

Yesterday we went to the Thai National Museum and to “Chitralada,” a sort of royal compound (we were informed in advance of the dress code in force there because of the close connection of Chitrilada to the king) where a large number of projects, undertaken personally by His Majesty “for the welfare and happiness of his people,” are on display.

During the reign of the earlier kings in the Chakri Dynasty (the last nine kings have been of that dynasty), the projects under taken by them for the advancement of Buddhism were a central feature of each king’s legacy.



At the National Museum I followed a presentation of each of the nine successive Chakri monarchs, and for each of them, his projects undertaken for the sake of Buddhism were prominently mentioned. Several of them had actually re-written major Buddhist texts, revising them to fit the change in the times. (I was told by our guide at the Temple compound last Tuesday that the king is definitely subordinate to the monks and to Buddhism–that’s the official understanding and it’s what seems to be symbolized by the arrangement of the royal throne beneath the image of the Emerald Buddha, as I mentioned last time. Though, if it’s taken as a

matter of course that the kings can re-write scripture, you might have your doubts about that.) I had read in a history of Thailand before I left for the trip that one of the kings who was ruling near the beginning of the twentieth century revised certain Buddhist texts such that the goal of the king for his people should no longer be so much the attainment of Nirvana, as it had always been taught, but that from now forward, the goal would be “Progress.” Quite a change! (Though perhaps one not unfamiliar to those Christians in the West for whom the Kingdom of God has become only this or that version of progressive politics…) I don’t know how accurate my historian was in this matter; I certainly know neither the earlier “Nirvana” texts nor their progressive revisions. But at the National Museum, while I was reviewing the stories of the nine Chakri kings, when I came to the presentation dedicated to the current king, for whom there were many impressive accomplishments, absent from the list–unless I missed it somewhere–was any mention of the advancement of Buddhism.

In any case, yesterday when we went to visit Chitrilada to see the current king’s actual projects, none of them was distinguishably Buddhist at all. At Chitrilada, you walk through a very orderly arranged set of workshops, each of them concerning one or another means of production–of rice, honey, candles, dairy products, trees, paper, hydrocarbons, etc. etc. Each workshop was staffed with a group of clean and happy workers. They seemed, or were expected to seem, quite pleased enough to be at this stage of their reincarnations, right here in this realm of desire. No need of Nirvana for them!

These workers hadn’t risen up in a great revolution against the owning class, they didn’t require the rivers of blood shed by Mao in the country to the north, but to me Chitrilada felt like propaganda through and through, a sort of Potemkin Village, not malign like the “Paradise Ghetto” of Theresienstadt, but altogether false. Everywhere there were images of the king, sowing seeds, driving the first tractor, studiously reviewing plans for various projects, etc., etc., and everywhere through the exhibits we were reminded of his great beneficence. I came across a new title for him on display here: “The Strength of the Land.” From what I’ve learned so far, the current king is an extraordinarily gentle, self-restrained and decent man dedicated to what, according to his lights, is the welfare of his people. He is no Pol Pot or Ho Chi Minh, and I’d guess that he regards Buddhism as a salutary humanizing influence for his people. At Chitrilada and at the National Museum both, he was praised for seeking self-sufficiency for the Thai people. He wants, I think, to be a force for the preservation of Thai tradition in the face of the pressures of the modern world. And his people seem to love him for that. At the temple compound our tour guide, for instance, proudly showed me a photo of himself when he was in the army, “a soldier for the king,” he said. “I would die for him!” He seemed to speak from the heart. There are laws of *lese majeste* in force in Thailand, something just about unimaginable to an American, but at least according to what people say in the “talk back” sections of articles in the Thai papers dealing with the topic, those laws are approved of by many of the ordinary folk.

But my point is this, that despite the good intentions of the king, and despite the effect of classical Buddhism on the formation of the evident virtues of the Thais, Buddhism does not stand alone here but is closely bound up with the political order, and while Buddhism may shine a sort of traditional legitimating aura surrounding the king, it does not constitute a force sufficient to resist the very untraditional powers massively at work in Thailand today.

On the contrary, there’s a sort of peculiar frenzy and desperate intensity to the commercial/technological typhoon that is Bangkok. We went last night to the city center. Moviemaker visions of dystopian future cities are just about the reality of Bangkok now. Everything looming enormous, swarming, flashing, pounding, crowds in what looked to me like abject service to the gods of consumerism. How is the King of Thailand king here? What force does Buddhism possess against this tide?

To my way of looking at things, the king is not the ruler of all this but rather, his personal decency, his good intentions and his Buddhist aura, which win the hearts of the people, willy nilly give legitimacy to the governing powers which the monarchy undersigns. Those powers rule. And those powers are not benign.



Technology, even as embodied in the king’s attempt at his technical projects for self-sufficiency, makes everything the same. It demands a globalizing efficiency, standardized and uniform. Its own relentless advance overcomes every resistance and reduces everything to its own purposes. Our job, like the traveler at airport security, is to submit to it. There is an inherently totalitarian, dehumanizing thrust to technological progress.

In the West, because of the Judeo-Christian tradition that was once our foundation, there is still some memory of freedom as a fundamental human good. There is some shadow at least of resistance in the West to the totalitarian forces that the West itself was first to set loose on the world. But the East never knew Christianity. They never heard the command: “I AM the LORD

your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall have no other gods besides me!” Here in Thailand, they never knew the God of freedom; their culture was permeated by slavery no less than the pharaohs’ Egypt. As with the cosmology, art and architecture of ancient Egypt, the culture here–the art and architecture of the temple compound, along with the picture of perfect human happiness represented by the works projects at Chitrilada–the culture here, real and imagined, represents a cosmic order where each being has its necessary place, where slavery is pervasive and dominant, necessary as the turning of the stars, and where there is no hope.

The Thais’ reverent eagerness to bow before the king, seeing in him the glow of the Buddha, only makes their entrapment by the powers of commercial technology–which he himself underwrites, like it or not–all the more total, hopeless and destructive. You see it not only in the frenzied commercialism but most strikingly in the extension of that commercialism even to the trafficking in human beings for which Thailand is notorious. For the Thais, slavery is nothing new; it’s just your karma!

Which brings me to the point I ended with last time. The notion that Christianity should merely bow reverently toward Buddhism, should aim merely at “openness” and at “harmony” with the culture here, makes no more sense to me than the notion that the Hebrews should have been more “open” to the cult and culture of the pharaoh in Egypt. The blurring of the very real and important differences between Christianity and Buddhism is at least as dangerous here in Thailand as it is in the West when we blur the distinctions between merely political arrangements and the ever-shocking, ever-disturbing call to freedom that announces the Kingdom of God.

The Scriptures have content, the most dense and potent content in the world; they are not about “emptiness” or “openness” or mere “harmony.” They command freedom, “the freedom of the children of God!” That is our goal, not submission, not “emptiness.” Clarity about that content, and about the need for precisely that content urgently, here and now in the modern world, East and West, is what the Assumption must aim at. Our sentimental multiculturalism at home–or here in Thailand in the shape of a fluttering Westerner’s heart before the childlike devotion of the Thais to his majesty the king–these things ought not to delude us.

By Fr. Barry Bercier, A.A.