

Inside Buddha's Jade Fortress

In Thailand, where people visit temples to appease thousands of gods, pentecostals are aggressively winning converts.

Not far from the Chao Phraya River that curls about the center of downtown Bangkok is a temple complex surrounding the spiritual and geographic heart of this country of 61 million people. Inside is the ceremonial grand palace of the king of Thailand and Wat Phra Kaew, a temple glistening with orange and green roof-tiles and millions of pieces of mirrored glass that sparkle and glisten in the sun.

The air is full of the sound of tinkling chimes. Scenes from the Ramakian—a Thai-Indian epic—decorate the muraled walls of the cloister surrounding the temple, displaying demonic images that are part human and part bestial with monkey faces.

Before the temple is an outdoor altar to various deities, where devout Buddhists burn incense and place lotus blossoms and chrysanthemums as offerings. Visitors are told to cover their legs with trousers or a long, modest skirt to gaze at the Green Buddha, a jasper quartz or nephrite jade figurine placed on a 20-foot dais overlooking respectful worshipers. The statue even has its own wardrobe: three robes marking dry, rainy and cool seasons, which are changed by the king himself. On the palace grounds sits another statue, this one representing Phra Siam Devadhiraj, which missionary Charles Kraft believes is the governing principality over Thailand. Thais believe this spirit has protected the nation from foreign invaders.

One of the world centers of a religion that claims 360 million followers worldwide is housed in Thailand. This austere religion, based on the principle of obtaining a blissful

state—nirvana—after one has sufficiently tamed his or her passions, does not believe in a creator God, much less a loving or benevolent one. Rather it holds to the life principles taught by the Indian prince Siddhartha Gautama, later known as the Buddha. Founded six centuries before Christ, Buddhism eventually settled into three strands: Theravada, Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism.

Theravada Buddhism, which is prevalent in Thailand and Southeast Asia, is tremendously resistant to Christianity. Despite the heroic and sacrificial work of missionaries and national Christians, the growth rate of the Thai church is one of the slowest in the world. The Four Spiritual Laws do not work well in a society that does not believe in God, and the demands of Sunday church and weekly Bible study do not sit well in a society used to only a few temple visits per year.

Yet Bridge Communications, a book distributor squeezed into sixth-floor offices across the street from an upscale brothel, has the Thai franchise for the blockbuster Left Behind series. It has sold 15,000 copies to date, highly unusual for Christian books in this country. Typically, a Christian book might sell 1,500 copies over two to three years. Tribulation Force, released last May, also is doing well.

Buddhism has little to say about the end of the world. Some Buddhists are fascinated by the idea of a second coming, as there is a legend of another Buddha arriving on the world's last day to bring about a period of peace.

"Our strategy is to penetrate Christian values and references throughout society using the media," says managing director Somjai Raksasee. "That works in Buddhist society. If you share the gospel directly with a Buddhist, they will dismiss it as a

Western religion. But they won't throw away something they buy in a bookstore."

A Resistant Mission Field

Christianity did come to Thailand literally from the West in 1567 through Portuguese Catholic missionaries. They were not allowed to convert the Thai, nor were Protestant missionaries who began arriving in the 1830s. Not until 1878 did King Rama V allow other religions to be proclaimed.

Today, the Thai government recognizes five Christian groups: Catholics, Presbyterians, Southern Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists and the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand: 1,200 congregations of assorted Protestants.

Outside of Bangkok, churches are smaller and more isolated. In central Thailand north of the capital, congregations are informal affairs in simple buildings where no shoes are allowed, according to Thai custom. One is pastored by a Buddhist convert who sought out Christianity for intellectual reasons. Another was founded in a rice field by a matriarch with leprosy patients for her congregants. It is now mostly made up of local merchants who befriended one another in the weekly marketplace.

Raksasee, who grew up Buddhist and was converted at age 22 through a Christian girlfriend, publishes a Christian magazine, Tomikachun, which means "The Saint," for scattered Thai Christians. His company also translates material from Focus on the Family: No Apologies and Drug-Proof Your Kids. Both have been distributed in 40,000 secondary schools in Thailand by the government, as there is little other

literature available to a society known for its huge numbers of HIV-positive citizens and its notorious sex industry.

“In this way,” Raksasee says, “we build relationships, we build trust, and we help people solve their problems.” Bridge has been operating only four years in Thailand, but it’s already producing some of the country’s top-selling books, such as a children’s Bible. However, there is no Thai Christian radio or TV station, and 90 percent of Bridge’s writers are American. Raksasee can list only 10 Thai Christian authors. “Translating,” he says, “is easier than writing, for us.”

Thailand, a polite country where strangers are greeted by a graceful folding of the hands held to one’s lips, is filled with people who one missionary describes as “pleasantly resistant” to Christianity. Like Japanese Buddhists, the Thai inclination is toward group and community, and their social networks make it extremely difficult for an individual to convert to another religion, thereby becoming a minority and outcast.

Buddhists have no concept of sin, which involves rebellion against a God who they do not believe exists. Suragarn Tangsirisan, director of Youth for Christ in Thailand, works with university students he says are materialistic and obsessed with sex. Buddhism, which preaches indifference to the world’s longings instead of giving guidance on how to deal with them, has been of little help. Some students even prostitute themselves to earn money for much coveted cell phones, so he distributes copies of No Apologies to teach abstinence.

“In Buddhism, sex is all illusion, so it is no good,” he says.

“Sex is evaluated as something that keeps you from nirvana.”

Tavivat Puntarigvivat, a Buddhist scholar at Mahidol University in Bangkok, refutes any claim that sex is illusory to Buddhism but does say the religion is being undermined by corruption within its own clergy and a Muslim minority in its four southernmost provinces.

“Other religions are taking advantage of the weakness of Buddhism in order to gain their converts,” he says. “Muslims in Thailand have been trying to enter Thai politics to pave the way for the growth of Islam in Thailand. They have successfully pressured us to change a number of laws in favor of Islam. The number of their converts is increasing, which alarms Thai Buddhists.”

Tangsirisatian says: “Most students want to know the basics of Christianity. We don’t have persecution in Thailand. We have prejudice against Christians, but not opposition. Thais have an easy-going mentality. It’s hard to confront them. But once we get intense about Christianity, there will be persecution.”

First the Christians need to get educated, says Silawech Kanjanamukda, director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand since 1983. The country has 25 Bible schools and five Bible colleges or seminaries and can use a lot more, he says, such as the Oklahoma-based Rhema Bible Training Center, which set up shop three years ago in southern Bangkok.

Both Raksasee and Kanjanamukda cited Pentecostal churches and training centers as the most effective in reaching the Thai because of their emphases on worship and aggressive evangelism. Wirachai Kowae, who founded the Assemblies of God

(AG) in Thailand in 1969, is fiercely independent, friendly and proud of his country to the point that he says the Thai church no longer needs the help of foreign missionaries.

However, he owes his conversion to a 1957 visit by an American evangelist, T.L. Osborn, when he was 15. Today the country has 70 AG congregations that comprise 4,000 to 5,000 members. "The way we present the gospel is midway between gentleness and boldness," Kowae says. "Thai people are gentle by nature. But you have to be bold enough to tell them what they need to know."

Bold Witnesses

Theravada Buddhism in particular has strong Hindu and animistic influences, he adds, and can get quite occultic. Flowers or food are put in front of "spirit houses" in even highly sophisticated Bangkok neighborhoods to appease the neighborhood deity. Because Thais perceive the world as supernatural, they have no problem with miracles recorded in the Bible. Human sacrifice is seen as giving great spiritual power, and evidence of it is said to be under certain Thai temples.

Buddhism is the ultimate salvation-by-works program through karma, the idea that a person's behavior leads to reward or punishment. One contributes to temples or gives food to a monk or even buys a cage filled with sparrows in order to set them free—all to gain merit. When a Buddhist earns enough merit, the evil he or she has done in this or a previous life will be canceled out so he or she will be reincarnated into a better existence.

Many Thai men traditionally become monks at the age of 20 for at least a few months, which brings great merit. The strict lifestyle, which involves keeping some 227 rules, also creates a spiritual stronghold.

Moreover, the king of Thailand is constitutionally required to be a Buddhist. The mantra of Thai life–nation, religion and king–illustrates how religion and monarchy hold the country together. The current king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, is accorded godlike status. Having ascended the throne in 1946, he has been a stable figure in an era that has seen more than 20 prime ministers, 16 constitutions and 17 coups. Even T-shirts of his pet dog are prized.

Not only is the monarchy a source of spiritual energy for most Thais, but King Rama V is often worshiped as deity, and pictures of the royal family are seemingly on every wall in every building in the country. There is a reason for this omnipresent mixture of shrine and state. When the Buddhist base of a society is weakened, other religions can move in, notes Nobutaka Inoue, a Buddhist scholar at Kokugakuin University in Tokyo, who studied the crumbling of Korean Buddhism after World War II.

“Christianity did better in Korea after the war because the Buddhist infrastructure was much weaker there,” he says. “The religious figure–priest, pastor and monk–is less functional these days. The story of Buddha is being spread more through comics,” citing a famed illustrator, Tezuka Osamu, as an example.

Thai Buddhism lacks some of the intellectual rigors of Buddhism in Japan, as it is far more superstitious and rife with desires for good luck, power and help from the spirits.

And Thai society has Buddhism interwoven into its daily life far more than does Japan, where Buddhism has fragmented and atheism is growing.

But in Thai markets, phallic wood carvings are placed in money baskets in shops or stalls, idols are sold in markets, and zodiac signs are hung about as good luck charms. Amulets also are hot sellers, as are incense sticks to be placed about the outer corners of a home.

Pentecostal worship cracks some of the spiritual resistance, Kowae says. He pastors Romyan Church, a large Bangkok congregation with an adjoining bookstore. It attracts 500 on a Sunday; a huge turnout compared with the typical Thai congregation of perhaps 20 people.

"I do believe this country is under control of the spirit of darkness, whose temples are everywhere," he says. "A lot of people say the Thai are hard to win, but they're not. They are open. They have a spiritual hunger. We had people saved at my church last Sunday. We can get them saved, but it's hard to make them strong."

It is a challenge to preach to the more passive southeastern Asian personality, he says, and the churches that are growing are the ones with the more aggressive leaders. One was Kriengsak Chareonwongsak, who founded Hope of Bangkok, a Pentecostal denomination that is still going strong.

"Of all the Thai Christians, the Pentecostals are winning converts the fastest because they are aggressive in their presentation," Kowae says. "Sometimes people here beat around the bush too much."

Julia Duin, an assistant national editor for The Washington Times, visited Thailand and Japan in April and May.

BUDDHISM

Adherents worldwide: 360 million

Largest concentrations: China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar

History: Buddhism was founded by a native of India, Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 B.C.), during the sixth century B.C. as a result of a spiritual experience during which he claimed to have attained “enlightenment.” He became the Buddha, or “enlightened one,” and began to teach others the path to this desired state, which he called the “Middle Way” because it eschewed the extremes of both affluence and asceticism.

Gautama won thousands of followers, but for 200 years after his death, Buddhism was confined to his homeland. Not until King Ashoka ruled India (274-232 B.C.) and became a proponent of the new religion did it spread to other countries. Today there are three major branches of the religion: Mahayana Buddhism; Theravada Buddhism; and Vajrayana, or Tibetan, Buddhism.

Core beliefs: Beliefs among Buddhists are diverse. However, most Buddhists share at least the beliefs contained in Buddha’s Four Noble Truths:

* Life is made up of suffering.

* The cause of suffering is a craving for temporal things.

* The key to freedom from suffering is to eliminate this desire.

* The means to eliminate desire—and therefore suffering—is the Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

The ultimate goal in life for a Buddhist is to reach “nirvana”—a state of existence that is free from all desire.

Hollywood's Religion of Choice

Movie stars have helped make Los Angeles the headquarters of Buddhism in the West.

Los Angeles may be the second largest city in the country, but experts say it has become the first unofficial headquarters of Buddhism in the United States.

According to the Sonrise Center for Buddhist Studies (SCBS) in Sierra Madre, California, a group that seeks to equip and train the Christian community to evangelize Buddhists, Diana L. Eck, director of The Pluralism Project at Harvard

University, believes "Los Angeles is writing the history of Buddhism in America."

It boasts the home of the largest Buddhist temple in the Western Hemisphere, Hsi Lai, or "Coming to the West," which recently purchased the Christian Narramore Center for \$6.5 million for their new Buddhist University.

"All in all, Buddhism is making incredible inroads into America's religious, political and cultural circles," say officials for SCBS, which was started in 1988 by Jim Stevens, a Buddhist leader for 14 years before he became a Christian. "It has unfortunately become the religion of choice in Hollywood."

Buddhism's influence in America has been bolstered by endorsements by a growing number of celebrities, including singer Tina Turner, actor Richard Gere, model Cindy Crawford, golfer Tiger Woods and Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson.

Additionally, the latest wave of Buddhist movies such as Little Buddha, Seven Years in Tibet and Kundun have accelerated the visits on the Free Tibet Web site from 500 hits per week to 40,000. According to the Sonrise Center, Gere's production company has sponsored a tour with Tibetan monks who last year began efforts to build sand mandalas (Buddhist symbols of deities) in 100 U.S. cities within 18 months.

"These will attract hundreds of thousands of unsuspecting seekers and observers who are blind to the reality this represents as this temporary home to 722 Tibetan deities, also known as demons," SCBS officials say.

To former Thailand missionary Alex Smith, a “minister at large” with Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) International, which specializes in Buddhism, Buddhists are “the neglected giant in missions.”

“Today it claims 10 million followers in the . alone, where over 1,500 Buddhist temples are countable and hundreds of Buddhist associations flourish,” Smith writes in his booklet *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*.

Smith believes American churches face a daunting challenge with the recent growth of Buddhism in the West—a phenomenon of the last 50 years that could likely increase in the 21st century.

“Among the major world religions, Buddhism, with its emphasis on meditation, purity, peace and ethics, appears to be the most nonthreatening,” says Smith, who spent 20 years in Thailand with his wife, Faith, serving in pioneer evangelism, church planting and training of national leaders.

Joseph and Hannah Ems, regional facilitators of the Tibetan Buddhist world for the Network for Strategic Missions in Virginia, told *Charisma*: “Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, is overtly a power religion with real demonic power displays. It is a ‘do it yourself’ religion, which often suits Westerners seeking freedom to live outside structures of morality, yet meeting their inherent need for spiritual answers.”

Ministries that try to reach Buddhists say prayer is the key. Littleton, Colorado-based OMF has resources for reaching Buddhists as well as for praying for the Buddhist world

through its Web sites and .

Eric Tiansay