

AYUTTHAYA, THAILAND



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY
OF Global
Christianity

GORDON  CONWELL
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



Ayutthaya, Thailand

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Cover Photo: Woman and children at the Festival of Light, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, Thailand. Unsplash: Guille Álvarez

Unless otherwise noted, data is sourced from the *World Christian Database* and the following citation should be used: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed December 2019).

ABOUT THE CSGC

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity is an academic research center that monitors worldwide demographic trends in Christianity, including outreach and mission. We provide a comprehensive collection of information on the past, present, and future of Christianity in every country of the world. Our data and publications help churches, mission agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to be more strategic, thoughtful, and sensitive to local contexts. Please visit our website at www.globalchristianity.org.

DATA AND TERMS

This dossier includes many technical terms related to the presentation of statistics. A complete methodology document is found here: <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/research/dossiers>. We use a social scientific method for measuring religion around the world; namely, self-identification. If a person calls herself a Christian, then she is a Christian. We measure Christians primarily by denominational affiliation in every country of the world and these data are housed in the World Christian Database. Ethnolinguistic people groups are distinct homogeneous ethnic or racial groups within a single country, speaking its own language (one single mother tongue). These dossiers measure gospel access (also known as “evangelization”) by a number of variables, including but not limited to, evangelistic outreach, church planting, personal witnessing, sharing on social media, etc. These dossiers also utilize data from the United Nations related to socio-economic, development, and gender-justice related issues.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



School children in Thailand.

Southeast Asia's most prosperous cities. In recognition of its historical and cultural importance, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Historical Park, the location of the ruins adjacent to today's city, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1991. A number of products are manufactured in the town, including cement, paper and pulp, electronics, synthetic fiber, and chemical products.

Catholics have had a presence in Thailand since the establishment of the Portuguese community in Ayutthaya in the first half of the 16th century. Catholic institutions have been important in the education of Catholic clergy and leaders in the region, and for the education of Thai citizens at large, particularly in central Thailand, home to an extensive network of educational institutions, religious organizations and charities. The first Protestant missionaries (Dutch and British) arrived in 1828, followed by representatives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission in 1831, American Baptists in 1833 and American Presbyterians in 1840. Christians have remained a small though influential minority in the country with the

Ayutthaya province is relatively small at 2,557 sq. km. and is easily accessible due to good road, rail, and river connections and its proximity to Bangkok. Straddling the Chao Phraya River, the nation's principal waterway, the province is extremely important, as it was the Siamese capital for four centuries. The city of Ayutthaya is 76 km. north of Bangkok and boasts numerous magnificent ruins from its days as the capital. Just to the south stands the royal palace of Bang Pa-In set in splendid gardens. The province is also noted for H.M. the Queen's Bang Sai Arts and Crafts Centre. Formally designated Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, this ancient capital is one of Thailand's major tourist attractions. The extensive ruins and the historical records demonstrate that Ayutthaya was one of

THAILAND QUICK FACTS

POPULATION (2020): 69,411,000
CHRISTIANS: 906,000 (1.3%)
RELIGION: 87% BUDDHIST, 6% MUSLIM
GOSPEL ACCESS: MEDIUM
PEOPLES: 98 LEAST-ACCESS: 46
DEVELOPMENT: 75 (GLOBAL AVG. 70)
GDP PER CAPITA: \$16,300 (AVG. \$15,300)
GENDER INEQUALITY: 39 (AVG. 37)

AYUTTHAYA PROVINCE QUICK FACTS

POPULATION: 834,000
CHRISTIANS: 830 0.1%
GOSPEL ACCESS: MEDIUM

highest percentage of Buddhists in the world (87% Buddhist). The traditionally close connection between Buddhist identity and national Thai identity is one factor in Christianity's lack of presence among the Theravada Buddhist majority. However, Christianity has been more widely received by Thailand's ethnic minorities.

Bible translation status in Thailand is twofold: languages with complete Bibles; and the distribution of those Bibles to those who have no access to the translations even though they exist. On the one hand, only 1.3% of the population speaks a language in which there is no portion of scripture. On the other hand, distribution remains low as 40 million Bibles remain to be distributed in order for every literate adult to have at least a scripture portion available to them in paper form.

"Ayutthaya," by Shaheen Dil (1993)

The city lay in a loop in the river,
the Chao Phya meandering through fertile plains,
the fourth side guarded by a wide moat,
canals and waterways interlaced the whole.

Ramatibodi's abode from 1350 on, reddish clay
walls for palaces, huts, towers, temples and halls,
the city a center for an empire stretching
from Myanmar and Kampuchea to Siam.

Sacked by the Burmans in 1767, the canals
of the city ran red with the blood of the killed,
flames lapped the lovely walls now crumbling
where I stand in the smoke-blackened ruins

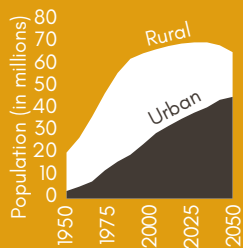
struggling with a lush green wild trying to reclaim them,
face to face with the fallen head of god, Buddha-beautiful
and serene, and my eye to giant eye to see
the impermanence of grand things is neither bad nor sad.



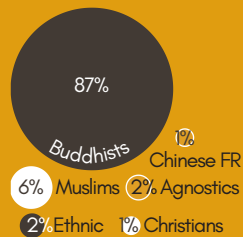
Monks studying at Wat Suthat Thepwararam Ratchaworahawihan.

THAILAND IN CONTEXT

COUNTRY



population

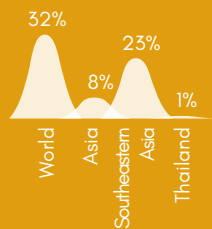


religion

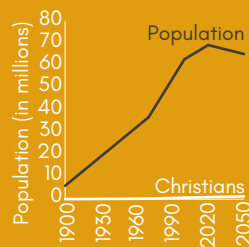


human need

CHRISTIANITY



region

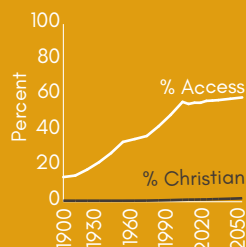


history

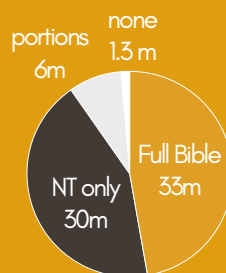


tradition

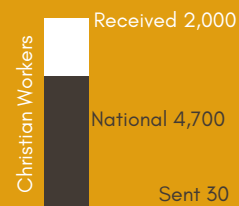
MISSION



evangelism



bible translation

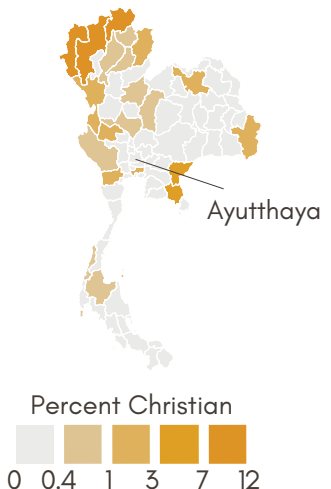


personnel

HISTORY

In Thai history, the first unified Siamese (Thai) kingdom began with the city-state of Sukhothai in 1238. The city-state of Ayutthaya rose to prominence over Sukhothai in 1350, though the two competed for and shared power between 1350 and 1448, after which Ayutthaya absorbed Sukhothai entirely. The years 1351–1767 mark the Ayutthayan period of Thai history, beginning with the founding of the eponymous city by King Uthlong in 1351. Earliest significant contact with Western nations began in the 16th century with Portugal via Catholic missionaries and traders, both of whom gained influence in the court of Ayutthaya. However, some scholars suggest that Catholic missionaries did not make a concerted effort to convert Siamese people until the next century, though they had been able to provoke philosophical discussion among the king and some monks and scholars at his court. Even though they had a prominent court representative in Ayutthaya, Catholic missionaries, now supported by France, were unsuccessful at contributing to the growth of Christianity in the region. Resentment against the foreign presence in the king's court culminated in 1688 with a coup against King Narai. The Catholic voice in the Siamese court and many of the king's supporters were killed, the French were expelled, and the remaining Christians were confined to foreign enclaves. The usurper, King Petracha, persecuted Catholics and trade with Western nations declined.

CHRISTIANITY IN THAILAND BY PROVINCE



Christians have remained a small but influential minority in the country with the highest percentage of Buddhists in the world (87%).



Ayutthaya ruins.

THAILAND TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

1350–1767: Ayutthaya kingdom gradually brings Thailand under its control.	1767: Burmese forces sack the capital, Ayutthaya, bringing an end to the kingdom.
1782: Beginning of Chakri dynasty under King Rama I, which rules to this day.	1804–1910: Embrace of Western influence and Thailand's modernisation.
1939: Siam changes its name to Thailand ("Land of the Free").	1932: Bloodless coup introduces constitutional monarchy with parliamentary government.
1941: Japanese forces land.	1945: Thailand compelled to return territory it had seized from Laos, Cambodia and Malaya.
1973: Student riots in Bangkok briefly bring about the fall of the military government.	1991: Military coup, the 17th since 1932. Civilian installed as prime minister.
1997: Asian financial crisis 1998: Tens of thousands of migrant workers are sent back to their countries.	
2016: Voters approve a constitution with continuing military influence.	2016: King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the world's longest reigning monarch, dies.

Source: BBC

Historians posit two reasons for the lack of success in these early efforts at converting Siamese kings and their people. First, early missionaries tended to associate the conversions of monarchs with major power shifts; that is, making converts was tied to making Christianity the religion of the country. Second, is the lack of contextualization employed by the early Catholic missionaries in Siam, in contrast to Catholic missions elsewhere in Asia during this period. The message of early Catholic missionaries was inadequately translated. Instead of borrowing recognizable religious terms from Pali and Sanskrit, Catholics used Portuguese terms for Christian concepts. Christianity was considered foreign by Thai people because of the failure to make Catholicism linguistically indigenous.

Burma overtook Ayutthaya in 1767 and the historic kingdom was mostly destroyed and abandoned. Its monarchy remained fragmented until reconstitution. The ascendancy of King Taksin occurred in the power vacuum of the destruction of Ayutthaya. Rule was established across the river from modern-day Bangkok. However, Taksin was disposed in 1782 as a result of tyrannical behavior that included the expulsion of Catholic missionaries for their refusal to participate in Buddhist ceremonies. The king who took his place was his former general who ordered him to be killed, thus becoming the first king of the present-day Chakri Dynasty. Dynasties following the Ayutthayan period had varying degrees of power and emphases upon rooting the Siam identity in Buddhism, the trajectory of Thai history after this point was towards becoming both more Buddhist and more politically Western.

Siam's mixed support for Western Allies between World War I and World War II, combined with the influence of their Oxford-educated King Vajiravudh (also known as Rama VI) in the second decade of the 20th century, led to the emergence of both a more democratic and more Buddhist country. A distinct Thai identity is tied to the creation of its national flag and the three tenets (or three pillars) established by King Vajiravudh (r. 1910–1925): chat, sasana, mahakasat (nation, religion, monarchy). The tricolor (red, white, and blue) Thai flag introduced during his reign (1917) embodies these values. His reforms, national symbols, and mantras served to solidify the equation of faithful, moral, and strong individual and collective Thai identity with Buddhism itself. The nationalization of Siam was also

a joint project of anchoring the Thai ethical and political identity in Buddhism and against other foreign faiths, which had severe consequences for Thai Catholics as well as Muslims and other minority populations. The pinnacles of Thai monarchs deepening their own ties and those of the whole nation with Buddhism appears to precisely be the point at which Christianity was viewed as inferior. In addition, Buddhism simply held more historical significance in the country, having arrived and been adopted much earlier than Christianity and Islam.

King Vajiravudh's successor, Prajadhipok, was deposed in 1932 in what is frequently referred to as a "bloodless coup." The first leader under this new constitution is referred to as Pibul or Phibun from his full name Plaek Phibunsongkhram. During this period, Thai identity became even more solidified at the expense of other religions. The government declared at this time, "Thais love Buddhism more than life itself," implying that those who were not Buddhists were also not Thai. Pibul's constitutional and militaristic government extended the ideology of King

For much of the 20th century, Thai national identity centered around the three pillars of nation, religion (Buddhism), and monarchy.



Monks at a Temple in Bangkok.

Thai identity became solidified at the expense of other religions under the leadership of Pibul (1938–44), also when "Siam" became "Thailand".

Early Catholic missionaries in Thailand were unsuccessful in part because their message was inadequately translated for the local context and language.

Strong Buddhist identity couple with anti-French sentiments in the 1940s had disastrous consequences for Catholics in Thailand.

Vajiravudh into a new era and a new caliber of Buddhist nationalism. Under Pibul in 1939 "Siam" became "Thailand." Pibul's transformation of Thailand included a fundamental rearrangement of the posture of the Thai people toward other religions in their country and of the government itself. The use of military force in the early years of the constitutionalized government set a dangerous precedent that reduced the ideals of a constitution that gave rights to the Thai people into another form of authoritarian rule.

The emphasis on Buddhism as the religious cement for the pan-Thai nation had the gravest implication for Catholics. The conjunction of a strong Buddhist identity and the anti-French attitude of the government had disastrous consequences for the Catholic missions in the country. By 1942, many mission stations and parishes had been destroyed, seized, or vandalized. Numerous foreign priests and nuns took refuge in French Indochina, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, and India, while those who remained were under increasing pressure to convert to Buddhism, a religion not previously known for such militancy. Congregations were also forced to convert, especially if members were in the civil service and wished to keep their jobs. Those who did not convert were assaulted or arrested and accused of being unpatriotic.

A critical change occurred in January 2001, when the newly formed Thai Rak Thai (Thai loves Thai; TRT) party under the leadership of a former policeman and telecommunication tycoon, Thaksin Shinawatra, won a resounding victory in the general election. Furthermore, in the 2005 elections, the Thai Rak Thai party won an unprecedented second term, and could form a single party government. Thus, this represents a new era of Thai politics to the extent that the parliament is controlled by a dominant political force.

The political market in Thailand became chaotic again in early 2006, when Thaksin sold his telecom company shares to a Singapore's state-owned Thamasek Holdings for a tax-free \$1.9 billion. The deal to avoid paying tax on capital gains. Anti-government protests grew rapidly leading to many big demonstrations in Bangkok. Opponents of the billionaire leader accused him of abusing the country's system of checks and balances and bending government policy to benefit his family's business. Instead of using



Wat Chai Wattanaram, Ayutthaya, Thailand.

Thailand has experienced upward of 30 different governmental coup d'états since 1932.

parliament to respond to the opposition's demand, he dissolved the parliament and called a snap general election, which was boycotted by all main opposition parties. Although the Thai Rak Thai party was returned to power, the no votes (abstention) were substantial, in particular in Bangkok and in the south. This has tainted Thaksin's legitimacy and to defuse the political crisis, Thaksin handed over the premiership to his deputy. What role Thaksin plays in the future remains to be seen.

Since 1932's overthrow of King Prajadhipok, Thailand has undergone 12 different coup d'états, (some who include all attempts place this number as high as 30) the most recent of which placed the current Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in power since 2014.

COUNTRY RANK	LIFE EXPECTANCY	PHYSICIANS PER 1K	INFANT MORTALITY	MALARIA PER 1K	HIV PER 1K	GDP PC	NET WORTH PC	INTERNET USERS %	RELIGIOUS LIBERTY	GENDER INEQUALITY
THAILAND	77	5	8	2	11	\$16,300	\$14,800	48%	5	39
REGION (OF 11)	4	8	8	5	1	4	4	5	6	7
ASIA (OF 51)	20	45	32	9	1	23	20	29	23	19
WORLD (OF 234)	111	162	129	66	41	90	112	113	189	115

The table above depicts the value of specific UN indicators for Thailand as well as Thailand's ranking globally, continentally and regionally against other countries. For example, Thailand ranks 20th out of 51 countries in Asia for life expectancy.

Thailand's
socio-economic
structure has
been changing
rapidly from an
agricultural to an
industrial society.

AYUTTHAYA TODAY

ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT

In the 1990s, factories in the Central Region were concentrated in the following areas: (1) East of Ayutthaya, which were Saraburi and Lop Buri. The density of the factories was still low. In 1994, there were about 32-94 factories per district, which was lower than the Central Region's average of 125. Factories started to be built in the northern part of the region, which included Ayutthaya, Saraburi and Lop Buri. Between 1981 and 1989, the industry grew at 9.5% annually. In 1991, there were 3,172 factories in the northern part of the Central Region. Despite the boom engendered by the then burgeoning and now formidable factory economy in Ayutthaya, it seems it is both the boon and the bane of the regions enduring livelihood of the region when synergized by the region's refuse and flooding issues.

Exploitative relations of production are no longer simply attributable to the ownership of property but also involve the operation of further ideological doctrines including nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. The migrant registration system and the creation of the category of the "registered illegal immigrant" coupled with the rapid expansion of export-led industrialization, have led to a swelling population of an underclass of migrant workers. By some estimates, this population constitutes up to 10% of Thailand's workforce, upon whom Thailand's economy may currently be structurally dependent. The Thai state has consistently pursued policies that marginalize and disempower these people, a development that can be interpreted as a de facto reintroduction of a social formation that has led to egregious violations of human dignity and autonomy.

ENVIRONMENT

The problem of waste is a crucial environmental issue that has become increasingly serious due to an increase in population, especially in urban areas and tourist cities such as the Historic City of Ayutthaya. In addition to its attraction as a World Heritage Site, its neighboring areas are designated as industrial development zones. Consequently, Thai and foreign laborers have migrated to the area, causing the non-registered population to be five times greater than that of the local population. The aforementioned situations have contributed greatly to the waste problems endured

by the city of Ayutthaya. This problem could lead to the removal of Ayutthaya from UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites. This in turn would result in the loss of one of Ayutthaya's most significant sources of income found in its robust tourism industry and the economic boost that comes from consistent visitors from abroad. A major opportunity for activism among Christian workers would be for teams to love their Buddhist Ayutthayan neighbors by joining in efforts to preserve these World Heritage sites, thus helping to ensure that the tourism industry that is central in the Ayutthayan economy is not compromised.

One study noted that there were 20,000 tons of waste in the Ayutthaya municipality. Terrifyingly, the amount of waste at present day is five times greater than that found in the past. Before 2015, the one and only waste disposal area of the Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya municipality was a 30-rai area in the Baan Pom sub-district, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya district. By using an open dumping system, this disposal area now holds nearly 300,000 tons of residual waste in the middle of paddy fields. Furthermore, daily waste collected in the Ayutthaya municipality amounts to about 90 tons; in addition to the 50 tons of waste originat-

One study noted that there were 20,000 tons of waste in the Ayutthaya municipality – five times greater than that found in the past.



Man posing for a picture in Ayutthaya.

It is critical to have an awareness of the environmental and economic risks to Ayutthaya, particularly as they impact the region's most vulnerable populations.

ing from other organizations. All in all, approximately 140 tons of waste are dumped in this area on a daily basis.

Thailand's socio-economic structure has been changing rapidly from an agricultural to an industrial society. The increase in industrial activities has contributed to environmental pollution throughout the country, raising health concerns. The Chao Phraya and Pasak Rivers are considered major water sources in Chao Phraya River basin, Thailand. Over 30,000 industrial facilities located in the Chao Phraya River basin have contributed to river water contamination by toxic substances, including heavy metals from industrial sewage. In addition, flooding is one extreme event that can play a significant role in toxic substance dispersion to the environment. Regarding the Thailand catastrophic flooding in 2011, industrial estates in central Thailand were flooded, raising concern about toxic chemical contamination from wastewater treatment systems of industrial estates in Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province. As industrialization is one of the factors contributing heavy metal contamination to the environment, flooding also plays a significant role in transporting heavy metals, since it can trigger a failure of the wastewater treatment system in the flooded area.

Though it is less clear how cross-cultural workers might engage in efforts to ameliorate the effects of industrialization on water quality in the region, nevertheless, an awareness of the risks to Ayutthaya, particularly to its most vulnerable populations and immigrants who work in the burgeoning industrial zone of Ayutthaya is essential to having a holistic missional presence.

GENDER

Historical depictions of women in mural from the Ayutthayan period give a varied picture of their position in society. While the depictions of men performing assumed household tasks like pounding rice and childcare, and the presence of female mahouts (elephant drivers), and some all-female orchestras from the 17th and 18th centuries suggest a level of vocational equality and social mobility not typically ascribed to women during this period, other murals suggest that the division of labor and traditional household roles still prevailed and that a number of dehumanizing punishments were wielded against women reinforcing their assumed responsibility for protecting the sexual purity of

their families and society. One immensely significant insight for missional engagement in contemporary Ayutthaya gleaned from artistic and literary history comes from a canonical jataka (accounts of the supposedly previous ahistorical lives of the Buddha) text in Theravada Buddhism. During the Buddha's life as Prince Vessantara, he is said to have given away all his worldly "possessions," including his children and wife. He gives his wife Maddi to a passerby who turns out to be the god Indra. Nevertheless, the story clearly depicts women as the disposable property of men; this is intended to be a "laudable example" and the story ostensibly remains popular today. In the subplot, an old Brahmin named Chutchak (also known as jujaka) exploits the debt of two parents to buy their daughter as a "domestic and body servant or wife." Though the woman, Amitada,



Thai caterer in Ayutthaya.

GENDER IN THAILAND

	% FEMALE	GENDER GAP	GENDER INEQUALITY
THAILAND	51	0	39
S. EAST ASIA	50	4	41
ASIA	49	10	36
WORLD	50	8	37

The table above compares key measures of gender equality against global, continental and regional averages.

Prostitution was made illegal in Thailand in 1960, yet the sex industry comprises anywhere from 2-10% of the country's GDP.

subverts his authority, she nevertheless is unequivocally the property of the manipulative Chutchak and her story climaxes with a near-riot that occurs when she goes to a well alone to draw water.

Here, one may find a bridge for Gospel conversation with Buddhist women familiar with this ancient narrative about one of the Buddha's past lives. Despite the contextual irony of the story, creating a foil, as it were between Buddha and the Brahmin it depicts both of its central male characters as commodifying women, either as disposable in the pursuit of enlightenment/renunciation or easily obtainable for one's own purposes. Yet, one of its central characters, is a woman abused by her husband, mocked by village women, going to a well alone to draw water. The Buddha, however, doesn't meet her at the well with any hope from alleviation of her oppression or suffering. Cross-cultural workers in Ayutthaya have a more hopeful account of a woman at a well, whose years of abuse are met with healing and new life.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND PROSTITUTION

Prostitution's formal roots in Siam go as far back as 1860, when an Ayutthayan official was licensed to run an elite brothel. A century later, prostitution was made illegal in Thailand in 1960. Various studies suggest that the so-called "sex-industry" still contributes anywhere from 2 to 10 percent of Thailand's GDP. Though an egregious human rights issue in the country, some studies suggest that prostitution in Thailand is more complex than "selling sex" and that there remains a dominant and, in their view, more "humane" mistress culture in prostitution throughout the country. In this culture, which some describe as "professional girlfriends" it is not uncommon, for example, for men to take prostitutes on numerous dates and maintain pseudo-relationships that may superficially appear to be consensual and authentic. This mistress culture has historical underpinnings in the Sakdina slavery system that endured until it was outlawed by King Rama V in the late 19th century. Under this system, men were allowed three "categories" of wives: a wife from an arranged marriage, a wife that the man chose for love, and slave mistresses; and women from poor families could be sold as the mistress of a wealthy aristocrat, earning both money and face for her family at home. In the wake of the abolition of this system opportuni-

ties were provided for male slaves to become participants in the monkhood or the military. Women were not afforded either of these opportunities and prostitution emerged to fill this socio-economic gap. Consequently, particularly among middle to upper class members of Thai society, the idea of having a “third-tier” wife remains socially acceptable to many and is met with little to no consequences. For many women migrating to urban areas and engaging in prostitution is regarded as a lucrative and viable option for socio-economic mobility and/or to provide for their families given the historically precedented mistress culture.

FEMALE IMPRISONMENT

Thailand has the fourth highest rate of female imprisonment next to the U.S., China, and Russia. Many sources suggest that since women constitute the vast minority of inmates globally in addition to the egregious lack of equality afforded to women worldwide, incarcerated women are a particularly vulnerable population.

Thai Princess Bajrakitiyabha Mahidol has been instrumental in increasing the global awareness of the issues facing women in prison. Her advocacy for female prison reform through the “Enhancing the Lives of Female Inmates” project prompted the Thai government to submit a resolution to the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice resulting in the adoption of what are known as the “Bangkok Rules.” What is ostensibly the primary prison in the region, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Provincial Prison has adopted these rules.

Thailand has the fourth-highest rate of female imprisonment in the world, making them a highly vulnerable population.



Woman and child.

PEOPLE GROUPS IN THAILAND

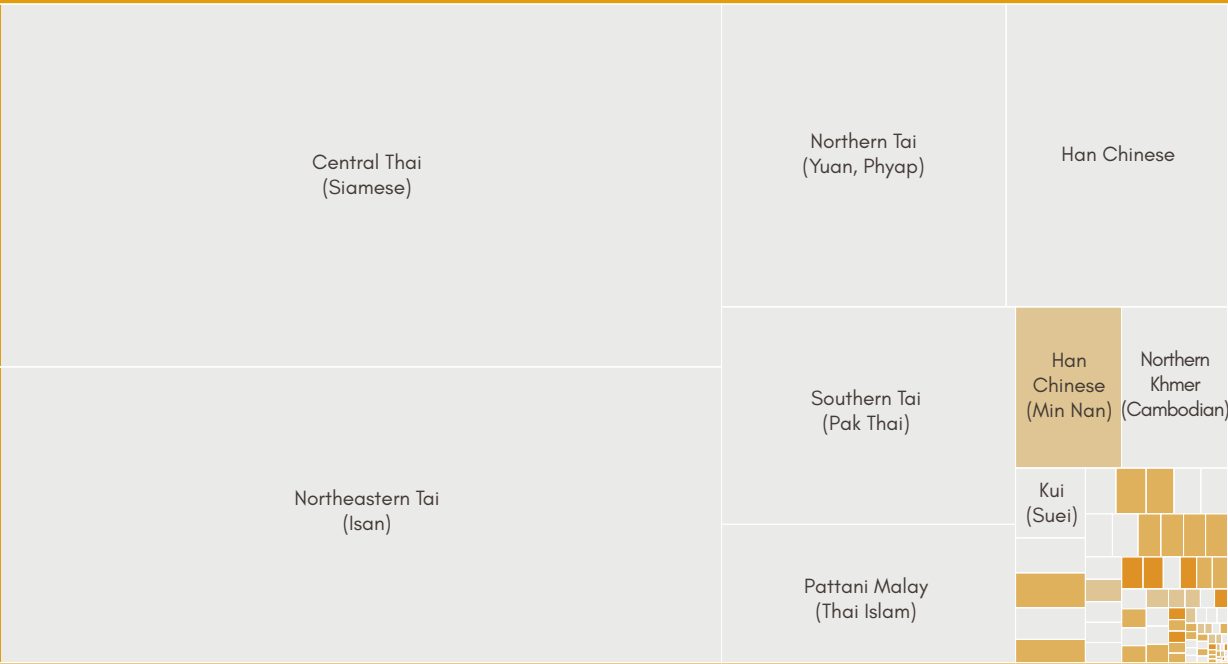
Over three quarters of the people of Thailand are ethnically Thai, likely originating from the migration of peoples from southern China in the 11th century. Four primary ethnolinguistic groups of Thai exist today, defined by geographical regions in which they historically developed: Central Thai, Northeastern Tai, Northern Tai and Southern Tai. A distinct culture and language have developed among each of these people groups based on geographical differences and the influence of neighboring cultures. For example, Northeastern Tai language and culture are similar to the neighboring peoples of Laos, while Southern Tai have been influenced by the Malay of Malaysia. Central Thai language has long been the official language of Thailand, and is a reflection of the cultural, economic and political dominance of the Central Thai in the country.

Less than 1% of ethnically Thai people are Christian. There are significantly more Christians among minority peoples in Thailand including the Han Chinese (7.5%).

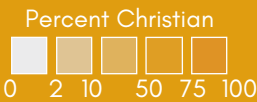
LARGEST PEOPLE GROUPS IN THAILAND

People	Population	% Chr.	%Access
CENTRAL THAI (SIAMESE)	22,575,000	0.8%	HIGH
NORTHEASTERN TAI (ISAN)	18,394,000	0.4%	MEDIUM
NORTHERN TAI (YUAN, PHYAP)	7,358,000	0.6%	MEDIUM
HAN CHINESE	5,719,000	0.7%	HIGH
SOUTHERN TAI (PAK THAI)	5,456,000	0.3%	MEDIUM
PATTANI MALAY (THAI ISLAM)	3,471,000	0.0%	LOW
HAN CHINESE (MIN NAN)	1,458,000	7.5%	HIGH
NORTHERN KHMER (CAMBODIAN)	1,458,000	0.1%	MEDIUM
KUI (SUEI)	416,000	1.4%	MEDIUM
LAO PHUAN	208,000	1.7%	MEDIUM

PEOPLES OF THAILAND



The treemap depicts all 98 people groups in Thailand. The rectangles are proportional to the population of each people group, while the color intensity reflects the percent Christian within the people group.



The Thai landscape is filled with more than 40,000 Buddhist temples, of which 34,000 are active.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Thailand is technically a secular state and has no official religion. However, Buddhism plays a special role in politics and society; as a constitutional monarchy, the king is required to be Buddhist; the government also maintains many Buddhist temples and regulates some aspects of the sangha (the monastic community) through several state departments such as the Office of National Buddhism. An interim constitution adopted by leaders of a 2014 coup states: "The human dignity, rights, liberty, and equality of the people shall be protected." It also grants the military government significant power to limit or suppress protections of fundamental human rights but does not specifically mention either religious liberty or protection from discrimination based on religion. The law specifically prohibits the defamation or insult of Buddhism and Buddhist clergy.

According to the 2018 International Religious Freedom Report on Thailand, Christians are included in Thailand's five officially recognized religious groups. However, in 2018 Christian and Muslim refugees who were formally seeking or had received UNHCR status were detained. A nongovernmental organization (NGO) said the detainees included Christians and Ahmadi Muslims from Pakistan, who fled for religious reasons, and 181 Christian Montagnards from Vietnam, whom the NGO said had asylum or refugee status. The NGO said the Montagnards were detained on August 28 and the adults were sent to an immigration detention facility, while approximately 50 children were sent to children's shelters."

RELIGION

THAI BUDDHISM

Theravada Buddhism is the religion of the majority of the population. It is commonly viewed as one of the pillars of modern Thai identity, along with the monarchy and the state. Theravada Buddhism was adopted as the official state religion in the Sukhothai period of the 13th century and has remained integral to the monarchy and state ever since. Buddhism in Thailand has blended with local and folk beliefs and practices. It incorporates elements of Brahmanic religion for ceremonies and festivals and animism for navigating every day life and seeking protection from spirits.

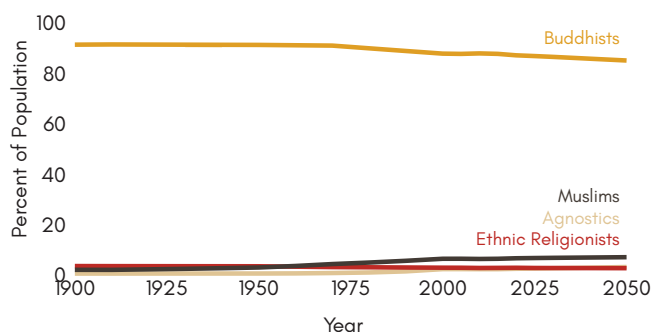
The Thai landscape is filled with more than 40,000 Buddhist temples, of which 34,000 are active. According to the tourism authority of Thailand, the greater Ayutthaya area is home to 14 historic wats which are major tourist attractions. Thailand also has 300,000 Buddhist monastics. Thailand also serves as the center for Theravada in its mission of conciliation between the various orientations of Buddhism. Theravada ("elder's view") is regarded as a qualifying term among many associated with Buddhism over the centuries. As a historical tradition, considered the oldest of the three primary sects of Buddhism, Theravada represents how a large, early group of monks and nuns became known to posterity with a purportedly unbroken ritual however the term can also refer to the canonical textual tradition of the teachings of the Buddha and collection of distinct interpretations of his teachings by Theravadins. Together, these meanings constitute an entire spiritual practice propagated and promulgated by its monastic tradition and interpretation of sacred texts.

WOMEN IN THAI BUDDHISM

Theravada Buddhists have a long history of debating whether or not women should be formally integrated into the sangha. Since Theravada Buddhism stresses the purity of their textual-ritual tradition which they trace back to early councils held shortly after the death of the Buddha, those early meetings to organize and agree on the "orthodox" teachings of the Buddha have shaped Theravadins views towards women for millennia afterwards. According to some Theravadins, Buddha's decision to include a female monastic order was a concession to one of his close

Female lay Theravada Buddhist monks are systematically denied the rights of male monks in Thailand, including governmental supports such as free education, medical care, and transportation.

RELIGIONS IN THAILAND, 1900-2050



Thailand has remained majority Buddhist since 1900. Christianity has increased slowly to 1.3% in 2020, and is projected to be 2% by 2050.

followers, Ananda, to begin with. Scholars suggest that this ancient debate “colors the contemporary debate on the possibility of reestablishing the order of nuns,” though, they also suggest that within Theravada no reestablishment of this order is considered possible “until a buddha [i.e. fully enlightened one] appears again.”

Scholars prefer to explain the lack of equality for women in Theravada Buddhism, particularly in Thailand, to the prevalence of traditional Thai gender roles. Renouncing the world to be wholly devoted to Buddhism, while being denied the full status of nun (Bhikkhuns) places women in a uniquely ambiguous category. Their devotion intentionally rejects the fulfillment of cultural expectations of marriage and motherhood, yet female “lay” monks in Theravada Buddhism in Thailand are systematically denied the rights of male monks in their country, such as free education and free medical care. Women’s motives for becoming lay-nuns in Thai Buddhism vary but one study suggests that it is genuinely to seek spiritual maturity and for the opportunity to study the dhamma more deeply. However, as demonstrated in the sometimes heated debates among contemporary Buddhist women, the textual messag-



Woman and children.

es are often ambiguous, and in Thailand historical evidence testifies to the ways in which religious practice adapted to the gender dynamics of local environments. In a region allegedly characterized by 'relatively high female autonomy', women are commonly acknowledged to be Theravada's principal supporters. The position of female ascetics is emblematic of the discrepancy between text and practice frequently resulting from the accommodation that typifies Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asian societies.

CHRISTIANITY

Catholics have had a presence in Thailand since the establishment of the Portuguese community in Ayutthaya in the first half of the 16th century. The first Protestant missionaries arrived in 1828 from Dutch and British societies, followed by representatives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission in 1831, American Baptists (who began work among the Chinese) in 1833 and American Presbyterians in 1840. Christians have remained a small though influential minority in the country with the highest percentage of Buddhists in the world (87% Buddhist). The traditionally close connection between Buddhist identity and national Thai identity is one factor in Christianity's lack of presence among the Theravada Buddhist majority. However, Christianity has been more widely received by Thailand's ethnic minorities. Recently, Christianity has made significant inroads with the central Thai community. About half of Christians today are ethnic Thai with the rest comprised of minorities.

Christianity in Thailand is shaped by the government's recognition (through the Department of Religious Affairs) of a handful of groups: Catholics, the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT), the Thailand Baptist Convention and Seventh-day Adventists. Most churches, even if Independent, associate with one of these groups to provide legitimacy and ease of work in the country. Catholics and Seventh-day Adventists have well-defined boundaries, but other Christian groups, individual churches and missions have tended to weave into and between the other three groups – an important, ecumenical dimension of Christianity in Thailand. Most churches in Thailand are majority-female.

Catholic institutions have been important in the education of Catholic clergy and leaders in the region, and for the education of Thai citizens at large, particularly in cen-

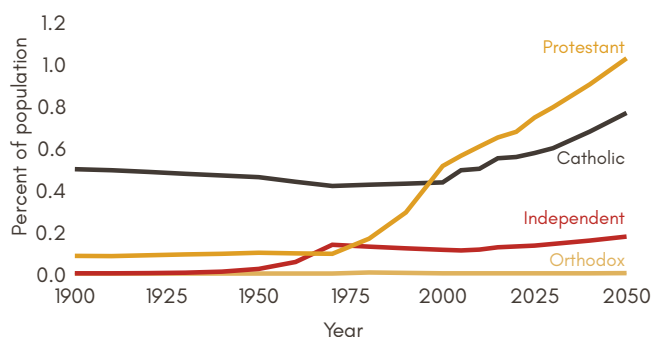
About half of Christians today are ethnic Thai, with the rest comprised of minorities.



Worship service in Krabi, 2006.

tral Thailand, home to an extensive network of educational institutions, religious organizations and charities. The Church of Christ in Thailand (Protestant) sponsors several hospitals and established the first private university in Thailand (Payap University in 1984), with a College of Divinity with roots in the 19th century, a rehabilitation institute, an agricultural farm, an adult literacy department and a guest house in Bangkok. The largest concentration of Protestant Christians is in the north, particularly around the border with Myanmar, in Thailand's "Bible hat". Ethnic minorities make up many of the Protestant Christian communities in the country. They include the Karen and Akha Baptists who originally came from Myanmar. Thailand has experienced a growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, particularly in urban and suburban areas.

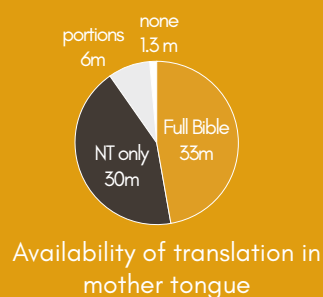
CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS IN THAILAND, 1900–2050



Protestants were the fastest growing Christian tradition in Thailand between 2000 and 2020, at 1.89% per annum. Catholics grew at a slightly slower rate of 1.73%.

BIBLE TRANSLATION AND ACCESS IN THAILAND

TRANSLATION AVAILABILITY



The national language of education in Thailand had received a full Bible translation as early as 1883 providing for the bulk of the population in their mother tongue, and the vast majority of literate Thai people in a second language. By the time of the 2016 publication of the New Testament in Northeastern Thai (Iban) nearly 99% of people in Thailand had at least a book of scripture in their mother tongue, placing Thailand in the top 10 countries with most mother-tongue access to translations.

TRANSLATION NEED

The remaining 1.3% of the population with no scripture still however make up a sizeable 800,000 people speaking 32 languages. The ten largest languages in Thailand with no scripture shown here include 4 languages with over 100,000 speakers in Thailand, two of which have even more speakers in Myanmar.

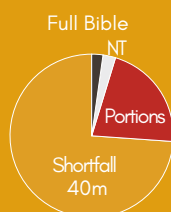
10 Largest languages in Thailand with no scriptures

Language	Global mts *	Thai mts*
1 Phuan	362,000	208,000
2 Phu Thai	674,000	188,000
3 Rohingya	1,743,000	104,000
4 Eastern Kayah	112,000	104,000
5 Nyaw	82,200	63,600
6 Thai Song	41,600	41,600
7 Western Bru	26,500	26,500
8 Kucong	108,000	16,600
9 Yong	13,900	13,900
10 Phunoi	73,200	13,900

* mts - mother tongue speakers

BIBLE DISTRIBUTION AND ACCESS

Progress towards distribution goals in Thailand



Adult Literacy: 93% Internet Users: 48%

Assuming that every literate adult should have access to at least one book of scripture, 54 million books would be required to be in place in Thailand. Over the last 20 years (the assumed life of a hard copy Bible), 14 million Bibles, New Testaments and individual books of the Bible were actually distributed. This is more than enough for the less than a million Christians, but millions of non-Christians are without. How much the shortfall of 40 million can be made up will depend both on online availability as well as vastly additional printed materials for the half without any internet access.

Looking into historical Thai Buddhist stories and legends might provide bridges to the Christian message in contemporary times.

MISSION RANK	% CHRISTIAN	CHRISTIAN GAIN P.A.	CHRISTIAN GROWTH %	GOSPEL ACCESS	BAPTISMS PER ANNUM	MISSIONARIES RECEIVED	CHRISTIAN BROADCAST %	PERSONAL EV (ALL)	PRIORITY PEOPLES
THAILAND	1.3%	27K	3.0%	57%	9,440	2,000	13.5%	8m	6
REGION (OF 11)	5	9	5	7	9	3	5	3	4
ASIA (OF 51)	29	25	24	19	28	8	17	9	22
WORLD (OF 234)	113	120	70	184	133	47	166	24	40

The table above depicts the value of specific indicators of mission and Christian presence for Thailand and ranks them globally, continentally and regionally against other countries. For example, Thailand ranks 24th out of 51 countries in Asia for Christian Growth.

CHRISTIAN MISSION

Thailand has been hospitable to a variety of mission, humanitarian and faith-based organizations. Northern Thailand (Chiang Mai, in particular) has become an important hub for missions, a development that began in the late 1990s, when Hong Kong reverted from British to Chinese control. Many mission agencies are based in the northern region because it is geographically well-positioned to access many areas and peoples in China, Myanmar, India, Laos and Viet Nam. Large international organizations such as Youth With A Mission, SIL International, and Partners International have an extensive presence in the north. Many organizations also focus on reaching ethnic minorities that extend from Thailand into neighboring countries; an example is the Thai Christian Foundation, which promotes projects that serve ethnic minorities and also conducts training of national workers. The Thailand Bible Society seeks to translate and distribute the Bible in various languages.

ANALYSIS

As Christianity seeks to translate the message of the Gospel into the Thai context, it must do so in ways which present more compelling moral and rationale frameworks for understanding the life experiences of Thai people in conjunction with both honoring and subverting the forms of authority in which Buddhism is vested in the Thai national identity. This is not just a call for novel or innovative Buddhist-Christian apologetics, but one which understands the ways in which the Central Thai people draw their moral

and rational framework for living directly and indirectly from their Buddhist history. Someone can be a nominal Buddhist but a devout nationalist, and if the latter then they may still find Christianity uninteresting, unnecessary, foreign, and undesirably un-Thai.

Most Christian converts in Thailand have historically been immigrants, non-Buddhists, and, in particular, tribal animists in the North who had not previously converted to or been proselytized by Buddhist “missionaries.” Scholars emphasize the acceptance of Christianity by immigrants in the country whose national identity is not as deeply tied to Buddhism and who have significantly less “to-lose” by not being Buddhist or associating with “foreign” religion, since they are effectively, already regarded as “foreign” within Thailand.

Though so-called “monk-missionaries” are historically a part of Theravada Buddhism, such missionaries have been explicitly employed in national security efforts aimed at ensuring the Thai identity of people along the borders. Exemplary of the politico-religious authority imbued into Buddhist leaders and monks, scholars cite instances in recent decades of the genuflection of armed Thai police to Buddhist monks despite their lacking says, the “trappings of secular power.” The government, in sponsoring a Buddhist missionary program, found that it could also stimulate the development of movements that are beyond government control. For the most part, however, monks rarely use their prowess to challenge existing authority; they are more likely



Seminar at Bangkok Christian College, 2016.

to draw on that authority to assert a new understanding of the world.

Despite the financial and geographic/logistical difficulties of such a strategy, it seems that mobilizing North Thai people(s) and their churches to partner in Kingdom efforts in Ayutthaya would be the most effective way of distancing Christianity from its historic association with foreignness in Catholic missions. Abundant opportunities for the kind of authentic and identity shaping work exist in the areas of environmentalism and justice activism in conjunction with evangelistic efforts. Missions that aim to correct injustices would do well to consider the women left languishing without privileges in the liminal spaces of Thai society.

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Monks studying at Wat Suthat Thepwararam Ratchaworahawihan, Thailand | Unsplash: Bundo Kim

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Woman and children. | Flickr: Feed My Starving Children (FMSC) (CC BY 2.0)

Worship in Krabi, Thailand | Flickr: Neale Bryan (CC BY-SA 2.0)

APPENDIX

RELIGIONS OF THAILAND

	1900		1970		2000		2020		Avg. Annual Growth Rate 2000-2020	2050	
Religion	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%		Population	%
Religious	6,040,000	100.0	36,775,000	99.7	61,812,000	98.2	68,053,000	98.0	0.48	63,622,000	97.3
Buddhists	5,488,000	90.9	33,375,000	90.5	54,961,000	87.3	60,130,000	86.6	0.45	55,286,000	84.6
Muslims	90,000	1.5	1,392,000	3.8	3,699,000	5.9	4,220,000	6.1	0.66	4,250,000	6.5
Ethnic religionists	180,000	3.0	950,000	2.6	1,470,000	2.3	1,600,000	2.3	0.43	1,400,000	2.1
Christians	35,200	0.6	240,000	0.6	694,000	1.1	906,000	1.3	1.34	1,276,000	2.0
Protestants	5,100	0.1	34,700	0.1	322,000	0.5	469,000	0.7	1.89	670,000	1.0
Catholics	30,000	0.5	154,000	0.4	273,000	0.4	385,000	0.6	1.73	500,000	0.8
Independents	50	0.0	50,600	0.1	71,000	0.1	89,300	0.1	1.15	115,000	0.2
Orthodox	0	0.0	0	0.0	900	0.0	950	0.0	0.27	1,000	0.0
doubly-affiliated	0	0.0	0	0.0	-1,700	0.0	-58,000	-0.1	19.27	-30,300	0.0
unaffiliated Christians	0	0.0	520	0.0	28,200	0.0	20,000	0.0	-1.70	20,000	0.0
*Evangelicals	4,300	0.1	27,000	0.1	260,000	0.4	410,000	0.6	2.31	600,000	0.9
*Pentecostals/Charismatics	0	0.0	55,000	0.1	114,000	0.2	145,000	0.2	1.20	200,000	0.3
Chinese folk-religionists	240,000	4.0	740,000	2.0	574,000	0.9	700,000	1.0	1.00	800,000	1.2
Confucianists	0	0.0	0	0.0	227,000	0.4	270,000	0.4	0.87	300,000	0.5
Baha'is	0	0.0	6,400	0.0	59,800	0.1	74,400	0.1	1.10	120,000	0.2
Hindus	6,000	0.1	60,000	0.2	61,300	0.1	72,500	0.1	0.84	80,000	0.1
Sikhs	1,000	0.0	10,000	0.0	51,000	0.1	61,500	0.1	0.94	80,000	0.1
New religionists	0	0.0	1,600	0.0	15,000	0.0	18,100	0.0	0.95	30,000	0.0
Shintoists	0	0.0	0	0.0	380	0.0	460	0.0	0.99	800	0.0
Jews	0	0.0	70	0.0	85	0.0	100	0.0	0.82	100	0.0
Nonreligious	0	0.0	110,000	0.3	1,146,000	1.8	1,358,000	2.0	0.85	1,750,000	2.7
Agnostics	0	0.0	80,000	0.2	1,114,000	1.8	1,320,000	1.9	0.85	1,700,000	2.6
Atheists	0	0.0	30,000	0.1	31,900	0.1	38,000	0.1	0.87	50,000	0.1
Total population	6,040,000	100.0	36,885,000	100.0	62,958,000	100.0	69,411,000	100.0	0.49	65,372,000	100.0

Source: World Christian Database

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