

# RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES FACED BY THE FIRST LDS MISSIONARY IN THAILAND

MICHAEL A. GOODMAN

To understand a religion's reception into a country and culture, it is necessary to understand the historical, cultural, and religious milieu into which it enters. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints first entered ancient Siam through the efforts of Elam Luddington on April 6, 1854. Luddington spent 129 days introducing Mormonism in Siam with no apparent success. On August 12, 1854, he left Siam on the barque *Serious*, captained by the same man who brought him to the country four months prior. This man, Captain James Trail, and his wife were the only baptisms Elam Luddington would have in Siam. In his official mission report he stated, "After making every exertion in my honor to establish a church, I found it entirely useless and left them to enjoy their own religion."<sup>1</sup> This would be the only formal attempt to introduce Mormonism to Siam for over one

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*Michael A. Goodman is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.*



A French map of ancient Siam dating to 1686.

hundred years. Luddington's experience was anything but unique for those who sought to introduce Christianity to Siam prior to the nineteenth century. Unknown to Luddington, Christianity had a 350-year history in Siam with little to show for the effort. The cultural, political, and religious realities of Siam created several challenges, which, if not totally unique, were in some ways unequaled throughout Southeast Asia. Almost no other country which allowed Christian proselyting appears to have been as resilient to the spread of Christianity. Too often, Mormon international history is presented somewhat in isolation from the context into which it went. The following study is an attempt to understand some of the reasons behind Siam's incredible resilience to the spread of Christianity in general, and to Mormonism specifically through the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

## Buddhist Foundations

The beginnings of Siam (modern-day Thailand) lay in the migration of the Tai people over a thousand years ago. These migrants, with some intermingling of Mon and Kmer indigenous inhabitants, form the foundation of ancient Siam.<sup>3</sup> The Tai (ไท) were united more by culture and language than geography. Though they spread from the Yunnan province of South China to small groups in northern India, the largest grouping settled in the areas now known as Laos and Thailand.<sup>4</sup> Even before their coming, Buddhism was a powerful influence in the lands the Tai people would come to inhabit. Between the sixth and the ninth century, a strong Buddhist foundation had been laid in central Southeast Asia and came to be associated with the name Dvaravati (ทวารวดี).<sup>5</sup> Known as more of a civilization than a state, Dvaravati, with its ancient Buddhist underpinnings, became a dominant influence throughout the area.

One of the other major civilizations that inhabited the area before the Tais came were the Khmers. The Khmer empire was largely

Buddhist, with infusions of Brahman culture. The archaeological evidence throughout the area points to an extensive and powerful Buddhist civilization and culture.<sup>6</sup> In short, before the Tai established their first state, Buddhism was already intricately associated with the political powers throughout the area. Besides providing meaning and purpose to individual lives, Buddhism became central in binding the people to their rulers. The Tai people became strongly integrated with the “universal, institutionalized religious tradition” of Theravada Buddhism by the end of the tenth century.<sup>7</sup> The following narrative will show how the Buddhist connection between the common people and their rulers was established and how it becomes a primary reason for Thailand’s resilience to Christian and Mormon proselyting.

Though some sources claim that the Nan Chao dynasty who ruled in South China in the eighth and ninth century were the first Tai state, documentary evidence linking the Nan Chao with the Tai is weak. By the thirteenth century, however, the Tai would definitely create their own state. The kingdom of Sukhothai was founded in 1238 by the father of King Ramkhamhaeng. However, it was King Ramkhamhaeng (พ่อขุนรามคำแหงมหาราช, 1239–98) who is credited with expanding the borders and creating diplomatic relationships with the other kingdoms of the day.<sup>8</sup> Closely associated with the rise of the first Tai state was “the revivification of the Buddhism already professed by the Tai through contact with Singhalese (Theravada) Buddhism and the foundation of strong, well supported Buddhist monastic institutions throughout the region.”<sup>9</sup> Ramkhamhaeng was a devout Buddhist who staunchly supported not only Buddhism in general but the formal monastic community which oversaw it. He gave official royal support to the Buddhist establishment in 1277 and went as far as sharing his own throne with the Buddhist monks once a week so that they could teach Dhamma (ธรรม, righteousness) to the people. From the very beginnings of the Tai state, Buddhism became inextricably connected to national identity. As Wyatt states, “That state was Buddhist, but the religion was also



*Relief of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great.*

political, certainly to the extent that political unity and identity were founded upon a religious basis.”<sup>10</sup>

This royal connection between the state and Buddhism would continue when the next Tai kingdom supplanted Sukhothai. The Kingdom of Ayudhya (อยุธยา) was established in 1351 by King Ramathibodi (สมเด็จพระรามาธิบดีที่ 1, 1314–69). He and his successor kings would provide state support and construct many important Buddhist monuments. One of the greatest kings of Ayudhya, King Naresuan (สมเด็จพระนเรศวรมหาราช, 1555–1605), who reclaimed Ayudhya for the Tais from Burmese subjugation, was known as a staunch supporter of Buddhism and its connection to the state. He maintained close ties to the Sangha, the religious leadership of the Buddhist monastic community. Each successor king maintained or strengthened this connection. In fact, during the reign of one of the final kings of Ayudhya, King Borommakot (สมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัวบรมโกศ,



*Sukhothai-style Buddha from the temple at Sri Chum.*

reigned 1733–58), the strength of Siamese Buddhism under royal patronage hit what might be considered an apex.

Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) was considered by many to be the center of Theravada Buddhism for centuries. It was from Singhalese Buddhists monks that Siam looked for guidance through much of its history. However, due to a perceived decline in Theravada Buddhism in Ceylon as a result of Portuguese and Dutch rule, a delegation was sent to Siam in 1751 requesting help to revitalize Singhalese Buddhism. King Borommakot sent a delegation of 18 Siamese monks to reordain Singhalese monks and reestablish a purer form of Theravada Buddhism.<sup>11</sup> Wyatt speculated that in some ways this actually made Siam the preeminent center of Theravada Buddhism in the world.<sup>12</sup>

In accordance with the tradition formalized by King Ramkhamhaeng, the kings of the next (and current) major Tai kingdom, Rattanakosin (อาณาจักรรัตนโกสินทร์), continued the strong relationship between the royal house and Buddhism.<sup>13</sup> The Chakri (ราชวงศ์จักรี) dynasty began with King Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok



(พระพุทธยอดฟ้าจุฬาโลก, 1737–1809), afterwards known as Rama I. One of his first actions as king was to further solidify the state's connection with the Sangha or Buddhist leadership, even going so far as issuing ecclesiastic laws to bring greater discipline to the monkhood. He further organized a grand council to establish an authoritative version of the Tipitaka, the Buddhist scripture. His patronage and support of Buddhism went beyond most, if not all, of his predecessors. More and more, the monarchy and Buddhism became inextricably connected. One author went as far as to say that “the pre-1767 trend towards Buddhist kingship was now realized.”<sup>14</sup>

This trend continued with Rama II (พระพุทธเลิศหล้านภาลัย, 1767–1824) and Rama III (พระนั่งเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว, 1787–1851, respectively). Both considered themselves defenders of Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> By the time Mormonism first appeared in Siam, the fourth king of the Chakri dynasty was on the throne, Rama IV (พระบาทสมเด็จพระปรเมนทรมหามงกุฎ, 1804–68), otherwise known as King Mongkut. King Mongkut was a renowned Buddhist monk for twenty-seven years before ascending to the throne. Before becoming king, he became head of the board responsible for Pali examinations (the official language of the Buddhist scripture Tipitaka) and, as a result, exercised a certain amount of control over instructions for the whole Buddhist monkhood in Siam.<sup>16</sup> He was famous for his efforts to restore Siamese Buddhism to its purest form both before and after his coronation as king and even was responsible for the creation of a major sect (Thammayut, ธรรมยุติกนิกาย) within Thai Buddhism.<sup>17</sup> As can be seen, from the foundations of Tai statehood, the monarchy has been intimately connected with Buddhism and it was a very symbiotic relationship. The close relationship gave legitimacy to both the Siamese royalty and to the ruling Buddhist council—the Sangha specifically, and Siamese Buddhism in general.

However, it was not only the Siamese royalty which became intimately associated with Buddhism, but the Tai people themselves. By



*King Mongkut (Rama IV) in European-style dress.*

combining the powerful transcendental influence of the religion itself with the patriotic allegiance the Siamese felt to their kings, the Buddhism of ancient Siam became a powerful national identity for the common Siamese. To be Siamese was to be a Buddhist, and to be a loyal Siamese was to be a loyal Buddhist. As a result, Buddhism, which has been a part of the Siamese identity for over millennia, became even more important in the lives of everyday Siamese. As one author put it, Buddhism

“spread like wildfire on a wave of popular enthusiasm” with the support of the king and rulers again and again throughout their history.<sup>18</sup>

## Christian Beginnings

As central as Buddhism has been to Siamese leadership and society in general, Siam has been remarkably open to other religions. Though Mormonism didn't appear in Siam until the mid-nineteenth century, Christianity has had an official presence, and there has been Christian proselytizing in Siam, since the early sixteenth century.



Except for a few isolated cases, officially sponsored or widespread persecution of other religions in Siam has rarely existed. From the earliest entry of Christianity to Siam, Christians have not only been free to proselyte, they have repeatedly been provided with lands and other resources to share their faith.

## Catholicism in Siam

The first Catholic presence in Thailand came from Portuguese delegations headed by Duarte Fernandez, who was sent by Alfonso de Albuquerque, the Portuguese Viceroy of India.<sup>19</sup> After the Portuguese captured Malacca in 1511, Fernandez was sent to the Siamese capital of Ayudhya, because they considered Malacca a vassal of Ayudhya. King Ramathibodi II (สมเด็จพระรามาธิบดีที่ II) exchanged several delegations with the Portuguese, and these delegations culminated in the first “treaty” between Siam and a European nation in 1516.<sup>20</sup> The earliest Catholic missionaries came to Thailand in 1555.<sup>21</sup> Jeronimon de la Cruz and Sebastian de Canto actively proselyted and both died as martyrs, de la Cruz at the hands of Muslims and de Canto at the hands of Burmese invaders. Though these missionaries attempted to work with the Siamese, they found that they were not easily converted and spent much of their time among the Portuguese and the Chinese.



*Alfonso de Albuquerque served as the governor of India.*



*King Ramathibodi monument, Ayutthaya, Thailand.*

This same pattern continued for the next three hundred years. Spanish Franciscans came in 1582 but abandoned Siam two years later.<sup>22</sup> The two main Catholic missionary bodies who would work among the Siamese were the Jesuits (largely from Portugal) and the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (MEP from France).<sup>23</sup> These two groups often did not see eye to eye, which caused further challenges for Christian proselyting.<sup>24</sup> For the most part, these Christian mis-

sionaries had good relations with the Siamese royalty. King Songtham (สมเด็จพระเจ้าทรงธรรม, reigned 1611–28) continued to grant foreigners the right to practice their religion.<sup>25</sup> The Society of Foreign Missions took over the main responsibility for proselyting not only in Siam but much of Asia. By 1669 Siam became a formal apostolic vicariate, the organizational step before a diocese is organized.<sup>26</sup>

King Ramathibodi III, also known as King Narai the Great (สมเด็จพระนารายณ์มหาราช, 1633–88), established a school taught by Catholic missionaries to help educate the young Siamese royals and nobles.<sup>27</sup> In 1685, as part of a formal treaty with France, the king again gave royal permission for Christian missionaries to proselyte throughout the kingdom. He further gave permission to operate a seminary to train Catholic missionaries for all of Asia. King Louis XIV of France even sent emissaries to King Ramathibodi III in hopes



*Portrait of King Louis XIV.*

of converting him to Christianity.<sup>28</sup> However, despite tremendous royal support and the presence of over 2,000 foreign Christians in Ayutthaya at this time, there were few, if any, Siamese converts. Sources put the number of Siamese converts up through 1690 from zero to a handful.<sup>29</sup> While approximately a thousand Catholics were living in Siam by 1770, almost all were of a foreign background.<sup>30</sup>

In 1680 King Ramathibodi III engaged as his foreign minister Constantine Phaulkon, a Greek who worked closely with the

Portuguese and then the French. Both the influence of Phaulkon on the king and the fear that the French were becoming too aggressive in their attempts to affect Siamese politics led to one of the only periods of systematic persecution that Christians ever experienced in Thailand, though to some extent it was aimed at the French more than at Christians in general. Phaulkon was assassinated, and the French were largely excluded from public life for several decades. There were also periodic persecutions from 1730 through 1760, but these persecutions came as often as not from the invading Burmese or other foreign sources, not the Siamese.

The Catholic Church continued to labor in Siam as the nineteenth century began. Though they had small success among the rank and file of the Siamese, they maintained close personal ties to the royalty and continued to play an active role in education and social services in the kingdom. Possibly the most renowned Catholic father to labor in Siam was Bishop Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix (1805–62). He was intimately associated with King Mongkut, because Pallegoix taught the king Latin, mathematics, and astronomy.<sup>31</sup> King Mongkut even spoke at Pallegoix's funeral. Not only did these missionaries associate and have influence with the king, they also had influence with a wide range of other Thai royals and highly influential people.<sup>32</sup> In some ways, it seems astounding that the Catholic Church could have so much influence with the highest levels of Thai society and yet have such little success in spreading Christianity among the Thai people in general. However, on close examination, the strong influence these Christian leaders and missionaries had was always in conjunction with secular issues such as science, medicine, and technology. Furthermore, the Protestant missionaries experienced this same pattern of strong influence in secular subjects but little influence in religious ones.

## Protestantism in Siam

Catholicism was not the only branch of Christianity to enter Thailand before the Latter-day Saint faith; protestants began work in Thailand almost thirty years before the first Mormon effort. In 1828 two Protestant missionaries began working in Siam: Reverend Carl Gutzlaff, a German physician who worked for the Netherland Missionary Society, and Reverend Jacob Tomlin, an Englishman who worked with the London Missionary Society.<sup>33</sup> They were welcomed by the Portuguese (Catholic) consulate and provided with a house on the consulate grounds.<sup>34</sup> They translated the Gospels and the book of Romans into Thai and had some success among the Chinese, but little among the Siamese. These two missionaries also made a mistake that would be repeated by many future missionaries. In their attempt to promote Christianity, they at times denigrated Buddhism. As a result, they were almost forcibly removed from the country.<sup>35</sup> But Protestant missionaries were still able to establish a church. Along with William Dean, Reverend and Mrs. John Jones from the American Baptist Mission established the first Protestant church in Siam with eleven members, all Chinese. The Baptists would labor for thirty-eight years among the Siamese but ultimately refocus their work on the Chinese, with whom they experienced much greater success.<sup>36</sup>

One reason Catholic and Protestant missionaries might have had some success with Chinese and other immigrants was the fact that they were not always connected to the Siamese nobility through the *corvée* system. *Corvée* was a system of forced labor in which common Thai people were under obligation to provide labor in the form of public works or military service to the nobility. This service could range from three to six months of the year. The system gave strong control over the common people to the nobility, and the nobility used

the Buddhist establishment to help administer the system. However, foreign immigrants such as the Chinese were not always held to the same requirement. In fact, by the last part of the nineteenth century, immigrants began seeking protection from Christian priests to avoid the abuses which at times happened at the hands of Thai nobles. For this reason, as well as others, immigrants were more free and motivated to experiment with other forms of religion. Also for these reasons, Thai nobility at times seemed more averse to Christian influence than were Thai royalty, as they had more to lose from the conversion of those under their authority.

Other notable missionaries arrived during this time. Another physician, Reverend David Abeel from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM, largely Congregationalists), arrived in Bangkok in June 1831. A third physician, Reverend Dan Bradley, MD, arrived from the ABCFM in 1835, and labored in Siam for almost thirty-eight years.<sup>37</sup> Besides missionary work, Reverend Bradley was responsible for several firsts in Siam. He performed the first surgery (to save the life of a Buddhist monk), performed the first inoculations at the request of the king, and brought the first printing press to Siam.<sup>38</sup> He printed the first newspaper and the first official government publication in Siam.<sup>39</sup> Bradley served in Thailand until his death in 1873. He was well known by King Mongkut and had a fairly tumultuous relationship with him. Several times he tried to convert the king and at other times condemned him for polygamy or idolatry.<sup>40</sup> In 1840 another ABCFM missionary, Reverend Jesse Caswell, would arrive. He was a close friend to Prince Mongkut and tutored him in English and science before Prince Mongkut became king.

By 1840 there were twenty-four Congregational and Baptist missionaries in Bangkok. Within twenty years, only three couples were left, along with the Bradleys. The next major missionary push came from the Presbyterian Church. The first Presbyterian missionaries had a profound impact in Thailand but, once again, mostly among



# ๑หนังสือจดหมายเทศา

## THE BANGKOK RECORDER.

Vol. 11 เล่ม ๑ กรุงเทพเดือนหกขึ้นปีใหม่คัมภีร์จุลศักราช ๑๒๒๙ March 1st 1865. ตรีศักราช ๑๙๖๕ ปี ๑ No. 1

### หนังสือ ทลวง

๑ ชื่อ วัด, ชื่อ บ้าน, ชื่อ เมือง, ที่มีอยู่ใน แผ่นดิน ไทย. บางแห่งก็แปลคำไทยแท้, บางแห่งก็แปลคำสังสกฤตแท้, บางแห่งก็แปลคำเขมร. ก็คำราษฎร เรียกทั่วไปนั้น, มักจะยกคำมาคำคน, แต่สั้น ๆ ง่าย ๆ. แต่ในราชการคือหนังสือของนักโยทนามักเรียกยาว ๆ. และแปลคำสังสกฤตไทยมาก. ถึงคำสังสกฤตก็เรียกเพม. ฝ่ายราษฎรมักแปลคำสังสกฤต, ก็เรียกสั้น ๆ ไป. จะ

๑ เมืองหนึ่งมีชื่อสองอย่างสามอย่าง, ฤๅวิกหนึ่งมีชื่อสองอย่างสามอย่าง, คำมาคำหลวงแต่คำราษฎร, แต่คำเก่าคำใหม่, เมืองที่เป็นเมืองหลวงเมืองไทยมีคำนี้, แต่เดิมเป็นหัวเมืองชื่อธนบุรี, เป็นภาษาสังสกฤต. เขียนตามครูที่เขาแปลงสังสกฤตเป็นหนังสือโรมันดังนี้. Dhanapuri. จะเขียนอย่างสั้นงไทยอ่านไม่ได้อีก. แต่คำนี้ใช้ในหนังสือราชการ, แต่คำตลาดเรียกเมืองบางกอกทั้งนั้น, ฤๅบางคำเรียกสั้น ๆ ว่าเมืองชุน, ก็กับเมืองหน. ก็เมืองหนนั้น. คำมาราชการเรียกว่าเมืองชุน, เขียนเป็นสังสกฤตอย่างที่ครูเขาแปลงเป็นหนังสือโรมัน, เขาเขียนดังนี้, Nandapuri. แต่ในหนังสือชาวเขียนศัพท์ตามพูดที่ท้ายเจ้าทั้งสองเมือง. ศัพท์ตามพูดเขียนตามสังสกฤต, ตามครูที่เขาแปลงเป็นหนังสือโรมัน, เขาเขียนดังนี้, Sri Maha Samudl. แต่คำคนทั้งบ้านทั้งเมือง, เมืองหนึ่งก็เรียกว่าตลาดจวัน, เมืองหนึ่งก็เรียกว่าบางกอก. ชื่อผู้ที่ชุนมาน้อย, จึงเรียกว่าเมืองหนเมืองชุน. ที่เรียกเพม, เขียนเพม. คำสังสกฤตอย่างว่านี้, มีแต่คำราษฎรใช้ในหลวงอย่างหนึ่ง, เขียนในหนังสือนักโยทนามักอย่างหนึ่ง, คำเรียกไม่ใคร่มี. จะ

๑ ก็ที่เรียกบางกอกนี้, คือแต่เดิมลำน้ำใหญ่, แต่วังน้ำลงมาจนถึงวังกรมหลวงวงษาไฉ่, เป็นแผ่นดิน. แม้

น้ำเข้าไปทางน้ำวังน้ำ, แล้วไปเลี้ยวลงวิกซึ่งไหลลงถึง, แล้วเลี้ยวมาจนถึงข้ามวังกรมหลวงวงษา. วิกซึ่งเขื่อนไว้เร็วแรงมาแต่วังน้ำ, ถึงวังกรมหลวงวงษา, ทางแต่เขื่อนเขม, เวลาเช้าทรงเจ้าอยู่หน้าวังน้ำ ล้อมมือให้ไว้, ล้อมมือมาถึงน้ำวังกรมหลวงวงษา, จะทรงเจ้าเขื่อนกิน, ก็ให้ว่าล้อมมือไว้, จดเรือเข้าเขื่อนยกไป, เอามือมาทรงเจ้าเขื่อนกินนั้นได้. ที่ริมข้ามวังกรมหลวงวงษานั้น, มีคลองหนึ่งปากคลองเข้าไปข้างเหนือ, แล้วคุ้คึกียวไปในสวนวนเวียนอยู่, แล้วปลายคลองไปหลดออกที่น้ำวังหลัง. ที่ปากคลองข้างล่างนั้นชื่อบางกอกใหญ่, ข้างบนชื่อบางกอกน้อย. บางน้ำแปลว่าคลอง, คลองบนกับคลองล่างเรียกบางกอกเหมือนกัน. ถ้าจะเปรียบเทียบนี้, เหมือนกับปากจัดแลบางกวย, ปากจัดก็เรียกว่าปากจัดบน, ปากจัดล่าง. ที่บางกวยนั้นปากที่ออกแม่น้ำใหญ่เรียกบางกวยนอก, ปากที่ออกแม่น้ำน้อยเรียกบางกวยใน. ถึงปากเกรงก็เหมือนกันนั้นต้นโต, บางกอกน้อยบางกอกใหญ่ก็เช่นเหมือนกัน. แต่ลำแม่น้ำนั้นอ้อมไป. จะ

๑ ที่เมืองแผ่นดินพระเจ้ามหาจักรพรรดิ, โปรดให้ขุดบางกอกใหญ่บางกอกน้อย, ให้คลองก็ขึ้นเป็นแม่น้ำ, แล้วสร้างเมืองสองวิชัยที่ขุดลัด, เหมือนอย่างแผ่นดินพระบาทสมเด็จพระพุทธเลิศหล้านภาลัย, สร้างเมืองนครเขื่อนขันธ์, เขียนเป็นสังสกฤตแต่ Nagar. แต่เขื่อนขันธ์นั้นแปลคำไทย, จะเขียนเป็นคำไทยก็ได้. ที่เขียนนี้เรียกว่าเมืองปากจัดนี้.

๑ ครั้นสร้างเมืองลงที่บางกอกขุดลัดแล้วนั้น, ตั้งชื่อว่าเป็นเมืองธนบุรี. การที่ขุดอย่างนี้ถึงกว่าสามร้อยปีมาแล้วทุกก็เห็นวังตอก, ด้วยลำน้ำก็แคบกว่าข้างบนข้างล่างไม่ใช่ฤๅ, กว้างเพียงสี่เส้นเศษไม่ถึงห้าเส้น. ครั้นทางลัดมีขึ้นแล้ว, น้ำลงเสียทางลัด, แม่น้ำเก่าก็แห้งไป

First Thai newspaper printed in Thailand—March 1, 1865, by Protestant missionary Dan Beach Bradley.

foreign nationals and in areas outside of missionary work. The first Presbyterian missionary, Reverend William Buell, started his work in 1840. However, he stayed for only three years because of his wife's

illness. He was replaced by Reverend and Mrs. Stephen Mattoon and Reverend Samuel House (also a physician) in 1847. Reverend Mattoon would become the first American consul to Siam in 1856. Dr. House became known as “the man with a gentle heart” for the great medical service he offered. He became the first surgeon to use anesthesia (ether) in Thailand and would serve over three thousand patients in his first year and a half in the country.<sup>41</sup> He would later be invited to live at the palace and serve as a teacher to King Mongkut’s children. Furthermore, several of the missionaries’ wives taught English to the women in the palace at King Mongkut’s request.

As can be seen, many of the Christian missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, had remarkable access and at times close relationships with the rulers of Siam. For three hundred years, Christians missionaries had remarkable freedom to proselyte.<sup>42</sup> Many served the leaders at the highest levels of Thai society. They had translated the Bible into Thai by the early 1840s and had several church buildings both in Bangkok and in the north. And yet there were precious few Thai converts. Kenneth Wells’s *History of Protestant Work in Thailand* lists the converts as of the mid-1860s as follows:

- First two missionaries from 1828 to 1831: zero Thai converts
- Twenty-two missionaries affiliated with the ABCFM from 1831 to 1839: zero Thai converts
- Numerous Presbyterian missionaries from 1840 to 1859: one Thai convert
- Numerous American Baptist missionaries from 1833 to 1863: forty-five total converts (all or almost all Chinese).<sup>43</sup>

In 1855 a British diplomat claimed that there were fewer than ten practicing Protestant Thais in the country.<sup>44</sup> A veteran missionary published the following statement in 1871: “There is scarcely another field in which modern missions have been established where the introduction of the gospel has met so little opposition as in Siam

proper. . . . It is equally just to say that there is scarcely any other field which has been so barren of results.”<sup>45</sup>

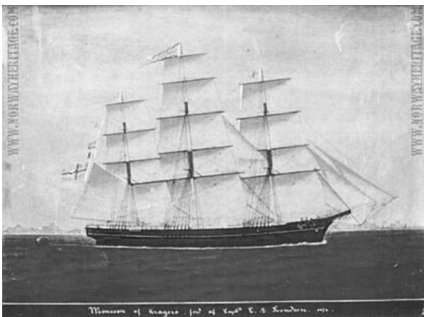
## Mormonism in Siam

It was into this religious and cultural environment that Elam Luddington entered as the first missionary of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Siam. Luddington was born November 23, 1806, in Harwinton, Litchfield County, Connecticut.<sup>46</sup> He was baptized by Joseph Smith, the Church’s founder, on May 16, 1840. His descendants noted the close relationship Luddington shared with the Prophet Joseph, with many hours spent together eating and sleeping under the same roof, as well as working together.<sup>47</sup> Luddington served as a missionary for the Church in different parts of the United States for the first five years of his membership. He spent the next seven years serving in different capacities as an officer for various church and civic organizations. However, his life would change forever at a meeting held on August 27–28, 1852. At this meeting the leaders of the Church called 108 missionaries to serve throughout the world. Missionaries were called to Africa, Australia, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, India, Norway, Prussia, and Siam.<sup>48</sup> Four missionaries were called to Siam; however, only Luddington would end up serving there.

Luddington’s reaction was typical of his past willingness to serve: “Being unexpectedly called upon at the fall conference of 1852, . . . we all acquiesced by saying Amen, it being an almost unknown part of the world, where but few white men ever tread the soil, so we were all anxious to fill this important mission.”<sup>49</sup> After arranging their affairs, the missionaries took leave of their families—almost all of the missionaries were married—on October 21, 1852. By January 9, they arrived in San Francisco and began raising money to buy ship passage. They set sail on January 29 on the clipper ship *Monsoon*. This

was one of the few ocean journeys of Luddington's entire mission that was not fraught with life-and-death danger. The missionaries arrived in Calcutta, India, on April 26 after a journey of 10,936 miles in eighty-six days. The missionaries met with the American consul, Mr. Hoofnicle, who treated them with kindness and made numerous inquiries for them. Mr. Hoofnicle informed the Siam-bound missionaries that it would be impossible to travel overland to Thailand, because the second Anglo-Burmese war blocked their route. He further explained that it would be impossible to go by ship until after the fall monsoon season had passed. Luddington and Levi Savage, another missionary called to Siam, were assigned to labor in Burma until it became possible to travel to Siam.

Luddington wrote in a letter, "A few Sabbaths ago, I preached on the government wharf to a company representing most of the nations and peoples under heaven—Burmese, Bengalese, Malays, Brahmins of different casts, Mussulman, Armenians, Jews, and Gentiles. . . . I believe this service has opened the blind eyes or hearts of some."<sup>50</sup> In Burma, Luddington worked largely with Europeans. They baptized two men by January 1854, bringing the total baptisms in Rangoon to ten. By the beginning of 1854, Luddington was determined to make it to his assigned field of labor in Siam. After a perilous ocean journey, he arrived in Singapore on March 6.



*Clipper Ship Monsoon, on which Elam Luddington sailed in January of 1853.*

While in Singapore, Elder Luddington called on Colonel W. J. Butterworth, governor of Singapore and Malacca from 1843 to 1855, and preached to him but was rejected. On March 25, Elder Luddington boarded the barque *Serious* on the final leg of his journey to Siam. Elder

Luddington said he “preached the first Mormon sermon . . . in the Gulf of Siam” and that even though “the Lord was with him” and “they paid good attention,” none of the passengers were receptive. In fact, he said, the other preachers contended against him—a harbinger of coming events. Luddington finally reached Siam on April 6, 1854, over a year and a half after leaving his home in Utah. Three days after his arrival, Elder Luddington taught the first Mormon sermon in Siam proper at the residence of Captain James Trail and his wife. That night, April 9, 1854, Elder Luddington baptized Captain Trail and his wife at their request. These two would be his only converts while laboring in Siam.

A few weeks after arriving in Siam, Luddington wrote a letter in which he stated, “I am following my calling at this time in the jungles of Siam, far from a civilized nation and surrounded on the one hand by wild savages, and by wild beasts of prey on the other.”<sup>51</sup> Luddington felt persecuted the majority of the time he was in Siam. However, he felt that the abuse was largely brought on not by the Siamese but by the Catholic and Protestant clergy.<sup>52</sup> As mentioned earlier, there was a history of infighting among the Christian missionaries in Siam, and Luddington seems to have experienced some of it. Luddington preached at least one sermon every Sunday he was in Siam, usually to an audience of eight to ten Europeans. He made an effort to preach to the Siamese as well, but language and culture were near insurmountable barriers. He stated that he attempted to learn the language, though he was discouraged by the reports from other Christian missionaries. One missionary reported he had tried to learn the language for seven years and still couldn’t preach a sermon in Siamese.<sup>53</sup>

Luddington attempted to preach not only to the Europeans and common Siamese but also to the highest officials of the kingdom. He reported, “Since I have been here I have visited the minister of Foreign affairs, a native of Siam. I preached nearly one hour to him, through an interpreter. He wanted to know much about the Book of Mormon, and if the Prophet would not come to his country.”<sup>54</sup> Elder Luddington

also wrote a letter to King Mongkut. He later explained: “I have written a long letter to the king . . . at his request. He being desirous to know something about gold plates, I gave him a brief synopsis of the same.”<sup>55</sup> He complained that the letter to the king had to pass through a dragoman (translator) and that “every sentence was misconstrued by the dragoman.” He sought to personally meet with King Mongkut as well as the second king, Phra Pin Clau, the brother to King Mongkut. In a letter, he wrote that he had just received word that the second king wished to see him. Both King Mongkut and King Pin Clau spoke enough English that if Luddington had been granted an audience, they could have conversed together. There is no evidence, however, that he was ever granted a personal audience with either of them, although he did attend two festivals at the invitation of King Mongkut and at which the king was present. But having received no training in culture, Luddington made several errors. At one of the festivals, he reported, “I took my seat on a mat, with my feet towards the king for which I was very much censured, my guide told me the cause of the excitement saying it is very improper to put your feet towards the king.”<sup>56</sup>

While attempting to preach the gospel, Luddington continually encountered opposition. “I was surrounded several times by the natives and twice I was stoned, once I was turned out of the palace and once out of the cathedral and poison was administered to me.”<sup>57</sup> He never gave any explanation for this persecution from the Thai natives, and again, he laid the blame for it mainly at the feet of the other Christian ministers. At the end of a letter Elder Luddington wrote after fleeing Siam, he stated, “I was rejected, and I washed my feet as a testimony against my foes—American missionaries and Europeans.” Ultimately, Elder Luddington felt he had done everything in his power to fulfill his mission in Siam, but to no avail. “After making every exertion in my honor to establish a church, I found it entirely useless and left them to enjoy their own religion.”<sup>58</sup> On August 12, 1854, Elder Luddington took passage again with Captain



James Trail on the *Serious* bound for Singapore. He had spent 129 days in Siam.

Thus ended the first attempt to introduce Mormonism to the Siamese. As was the experience of every other Christian missionary to make the attempt, there was little, if any, evidence of success. In Thailand, just as throughout Southeast Asia, the Christian missionaries had the usual cultural and linguistic challenges. However, the fruits of success in Siam were markedly fewer than in the other countries, even other countries which were predominantly Theravada Buddhist.

One author noted three reasons why Christianity has struggled to find converts in Thailand. The failure of Christianity to convert significant numbers of the Thais could be partly explained by the fundamental differences in the basic world views of Christianity and Theravada Buddhism, partly explained by the salience of Buddhism in the Thai identity and way of life, and partly explained by the often uncompromising attitudes of both Catholic and Protestant missionaries toward the “heathen” beliefs and customs of the natives whom they have sought to convert.<sup>59</sup> As this paper has shown, the second reason most definitely had a profound impact.

Perhaps one reason the Siamese royalty allowed so much freedom to Christian missionaries was the reality that their influence was seen as negligible despite the freedom to proselyte. The powerful combination of Buddhism’s deep historical tie to the area and people, the unique way in which Siamese royalty intermingled their influence with their religion, and the loyalty of the Siamese people to their leaders and traditions created a powerful bulwark against the spread of every type of Christianity in the ancient kingdom of Siam.

## Notes

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MICHAEL A. GOODMAN

2. For a more detailed account of Elam Luddington's missionary efforts rather than the milieu in which he labored, see Michael A. Goodman, "Elam Luddington: First Latter-day Saint Missionary to Thailand," in *Go Ye into All the World: The Growth and Development of Mormon Missionary Work*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Fred E. Woods (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 241–60.
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5. David K. Wyatt, *Thailand, A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 21.
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## THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH

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24. Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 3:297.
25. Van der Cruysse, *Siam and the West*, 118.
26. Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 2:51.
27. Van der Cruysse, *Siam and the West*, 165.
28. Smith, *Siam*, 56, and Bhamorabutr, *Short History of Thailand*, 48.
29. See Wyatt, *Thailand, A Short History*; Van der Cruysse, *Siam and the West*; and Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*.
30. Marten Visser, *Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand* (Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer, 2008), 61.
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32. Wyatt, *Thailand, A Short History*, 177.
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35. Barend Terwiel, *A History of Modern Thailand, 1767–1942* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), 134.
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38. Terwiel, *A History of Modern Thailand*, 169, and Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand*, 10–11.
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40. Moffat, *Mongkut, the King of Siam*, 157.
41. Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand*, 23.
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MICHAEL A. GOODMAN

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46. Details of Elam Luddington's early life come from Elam Luddington, "Luddington Family and All Existing Portions of an Autobiographical Sketch," folios I and IV, Family History Library, Salt Lake City.
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