

As I jot down these first random thoughts on my experience here in Bangkok, echoing over the canal and rice paddies outside my window, the Muslim call to prayer is sounding: Allah, hu-akbar! I haven't suffered from much jet lag, but just the same, hearing that call I have to take hold of myself and ask, "Where am I?" Suddenly I'm back in Jerusalem…where I was just a few weeks ago. But no, this is Thailand and I'm at a conference on the relation between Buddhism and Christianity!

Buddhism! I read a book on Zen Buddhism once when I was in college, and back then everyone was reading Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha, but I never took much of an interest and as I grew older and began to consider Christianity's relation to Judaism, Buddhism became only more distant to me. For the life of me I can't figure out why I was sent here to Thailand. I'm the wrong guy!

So for instance, the leaders of the conference have been insisting on an "openness to the other" and on the the need to discover that "Christ is already here," already here in Buddhism. I'm sure that in some sense that's true…



For certain, there is much that looks to me like excellent human qualities and accomplishments here as a result of Buddhism. The respect people seem to show each others, the carefully observed signs of politeness, a willingness to subordinate oneself to another, the desire, even the *need* to serve others…these things stand in marked contrast to the evident corresponding vices among people who are more like, say, myself! We Westerners have let go of many a human virtue in our pursuit of "Progress," or however you call it…



And beauty! What a sense of beauty there is in Buddhism, at least as it's expressed in the temples, palaces and throne rooms we've seen at the royal compound: dazzling, almost too much to look at. Gold everywhere, everything set with colored stones and bits of glass in impossible profusion and wild complexity. And all of it clean, perfectly maintained and reverently guarded. And all of it suggesting, or rather, relentlessly proclaiming, the importance of authority, hierarchy, difference in rank among the beings from the lowest to the highest. In the throne-room, for example, high at the top of many layers of ascending golden steps sits the Emerald Buddha. Before that structure, and a little lower down, is the layered and gilded platform leading up to the throne of the king. For the persons of lower rank–which is to say, everybody else–if you raise your worshipful eyes toward the Buddha, you see the throne of the king, or maybe the king himself! The hierarchy of beings establishes the place of the king and all the other lower rankings of authority, right down to the most abject slave! We learned in a talk given today that slavery had been officially abolished just a few years after our own Emancipation Proclamation, but Thailand's slavery was an institution permeating the entire society from its earliest beginnings. Its cultural effects endure.



