

Kurt Dershem
South Central College (North Mankato, MN)
Philosophy/Religious Studies

“Monks in the Modern World”

My module addresses the challenges facing the Buddhist community in contemporary Thailand. Membership in the *Sangha* (the community of monks and nuns) has declined dramatically in recent years due to an interrelated set of factors: (1) Thailand now provides universal public education, so children in poorer families no longer need to become initiates (trainee monks) to receive an education. (2) Economic growth in Thailand has been accompanied by a rapid expansion of consumerism, which makes the austere lives of monks and nuns less appealing. (3) The *Sangha* has been rocked by scandals in recent years, including stories of monks living luxuriously and engaging in illicit sex, drinking and drugs. Calls for fundamental reform of the *Sangha* are growing louder among religious leaders, lay Buddhists and political authorities. As important as they are, however, such reforms will not resolve what many see as the most pressing problem facing Buddhism in the 21st century: the lure of consumerism, an invasive ideology which is diametrically opposed to the teachings of the Buddha.

After completing this module, students will be able to:

- Summarize the historical and contemporary significance of Buddhism in Thai culture.
 - Describe the challenges facing Buddhism in modern Thailand.
 - Compare the threats to Buddhism with threats facing other religious traditions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism) in the modern world.
 - Analyze proposed reforms of the *Sangha* and other ways in which Thai Buddhists are responding to the challenges they face.
 - Identify ways in which consumerism functions as a quasi-religious ideology and poses a danger to all forms of religious faith.
- I. History of Buddhism in Thailand
- A. Origin and Spread of Buddhism
1. The Enlightenment of the Buddha
 2. The establishment of the *Sangha*
 3. Spread of Buddhism to Southeast Asia
- B. Buddhism in Thailand
1. The introduction of Buddhism to Thailand
 2. Royal patronage of Buddhism
 3. Status of Buddhism in contemporary Thailand
- II. Modern Thailand: Prosperity and Peril
- A. Economic Development
1. Economic growth in Thailand and surrounding region
 2. Cultural impact of economic prosperity
 3. Establishment of universal public education
 4. Political and economic instability in Thailand

B. Spiritual Challenges

1. Burgeoning power and appeal of consumerism
2. Decline in number of Thais becoming monks and nuns
3. Scandals within the *Sangha*
4. Controversy over Dhammakaya “Mega-Temple” and its “Prosperity Teachings”
5. Reform movements within Thai Buddhism III. Consumerism: The Universal Religion?

A. The Ideology of Consumerism

1. Origin and spread of consumerism
2. Parallels between consumerism and religion
3. Consumerism's challenge to religion

B. Religious Responses

1. Criticism of (and capitulation to) consumerism among Christians
2. Examples of responses within non-Christian religions

C. Promising Developments

1. Emergence of environmental concern (e.g., creation care) in different religions
2. Examples of environmental and anti-consumerist activism motivated by religion
3. Possibility of broad interfaith coalition to combat consumerism

VIDEOS:

“Commercial Buddhism in Thailand”

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/world/asia/thai-buddhist-monks-struggle-to-stayrelevant.html?_r=0

“Decline of Buddhism in Thailand”

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2013/05/24/may-24-2013-decline-of-buddhism-inthailand/18432/>

“Dhammakaya Temple”

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2014/06/13/june-13-2014-dhammakayatemple/23323/>

“Enlightenment: Chat with a Buddhist Monk”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HH5SxxQzasc>

“Forest Monks” <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2010/01/15/january-15-2010-forest-monks/5472/>

READINGS:

Anna Fifield, “Hardliner tries to reform Thailand's Buddhist monks behaving badly.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/15/thailand-buddhist-monks-bad-behaviourcrackdown>

Thomas Fuller, "Monks Lose Relevance as Thailand Grows Richer"

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/world/asia/thai-buddhist-monks-struggle-to-stayrelevant.html?_r=0

Lily Kuo, "Buddhist Monks Are Buying Into Thailand's New Religion: Consumerism"

<http://qz.com/107169/buddhist-monks-are-buying-into-thailands-new-religion-consumerism/>

David Loy, "Religion and the Market"

<http://www.religiousconsultation.org/loy.htm> Nicholas Liusuwan, "Inside the Commercialism of the Dhammakaya Temple

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nicholas-liusuwan/inside-the-commercialism-b_9812786.html

Tavivat Puntarigivat, "Toward a Buddhist Social Ethics: The Case of Thailand"

<http://www.crosscurrents.org/buddhistethics.htm>

Cod Satrusayang, "The Crisis in Thai Buddhism" <http://www.irrawaddy.com/asia/the-crisis-in-thai-buddhism.htm>

ASSIGNMENTS:

(1) Writing Assignment: "What are the steps required to become a Buddhist monk in Thailand? Historically, why did many young men enter the *Sangha* (at least temporarily), and why has that number declined so dramatically? Knowing what you would have to sacrifice, would you ever make the kind of commitment required to become a monk or nun in order to achieve your spiritual goals? Why or why not?" (Minimum length: 500 words)

(2) Group Presentation: Consumerism vs. Religion

Students will form small groups (3 or 4 people per group) and research ways in which consumerism is threatening another religious tradition (i.e., besides Theravada Buddhism) in the modern world. Each group will focus on a different religion, and can choose from the following options: Catholicism, Mainline Christianity, Evangelical Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism, and Mahayana Buddhism. They will present what they learned to the rest of the class, addressing the following questions:

- How has the religious tradition changed in response to consumerism? Provide a broad overview and at least one specific example.
- Compare and contrast the impact of consumerism on the religious tradition with its impact on Thai Buddhism.
- What resources does the tradition have to oppose and combat consumerism? Are there any movements within the religion which are actively opposing its influence?
- What, if anything, could Thai Buddhists learn from the way the tradition's adherents have responded to consumerism?

In addition to the quality of their answers to these questions, groups will be graded according to the following criteria: 1. Use and proper citation of at least 4 academic sources; 2. Participation of all group members; 3. Appropriate length of presentation (8-10 minutes); 4. Effective use of visual aids (e.g. Powerpoint slides or other visual images).

(3) Research Paper: "Is Consumerism a Religion?"

- Define consumerism; identify parallels (and differences) between this ideology and religious traditions
- Explain the appeal of consumerism and account for its rapid spread
- Identify the threats consumerism poses to organized religions (by undermining interest in spirituality), human happiness (by failing to fulfill its promise of providing contentment) and the global environment (by encouraging overconsumption)
- Describe a specific religious movement which opposes consumerism and speculate about the likelihood of its success

Minimum length: 1000 words; MLA format, at least 4 academic sources

ASSESSMENT:

- Reading quizzes to assess comprehension of the assigned articles
- Short-answer questions about the main points of the assigned videos
- Multiple-choice questions on exam covering key concepts in lectures
- Essay question on exam: "Describe how the ideology of consumerism is threatening Thai Buddhism. In your view, how could Thai Buddhists and the *Sangha* most effectively respond to these challenges?"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Darlington, Susan. *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement* (2013)

Kasser, Tim. *The High Price of Materialism* (2003)

Kitiarsa, Pattana. *Mediums, Monks and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* (2012)

Mackenzie, Rory. 2009. *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an understanding of*

Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke (2009)

Payne, Richard K. *How Much is Enough? Buddhism, Consumerism and the Human Environment* (2010)

Pattana Kitiarsa, "Buddha Panit: Thailand's Prosperity Religion and Its Commodifying Tactics," chapter 6 in *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (2008), pp. 120-144.

Rittenhouse, Bruce P. *Shopping for Meaningful Lives: The Religious Motive of Consumerism* (2013)

Stearns, Peter. *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (2006)

(In addition, see list of assigned readings)