

Religion and Reform: Buddhism, Christianity and the refashioning of the Siamese state, 1782–1868

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Abstract:

The nineteenth century is remembered in Thai history as a period of rapid political, economic and intellectual change that fundamentally transformed the Siamese state, its society and religious institutions. From c. 1830 onwards, discussions on religion became a central arena of conflict between rival regimes of knowledge in Siam, confronting 'traditional' Thai Buddhist views on nature and man's existence with the ideals and practices of science and rationalist thought coming from the West. Protestant missionaries were important brokers of knowledge, as one of their strengths was the ability to offer religion in tandem with modern science and technology. This project will examine the interplay between knowledge transfer and the Christian mission in a period of massive political pressure from Western imperial powers. It seeks to explain how Buddhism became a major instrument in the struggle for spiritual and political authority in Siam, and will grasp how the intrusion of colonial modernity and the enduring power of Thai culture and identity were negotiated in the nineteenth century.

Funded since 2017 by the German Research Foundation, the research project is based on three assumptions. *First*, it is presumed that Christian doctrines played a crucial role for the transformation of Buddhism in nineteenth-century Siam, even though the Christian mission itself was a failure in terms of conversions. *Secondly*, 'modern' Buddhism not only became an important source for Siamese cultural assertiveness in the face of European colonialism, but also a central ideology for pushing Siamese claims for religious leadership in the Theravada Buddhist world. *Thirdly*, it is hypothesized here that Siamese Buddhism was linked to a global discourse on Buddhism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that connected different and distant locales such as Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, Europe and the USA.

By revisiting published Thai and Western material from the period and based on a range of hitherto little used sources from missionary archives, the project will pursue the following objectives:

- (1) to illuminate the personal, religious and intellectual backgrounds of Protestant Anglo-American missionaries operating in nineteenth-century Siam;
- (2) to uncover Christian texts and translations produced for missionary purposes to describe the nature of cross-cultural religious debates in the period;
- (3) to provide a better understanding of the intellectual strategies that informed Siamese responses to Christianity and the threat of colonialism;
- (4) to assess the Siamese kings' efforts in the nineteenth century to disseminate their concept of modern Buddhism in the Theravada Buddhist world, especially in Sri Lanka;
- (5) to describe the global connections between modernist reform movements in Siam and Western discourses on Buddhism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.