

# Buddhism Imperialism and War

Trevor Ling



# *Buddhism, Imperialism and War*

Burma and Thailand in  
modern history

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## *Buddhism, Imperialism and War*

*Other books by the same author include :*  
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**THE BUDDHA**

*to*  
*EDWARD CONZE*

who disagrees like a true friend

## *Introduction*

There is a small but growing body of literature on the attitudes of the major religions of the world to peace and war. Buddhism in theory gives a high place to the maintenance of peace, both between individuals and between social groups. Buddhist nations in practice, however, are no strangers to the battlefield. They have frequently been found there, sometimes engaged in war with would-be conquerors and sometimes in aggressive imperial exploits of their own. In both cases Buddhist nation has been found warring against Buddhist nation.

This raises the question: what is a 'Buddhist' nation? Large issues are involved here and, although these cannot be fully explored, the intention is at least to indicate some of the complexity which underlies the superficially simple idea that Burma, for example, and Thailand are, alike, 'Buddhist' nations. Some preliminary remarks at this point may help to place the narrative which follows in a conceptual framework, albeit of a provisional kind which may need to be revised later.

The relationship between a particular religious community and other elements in society can, in the modern world, be a matter of some importance. A 'religious community' can be any one of the various types of religious organisation such as cults, sects, denominations and churches, or a state religion. Very few forms of religious belief and practice exist entirely without any supporting and surrounding community within which the beliefs are preserved and transmitted and the practices are observed. It is true that religious belief, at least, and possibly even practice of some sort, does not absolutely require the existence of a community; there has recently been a growing recognition, by Thomas Luckman and others, of a type of non-institutional belief which he has called 'The Invisible Religion' and which Robert Towler has called 'Common Religion' (III). Nevertheless, the practice of religion frequently results in the formation of a community or collectivity of some kind.

The relationship between such religious communities or collectivities on the one hand and other social groups and interests

on the other can be fraught with tension and conflict, or it can assist integration and harmony. One of the crucial factors in the situation is the attitude of the political rulers towards religion. In a state which gives preferential treatment to one religion, there is likely to be conflict with the other, non-privileged and often non-conforming religious groups. In a state where the official policy is an open religious pluralism, and where serious continuous efforts are made to implement such a policy, as in the United States and India, religious collectivities are *less* likely to act as disintegratory forces (unless one of those religious collectivities has also certain inbuilt political ambitions which are essential to its nature).

The study of such relationships can best be furthered by the comparative investigation of a wide range of examples and types of situation. A contribution to comparative study of this kind has now become possible on the basis of data from Burma and Thailand. One of the advantages of this particular comparison is that the number of independent variables is reduced by the fact that both countries have similar environments and both have been to some extent influenced by the Theravada school of Buddhism. The differences between them are partly ethnic and cultural, and partly political. The political differences arise partly out of the history of the modern period, but not entirely. I have attempted to provide a comparative as well as a synoptic account of Buddhist culture in these two countries, although only of an introductory kind, it must be emphasised.

Thailand was never a European colony. This, it is said repeatedly, is one of the great advantages the Thais had over their neighbours. Such freedom may appear to have given Thailand the opportunity to advance more rapidly towards modernisation. How far Thailand has been successful in preserving Buddhist values and attitudes while doing so, is, however, another matter. It may be true in a very general sense that the emergence of modern society has entailed both the establishment of new intellectual or 'spiritual' attitudes and the decline of traditional religious beliefs and attitudes. But what is perhaps more important for us to try to understand, towards the end of the twentieth century, is what Ernest Gellner has called, not these grand processes as such, but 'the mechanics of a transition' (25:20). In this comparison of Thailand and Burma we are concerned with the transition from medieval to modern, and the contrasting condition of Buddhism as it emerges in the modern period.



## Introduction

In Burma, which was subjected to imperial rule by Britain and then became independent in 1947, Buddhism is said to have languished because of the disruption of the traditional pattern of state Buddhism caused by British rule. If the latter assertion is true it follows that Buddhism is a religious system of such a kind that it is likely to be at a severe disadvantage in the modern 'secular' (or religiously non-aligned) state, such as India. This study will include a critical examination of this line of argument. 'Religion, King and Country' is the slogan of today's Thai state, ruled by its military elite.

The interconnections existing within this holy trio, to whose preservation the Thai state is dedicated, demand closer scrutiny than they have received in the past.

Many states have, in the past, nationalised one of the religions practised by the citizens. England did so in the early modern period, and has not yet completely undone the nationalisation measure passed in 1662. But none perhaps has nationalised religion so thoroughly and efficiently as modern Thailand. Neighbouring Burma may have been travelling a parallel road in the eighteenth century, but after that it was deflected by the obstacles placed in its way by the irruption of British imperial rule.

In Thailand the nationalisation of Buddhist religion has entailed the transformation of its symbols into Thai national symbols. This came about as the result of a long process of development over several centuries of recent history. Buddhist symbols had been nationalised before, notably in Sri Lanka, especially in the medieval period, in what has been called the Buddhist revival under King Parakamma Bahu in the eleventh century. The model for the *kind* of Buddhist state set up then in Sri Lanka is often said to be that of the Asokan state in ancient India, almost at the beginning of Buddhist history. But it is arguable that too much has been read into the religious history of Asoka's India from later, medieval situations, particularly that of Sri Lanka.

Undoubtedly there was much that was attractive both to kings and to monks in the kind of arrangement which was developed in the various countries of Asia where Buddhism established itself, in the reciprocal relationship whereby the king protected and supported the monkhood and the monks legitimated royal rule by endowing it with ethical meaning and by acting as agents of social control through their advocacy of attitudes of peaceableness, gentleness, and obedience among the common people. But there

was also some danger to the central principles of Buddhist teaching and practice, which, it is possible to see, has now become acute in Thailand. This danger was hinted at in a number of the utterances attributed to the Buddha in the India of the sixth century BC, but these warnings about what we may call the debit side of monarchy were too easily set aside (just as those of the prophet Samuel were in ancient Israel) in circumstances where the pressures were strong in the direction of a Sangha-and-King *entente*. In order to see medieval and modern developments in Buddhist Thailand and Burma in proper perspective some knowledge of the early development of Buddhism in India is necessary. However, it is not the purpose of the present book to convey that kind of information; for that the reader may be referred to my earlier work, *The Buddha : Buddhist Civilization in India and Ceylon*.\*

The religious aspect of life in Burma is predominantly Buddhist. That is to say, in Burma the most commonly observed features of religion appear to be Buddhist rather than, say, Islamic. This predominant flavour is, however, always open to change as new ideologies claim the attention of at least some of the people. It has changed in the past. One of the most notable changes in the late medieval period was the increase in the amount of Sinhalese, Pali Buddhism present in Burma. This altered the predominant flavour from what had previously been a blend of spirit and demon worship, astrology, meditational practices and Mahayana Buddhist ideas of bodhisattvas into a blend of spirit and demon worship, astrology, messianic cults, ethical precepts, meditational practices, and Buddhist bibliolatry. This, as the work of Michael Mendelson has served to bring to the attention of students of Burmese religion, is mainly what Burmese Buddhism has consisted of right into the modern period. But the flavour is always changing, very slightly and very slowly, as new ideological ingredients are added. In the modern period Protestantism, socialism, Marxism, and, particularly, nationalism have been the major new ingredients in Burma.

A similar but by no means identical blend is found in neighbouring Thailand. The only appropriate name that can be applied to this blend is 'Thai Buddhism'. Both Burmese Buddhism and Thai Buddhism have certain features in common. Orthodox Pali textual scholars tend to see only the fact that Pali texts are

\*Pelican Books, 1976.

housed in the monasteries of Burma and Thailand, and that a certain number of monks can read and understand them; beyond this, however, such scholars tend to ignore the other, differential ingredients, so that the view has become fairly widespread that the religion of both Burma and Thailand is 'Theravada (or Pali) Buddhism'.

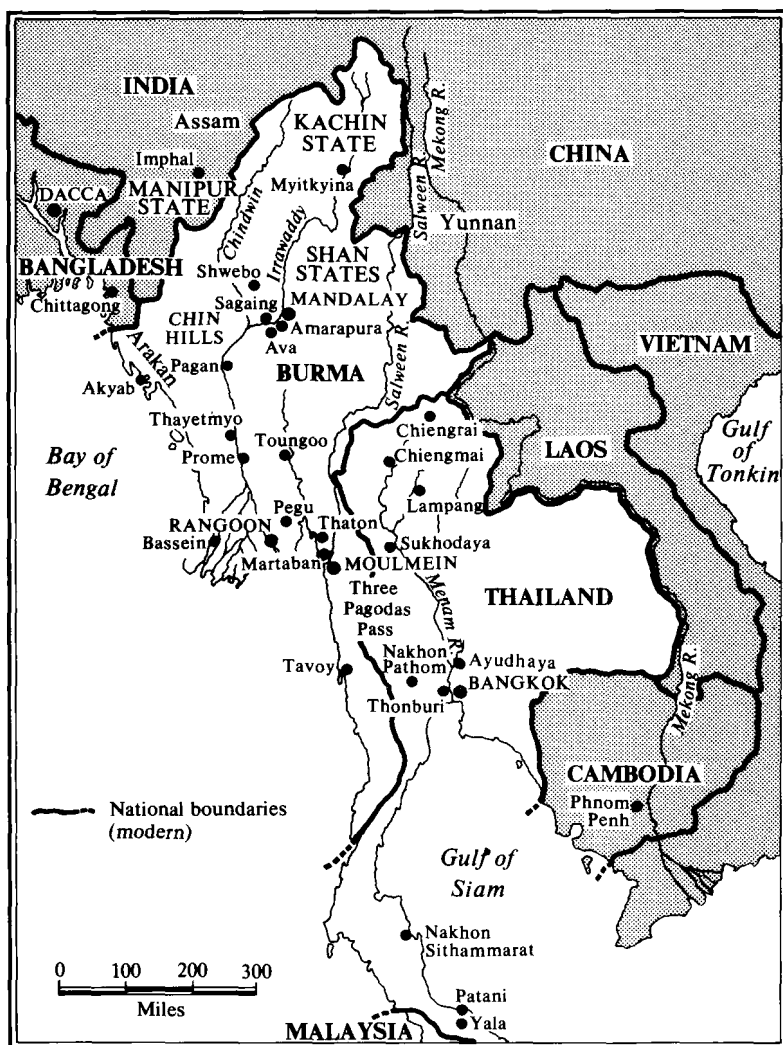
Discovering what is the 'religion' of any large number of people is a difficult problem, as an English anthropologist, Rodney Needham, has pointed out. It is extremely difficult to make large-scale statements about the beliefs of whole peoples. When the difficulties are ignored and such statements are nevertheless made they are likely to be so misleading as to be worse than useless.

If they are assertions about the inner states of individuals, as by common usage they would normally be taken to be, then, so far as my acquaintance with the literature goes, no evidence of such states, as distinct from the collective representations that are thus recorded, is ever presented, writes Needham. There is no point, moreover, as he goes on to say, in speaking of collective representations, or dogmas which are true of a culture as a whole, as 'beliefs' if it is not implied that the individual human beings who compose the social aggregate in question actually and severally believe (73: 5f).

We simply cannot say with any degree of reliability what the beliefs of the Burmese or the Thai people are. We can, however, ascertain what their society and their culture have trained them to *say* they believe. This will vary from time to time in the same society, as the dominant social, economic, ecclesiastical and political forces change. In the cases of Burma and Thailand it is possible to study the changes in these dominant forces and get some general notion of how they have differed in the two cases. This study is therefore primarily historical, and will be concerned largely with the more public aspects of Burmese and Thai life in the modern period. By this is meant the period from about the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the European presence in South-East Asia began to be felt. The intention is to enable the reader to become more familiar with the ways in which Burma's historical development has conditioned Burma's people to articulate their attitudes and beliefs in certain ways, and in which on the other hand Thai history has conditioned Thai people to give a somewhat different public account of their attitudes and

beliefs. The culture in both cases can be broadly characterised as 'Buddhist', subject to the qualifications 'Burmese' and 'Thai' respectively. There is, that is to say, common ground, and there are contrasts. The present book thus attempts to indicate some approaches to the understanding of the common ground and the contrasts. In that sense it may serve as an introduction to the kind of comparative cultural study which can with profit be carried out in other cases of similar but by no means identical cultural communities; it may also serve to clarify the extent to which religious ideals affect (or do not affect) the public and political life of the society in which they may be theoretically honoured.

Of the ancient Khmer civilisation Arnold Toynbee wrote that 'like so many civilisations before and after it, it wrecked itself' by its 'mad crimes', that is its imperialistic wars. The Khmer empire itself was eventually engulfed in that of the Thais. The latter was continually subject to attack from the expanding empire of Burma. The Burmese empire, in its turn, fell a victim to the rapaciousness of the British merchants of Rangoon. Fed by an overweening ambition to set its bounds 'wider still and wider' the empire of Victorian Britain collapsed by the middle of the twentieth century, exhausted, overstretched and unable to contain any longer the rising tide of nationalism in so many of the territories it occupied. Some of this serial story is the subject-matter of the present book, and it may not be entirely irrelevant to what is happening elsewhere in the world today, and what may happen tomorrow.



*Burma, Thailand, and neighbouring lands*

*Buddhism, Imperialism and War*

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# I

## *Early Buddhist Burma and Thailand*

### *The terrain and its peoples*

The modern political divisions of Indianised mainland South-East Asia, namely Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia, have little relevance to the region as it was during the pre-modern period. During the centuries when Buddhism was declining in India and advancing in South-East Asia, the people of the latter area were divided along political and cultural lines which run right across the boundaries of today. In the south of Burma and of Thailand were the Mon people. In the eastern half of what is now Thailand and in Cambodia were the Khmers. In the central and northern part of Burma were the Pyu and Burmese peoples, who had entered the region from the north-west. In the east of modern Burma and the northern parts of Thailand were the various branches of the Thai people, who had entered the region from the north-east.

Besides these broadly 'ethnic' divisions there is another important distinguishing feature which runs right through South-East Asia, and that is the distinction between valley and hill peoples. The whole region may be characterised as a complex series of roughly parallel ranges of mountains running in a north-south direction, with about four or five major river valleys (Irrawaddy, Sittang, Salween, Menam and Mekong), also following a generally north-south direction, except for the Mekong whose course from the mountains of Yunnan to its delta in South Vietnam is roughly from north-west to south-east, and which in its central reaches, where it forms the frontier between Thailand and Laos, is mostly in a west-east direction.