activities. As the females and the males have equal responsibility in developing the society, therefore, females should also have major roles and involvements in dissemination of the Buddha's Teachings. The Buddha said that the development and the decline of Buddhism depend upon the four assemblies of the Buddhist devouts, i.e. Bhikkhu (monk), Bhikkhuni (female monk), Upasaka (devotee), and Upasika (female devotee). However, Thailand does not have Bhikkuni, so the females are restricted to the roles of being Upasika and practicing the moral conducts rather than studying the Buddha's Teachings distinctly. Females who are interested in the Buddha's Teachings and would like to practice the Buddha's Teachings will be ordained as nuns or the ascetics. This shows the need of religious live involvement of females. The problems the females face in the religious world is complicated. In addition, females have also faced the problems at the social level. The government does not pay attention to the females in Buddhism. Thus, the status of nuns is only the small female Buddhist group that does not get recognition and full support from the government. Moreover, nuns do not the status of 'priest'. They are only the Upasika who holds the Eight Precepts. As a result, Thai females who have in-depth knowledge of Buddhism and would like to become a true Buddhist priest have to seek the right female ordination: the Bhikkhuni ordination. According to the article 18 of the International Covenant Civil and Political Rights, the freedom of Bhikkhuni ordination is the freedom of religion. Therefore, the State prohibition on Bhikkhuni ordination in Buddhism is against such International Covenant Civil and Political Rights. Moreover, Thailand is a member of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, so the prohibition of Bhikkuni ordination in Buddhism is not only the restriction of female rights in developing spiritual potential, but also the discrimination against female entering into the Buddhist's world. This is against article 1 of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women whereas females and males have equal responsibilities in protecting Buddhism. In addition, according to the Sangha Act B.E. 2505 amended by the Sangha Act B.E. 2535, the Sangha is defined as monks (Bhikkhu) and novices whilst in the Tripitaka the Sangha is defined as Bhikkhu (monks) and Bhikkhuni (female monks). It can be seen that such context in the above Act is against

the Tripitaka and the female (Bhikkhuni) discrimination principles. It is also against law on equal rights principles because only monks and novices but female monks are recognized as priest by law.

In order to establish the legal equality of rights for the females and be equally protected by law, unequal law and regulations must be amended. This means that the sex equality must be initiated by legal equality. Firstly, the State should repeal any laws and regulations that restricted religious rights of female Buddhists. Secondly, the State should also use legal measures to guarantee and support female rights for having more opportunities and roles in religion. Thirdly, the State should cooperate with agencies concerned in providing the right knowledge and understanding to people. Fourthly, the State should seek the ways to revive female monks ordination in Thailand. It should be acknowledged that Buddhism is religion for all people no matter the females or the males. It would be better if the Sangha can provide the right and proper guidance on female involvement in religious activities. If the females have to seek the ways and live their religious lives on their own, it might lead to the separation of the Buddhist society. It should be realized that 50% of the Thai population is the females. If the females and the males have equal opportunity in practicing the Buddha's Teachings and living their lives both at the layman level and the religion level, it would encourage the power of human resources in promoting the Buddhism and bringing peace to the society, because we all are having the equal responsibility to the religion and the society.

If the religious institution in Thailand understands the importance of the female monks in the Buddhism and the benefits for Buddhist females, then the females and the males should have equal opportunities in participating in religious activities. The value of oneself should be judged by the quality of their actions rather than the difference of sex, bias, culture, traditions or regulations which preventing the opportunity of the females in developing their own spiritual potential.

