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Battle for Dominion Over Time: War of the Calendars in Thailand

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Battle for Dominion over Time: War of the Calendars in Thailand (/volume-xviii-2017/300-battle-for-dominion-over-time-war-of-the-calendars-in-thailand)

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My annual January “get out of cold New York City” vacation was effectively ruined in the lounge of the Unification Theological Seminary. Shortly before I left for Thailand at the end of December 2016 I was describing my plans for a month in sunny Thailand when a student said “Oh, you’ll be in Bangkok for New Year’s. That should be wild!” Another student chimed in “And the Chinese New Year’s too!” “Double the fun and double the pleasure,” I responded, and everyone laughed.

The comment that ruined my vacation and turned it from a month of cheap red wine, beaches, exotic food, and maybe a body-sized tattoo into a month of research, writing, note-taking, and eventually a 15,000-word essay with footnotes for the *Journal of Unification Studies*, came from one of the new members of the Unification movement. Like most new converts, every law, rule, and even suggestion is scrupulously observed. “You’ll also be there for God’s Day.” There was a pause, and I said, “I never heard of that holiday; what is it?”

So was my fun-filled month in decadent Thailand transformed into a month-long voyage of research that ended with the article you are now reading.

The major premise of this paper is that a calendar is an essential instrument for uniting members of a religious group. A unique calendar firmly anchors a religious group in time, provides a distinct history and predicts a glorious future, distinguishes them from other groups; provides them with a temporal structure for their daily lives; celebrates their ancient founders, heroes, and leaders; and orients them to specific geographical locations.[1]

This paper will roughly follow my one-month (January 2017) tour of Thailand and the various calendars I encountered there during my travels. My thesis is that while calendars are ideally essential instruments in uniting followers into a distinct people, in that nation the various calendars employed by its diverse religious groups have become instruments of division, conflict, and even warfare that risk tearing the country apart.

God’s Day in Thailand

The day before I was scheduled to leave New York I checked my email and I received the first response to my question “What is God’s Day?” My newly converted Unificationist student forwarded an email titled “2017 Holy Days” from the official website of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.[2] He noted that I would be in Thailand during the January 27/28 Unification holiday of “God’s Day.” He also attached several Unification documents related to Father Moon’s quest to elaborate a Unification calendar populated with holidays, feasts, and observances. And so began my one-month exploration of the many calendars that both coexist but increasingly threaten to tear the wonderful country of Thailand apart.

My student had taken my World Religions class at UTS and had been particularly impressed by the class I had devoted to verse 28 of the first chapter of Genesis, “And he gave them dominion over all.” After God created man, I lectured, he gave him dominion over all his creation. I de-scribed how we, the descendants of Adam, have carried out this command with dedication. We harnessed the mysterious power of fire, domesticated the first animals, and invented plows to dominate the land. Today we are harnessing the power of the atom, penetrating the mysteries of the gene, and are on our way to subdue planets and possibly other peoples in the universe. Along the way, we dominate distance with horses, automobiles, and jumbo jets, the land with pyramids, skyscrapers, and bulldozers. However, one element of God’s creation consistently fascinates and challenges but forever eludes man’s quest for dominion—time.

Like all founders of religions, empires and civilizations, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon realized that time was a fundamental and universal building block of all religions.

Thus, Rev. Moon established the first of January 1968 as the original “God’s Day.” He declared that the first God’s Day celebration “was a day of joy unprecedented in history.” On that very day many millenniums ago “Adam and Eve were united into one centered on God’s love, as God had longed to see on Earth.” This day, he continued “was the first day of glory and joy for God in history since the creation of the world.” “God’s Day,” he went on, “means that people are in the sphere of God’s direct dominion.”[3]

Grafting a new holiday onto an already existing holiday—in this case, New Years’ Day—is not uncommon. The early Christians chose December 25 to celebrate the birth of Jesus because the pagan Romans were busily celebrating their holiday of Saturnalia. The Bible gave no indication of the actual date of Jesus’ birth, so December 25 would do. Eventually the Christian holiday displaced the pagan Roman one and no one was the wiser.

The new holiday of God’s Day joined the growing calendar of Unification holidays that would include True Parents Day, Children’s Day, Foundation Day, and The Day of All Things as key days commemorating seminal events in the evolution of the movement.

Later, on January 1, 1984, Moon announced that the holiday marked the birth of a “new nation.” On that day, his followers were united into a “new breed” of humans, “citizens” of a new nation that he was founding. God’s Day was the “national” holiday of this new nation, much like the Fourth of July was the national holiday marking the birth of the United States.

Sometime later Rev. Moon moved the holiday celebrations to midnight January 27/28, which was January 1st by the lunar calendar, and renamed it Heavenly Parent’s Day.[4] According to a Family Federation email dated December 20, 2016, Heavenly Parent’s Day 2017 will be celebrated with “Unificationist traditions and festivities.” Since the Lunar New Year is already a major festival in Korea, the celebration of God’s Day there would include “nearly two weeks of special events.” I sent several emails to Unification addresses in Thailand inquiring if the holiday would be celebrated, but received no responses. Maybe the Thai Unificationists don’t celebrate this holiday, I thought to myself.

Following the celebrations, on January 30, 2017, I received another email chronicling celebrations around the world. The Chicago Family Church began festivities with a Pledge Service followed by the 21st Annual True Family Values Awards Banquet, and on Sunday some 250 Unificationists gathered for Sunday Services, “a delicious pot-luck brunch,” entertainment and a viewing of True Mother’s address for the 2013 and 2014 celebrations. The email mentioned celebrations in Los Angeles, Vancouver, Dallas, Charlotte, Sacramento, Louisiana, Salt Lake City, Worcester, and other American cities. No mention was made of celebrations in New York City or Thailand.

Upon my return to New York City I mentioned my illusive search for God’s Day in Thailand. A Unificationist professor at UTS informed me that the current situation of the church’s calendar was difficult to describe. Rev. Moon had clearly recognized the importance of liturgical calendars in world religions and had elaborated some holidays. However, the calendar “is undergoing startling transformations even now.” Clearly the Unification Church and its theologians recognize the importance of elaborating a calendar for the new faith, but it remains a work in progress.

If I didn’t find a group of friendly Thai Unificationists to celebrate God’s Day with, I did discover that the country was awash in calendars, each claiming to have achieved the elusive quest of dominion over time. My research project went into overdrive the very moment I checked into my Bangkok hotel on Khao San Road.

Thai Time

The Korean Airlines flight required me to endure a 13-hour non-stop flight from New York to Seoul, a two-hour stop-over, and then a six-hour flight to Bangkok. The stamp in my passport indicated that I arrived on December 30, 2017 and my visa was valid only until January 28, 2017. My Swiss friend Bernie who had lived in Thailand for twelve years informed me that the Thais were clamping down on cheapo backpackers like me.

I bought a ticket for the mini-van from the airport into the city for 100 Baht, around \$3, and headed for the infamous Khao San Road where all the foreign tourists hung out. I checked into the Charoendee Boutique Hostel that offered “clean and good service” for a mere 250 Baht per night, around \$7. I asked the Burmese guy at the front desk for a receipt. He took out his little used block of receipts, filled in the sum in Thai Baht, misspelled my name, stamped it, and handed it to me. I stuffed it into my pocket and went to my room, where I crashed on my hard bed and slept the entire day.

It was only later that evening as I was writing my daily journal entry that I glanced at the receipt. I took out my glue stick, covered the back of the receipt with glue, and attached it to the page. I noticed that he had miss-written the date: the month “12” was correct as was the day “30,” but in place of 2017 he had simply written “60.” I thought he had simply made a mistake and wrote “60” instead of “16,” and thought no more of it.

The thump-thump-thump of the many discos had already started, massage girls were beckoning to every guy who passed, beer sellers were tempting tourists, guys were cruising for some good sex, and girls were displaying their wares. It was another wild night on Khao San Road, the most decadent street in the most decadent city in Asia. Little did I realize that that little slip of paper with the date 12/30/60 was just the first step into the war of calendars that was waging in the Kingdom of Thailand.

The Buddhist Calendar

Strolling along a major road away from Khao San Road, I stopped in the middle of an elegant bridge spanning one of the many canals that crisscrossed the city and gave it the name The Venice of the East. The elegant Thai script announced that I was on the Mahatthai Uthit Bridge and noticed that the year of construction was 2457. Puzzled, I checked my handy travel guide and read that it was constructed in the year 1914. It then dawned on me that there was a distinct Thai calendar, and after a quick calculation I realized that the “60” on my hotel receipt were in fact the last two digits of the current Thai year 2560 and not a mistake after all.

Image removed due to
copyright restrictions.

Common Thai calendar showing the Western year 2017 and Buddhist year 2560

With typical Thai ease, grace, and politeness, what could have become a vicious conflict between the Thai and the Western calendars was resolved with a gracious compromise. The Western month “December” and the day “30” peacefully existed alongside the Thai year “2560” without a hint of conflict. It was as if the Thais easily passed from one system for measuring time to another. At the airport my visa stamp was deeply rooted in the Western solar, Roman, and Christian calendar that announced my arrival in Thailand as the 30th day of December, the tenth month according to the calendar of Romulus, the founder of Rome, of the 2016th year after the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. But my receipt at the hotel stated that I checked in on the 30th day of the month of December of the year 2560.[5]

Now, if I had been an ordinary tourist enjoying the fleshpots of Bangkok, I would have noted this fascinating information and gone about my vacation with a full body massage from a Thai girl, had a few too many beers, danced the night away in a disco, gotten a tattoo of an eagle on my chest, and spent my days at the beach. But I had learned long ago that I was not such a tourist. If a vacation did not turn into a full-time research project that would result in a box full of research material and eventually a lengthy scholarly article on some obscure topic, it was not a success. My last vacation to, of all places, Paraguay, had resulted in a lengthy, footnoted, article on utopian religious and political communities in that rarely-visited country. I often tell my students that when I die and am sentenced to hell, within days I will be busily engaged in researching some obscure aspect of hell for publication in the Journal of Infernal Studies.

Of course, I could not just accept the fact that Thailand had a different calendar; I had to find out why. If it was in fact the Thai year 2560, it was 2560 years after what? The year 2017 was 2017 years after Jesus’ birth but what happened 2560 years ago in Thai religious or national history?

With the Western and Thai calendars on my mind, I continued my stroll through the city and eventually stumbled upon a beautiful Buddhist temple, the Royal Wat Kohlak.[6] Throngs of worshippers and tourists milled about, tourists like myself snapping pictures while worshippers lit incense sticks, prayed, or stood in silent meditation. In the disco the evening before I was clearly in the year 2017, but in the wat it was the year 2560.[7]

Buddhists measure time from the enlightenment of the Buddha, not from the birth of Jesus. After hundreds of thousands of years of human history, a monk from northern India had achieved a historic spiritual break-through. For the first time humans would be able to break through their endless cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. Enlightenment and the achievement of Nirvana was finally possible. The Eightfold Path to enlightenment that the Buddha discovered and taught was now available to all. Like a wildfire, this new teaching spread through India, into Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, into Central Asia, and across the Himalaya Mountains to Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan, and eastward into Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and into the islands of Malaysia and Indonesia.[8]

Some years earlier, I had visited the sacred city of Bodh Gaya in India and stood silently among thousands of pilgrims from around the world before the very Bodhi tree where the Buddha had achieved enlightenment. Brown clad monks and nuns from Korea and Mongolia, saffron-clad worshippers from China, camera-laden worshippers from Japan, brown-skinned pilgrims from Sri Lanka, and even white Buddhists from Europe and America stood silently at the sacred spot.

A glorious new age had begun. Emperor Asoka founded the first Buddhist Empire in India which lasted from 273 to 232 BC, followed by Buddhist empires across Asia. Scholars and monks wrote sacred books, Sanskrit became a sacred language, monasteries competed for scholars and monks, rulers built temples with towering statues of their founder, and pilgrims crisscrossed the Buddhist world seeking teachers and learning, and founded diverse schools of Buddhism. The rise and flowering of Buddhism rivaled the golden ages of Christianity in the West and Islam in the Middle East. The '60 marked on my hotel receipt was as history laden as the 2017 on my airport visa.[9]

The Thai calendar was not in fact Thai at all, it was Buddhist, the same calendar shared by Buddhist countries from Sri Lanka to Japan. With the adoption of Buddhism and the Buddhist calendar, Thailand became a member of a vast spiritual as well as earthly world. Much like the conversion of the pagan Germans, Slavs, Hungarians, and Celts to Christianity brought them into the larger Christian world so Buddhism opened the kingdom of Thailand to a vast world. Buddhist saints, monks and teachers, the Sanskrit language, Buddhist writings, pilgrims, and tourists, Buddhist architecture, art, and music all flowed across this vast world transforming what could have remained an isolated outpost into a hub of culture, religion, and trade.[10]

Later that evening as the thumping of the nearby disco kept me up all night, I started writing notes on the “fascinating” coexistence of the Western and Buddhist calendars. Here was a concrete example of what is called the “Thai flexibility” that enabled the people to reconcile the most contradictory of influences into a harmonious whole.[11] Little did I know that many other calendars would emerge from my month in Thailand, and that this coexistence of multiple calendars was not always as peaceful as the date on my hotel receipt.

Man’s quest for dominion over animals led to flocks of identical sheep from Idaho to Mongolia, herds of identical cattle from Argentina to Siberia, the same corn on the cob from Australia to Scotland, and the same sleek highways ignoring mountains, rivers, and deserts from Hong Kong to Cape Town. But man’s dominion over time remains an elusive and unfinished quest. Beginning with that mysterious hotel receipt, I spent the rest of my vacation discovering the plethora of calendars that battle to exert some modicum of dominion over time in that country. By extension, I also became aware of the global battle world religions are waging to dominate time. In the age of Samuel P. Huntington’s prophetic book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, calendars have become a particularly bloody battlefield.

Huntington’s central thesis is that the 21st Century will be a cataclysmic competition for global domination between world’s major civilizations: Western Catholic and Protestant Christian, Eastern Orthodox Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Confucian, Buddhist, and possibly Ethiopian and Japanese civilizations with Latin America and the southern half of Africa still up in the air. A “Civilization” as defined by Huntington is religion based but not necessarily. The USA, for example, is part of the Western Civilization not because everybody believes in and attends the Catholic or a Protestant church, but because we share a common civilization. We share attitudes toward women, marriage, and family; Sunday is our day of rest; our core language is Latin; Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s Day, and New Years are our major holidays; and Roman, Gothic, and Renaissance are our architectural reference points; and Christianity permeates our art, music, literature, and films. In short, religions created and continue to permeate their respective civilizations.[12] During my month in Thailand, I was to discover the significance of calendars as one battleground in Huntington’s cosmic clash of civilizations.

Unable to sleep because of the blaring discos, screaming German tourists, and wild laughter from Khoa San Road, I decided to join the merriment. Barely had I emerged from my room when I noticed a glaring multi-colored sign inviting me to a Happy New Year 2017 party. I picked up a flier I saw on the ground and decided that I would attend the party, in the spirit of academic research.

New Year’s in Bangkok

I had just missed the wild Christmas celebration in the city, but I still saw posters of a North Pole clad Santa wishing everyone a Merry Christmas, artificial Christmas trees in front of department stores, and discarded holiday fliers and advertisements in the garbage. It was New Years and so I threw myself into the holiday.

In one corner of the disco floor was a giant screen television focusing on the tens of thousands of revelers who filled New York City’s Times Square to watch the iconic crystal ball drop from the New York Time’s Building at the intersection of 42nd Street, Broadway, and 7th Avenue. Since the first ball drop in 1907 the event has become a global festivity accompanied by Guy Lombardo’s crooning of Ald Lang Syne. Another giant screen transported viewers to the first populated island in the Pacific that celebrated the arrival of the New Year, Tonga.[13] Mass hysteria filled the dancefloor every time a major city greeted the New Year, the New Zealanders in the place erupted a couple hours later followed by the many Aussies present and an especially boisterous outburst when the clock reached Bangkok. And so the New Year hysteria passed each time zone, through India, Turkey and Israel, into Europe, across the Atlantic to New York City, Chicago, California, and finally to the delight of the three Hawaiians present, Honolulu. Even the new Thai king got into the act and delivered his New Year’s greetings to his subjects.[14] (14)

It seemed that the entire world embraced the Western calendar that dated year one as the birth of Jesus. The number “60” on my hotel receipt and the year “2457” on the Mahatthai Uthit Bridge were pale reminders of some ancient attempt to exercise dominion over time that had been replaced by the stamp in my airport visa stamp and the disco global countdown. The Christian western world had definitively achieved dominion over time and imposed it on the globe.

As an American, I was acutely aware of the present American global economic, military, linguistic, and cultural domination. The “American Century” that Henry Luce had predicted in the pages of *Life* in 1941 had become a reality with the American victory in the Second World War.[15] Levi jeans and New Balance sneakers, Coca Cola and McDonald’s, Ford and IBM, Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson, John Steinbeck and Hollywood movies, and the American army and Wall Street banks turned the globe into America’s backyard. Benjamin R. Barber eloquently described this brave new global planet in an article titled, “Jihad vs. McWorld” in *The Atlantic*. He wrote, “fast music, fast computers, and fast food—with MTV, Macintosh, and McDonald’s, pressing nations into one commercially homogenous global network.”[16] However, what American historians now call “globalization” and the rest of the world calls “westernization” began long before McDonald’s started mass-producing its hamburgers.

Alcohol, dancing, and wild music dragged me into the New Year’s spirit, and I even felt a thrill when the giant screen followed the Times Square crystal ball drop in my New York City hometown. It was only the next morning, while I switched between Russian RT, Arab Aljazeera, France 24, CNN, Thai television, and Chinese CCTV, that I realized my presence at the New Year’s celebration made me a warrior in Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations. In the eyes of many countries the Times Square ball drop that so thrilled me was nothing less than an atomic bomb, the fireworks in the street were car bombs, the cheers emanating from the various revelers were war cries, and even the date of January 1 marked the beginning of a new military campaign. *The New York Times* reported that a video from Bangalore India showed young men attacking female New Year’s partygoers for behaving in Western ways.[17] In Istanbul a government-sponsored religious leader called on Turks to avoid the New Year’s revelry because it belonged to “other cultures and other worlds.” As the clock approached midnight in Istanbul, an armed gunman attacked the popular Reina nightclub in the city and massacred 39 people. ISIS called the attack a “blessed operation,” the gunman was hailed as “a hero soldier of the caliphate,” and referred to the holiday as a “pagan holiday.” *The New York Times* also noted that in the days preceding the massacre some Turkish nationalists had held a mock execution of Santa Claus in front of a shopping mall “in the name of defending Islam.”[18]

In my world travels I had celebrated New Year’s in many countries and even mid-air while flying across the Atlantic. I had never considered it as a Christian holiday; it was just part of the global culture that included Hollywood movies, McDonald hamburgers, the Beatles, Levi jeans and baseball hats, the American dollar, and the English language. But with the rise of rival civilizations and the challenges to American planetary domination, even the quaint holiday of New Year’s has become a night of battle. Not only are Muslims beginning to throw off the last vestiges of Western colonialism; in India the BJP demands the end of public celebrations, and Jewish police raid Tel Aviv hotels for holding pagan and Christian religious celebrations.[19]

The Western Calendar in Thailand

I spent the morning writing notes in my spiral binder and then decided to visit the royal palace. The National Museum was nearby, so I got a brush-up on Thai history. King Rama IV ruled from 1851 to 1868 at a time of vicious European colonial expansion, and his ancient kingdom of Siam was surrounded by greedy Western powers eager to add it to their growing empires. England was busily occupying India, Burma, Singapore, and Malaysia as well as Hong Kong, Australia, and New Zealand. Thailand would fit in very nicely, thought the British. The French were seizing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and Thailand was just next door. Russia was expanding into Central Asia and Siberia, and Austria was busily sending its army into the Balkans. The Americans, who had just stolen territory from Texas to California from Mexico, were laying plans to topple the queen of Hawaii, and would eventually seize the Philippines and other Pacific islands from Spain, thought Thailand would firmly anchor their growing Asian empire.

To resist this colonial frenzy King Rama IV, like his fellow monarch in Japan, began a massive campaign of modernization, which at the time was synonymous with Westernization. His hope was that his country “would be able to retain some significant measure of her independence.” The alternative was to “disappear ignominiously into the colonial empire of one or more aggrandizing European powers.”[20] Military uniforms and style of marching, post offices and modern banking systems, science and mathematics in modern schools, foreign language education, railroads and modern ports, decimal measures and weights, and western advisors and administrators, flooded into the country. The “Father of Science and Technology,” as King Rama IV is called in Thailand, also learned western ways from a certain Miss Anna Harriette Leonowens, which was chronicled in the book, *Broadway Show* and Hollywood film “The King and I.”[21]

The Western calendar was one of the many weapons that King Rama IV imported into his ancient kingdom to resist the French and English designs on his country. The year he mounted the throne became 1851 A.D., marked by the years after the birth of Jesus Christ, and every event in Thai history that preceded Jesus’ birth became B.C. Adopting the Western calendar grafted his kingdom onto the Western

march of time, and the king hoped to convince England and France that Thailand was a participant in this grand scheme of time rather than a victim. In this way, King Rama IV of Thailand would take his place alongside Queen Victoria of Great Britain, President Andrew Johnson of the United States, and Alexander III of Russia.

Along with giving centrality to the birth of some Jew in faraway Palestine came the European names of the months with their own unique Greek and Roman historical associations and the names of the days that are deeply rooted in Roman and ancient Germanic cultures. I seriously doubt that any Thais queried why the twelfth month of the new calendar “December” comes from the Latin word for ten, or why Thursday is named after the Germanic god of warfare, Thor, but nevertheless the new calendar thrust the ancient kingdom into the modern world.[22]

As I researched Thai history, I began to realize that the hotel receipt date 12/30/60 was not just a quaint holdover from some far distant age but a unique strategic compromise in the Thai struggle to retain its distinct and ancient culture while fully participating in the modern global world.

The Hindu calendar

Following the museum, I made my way to the entrance of the royal palace, one of the touristic highlights of Thailand. A guide directed me to a small room and asked me to wrap a black cloth around my unacceptable bare legs and put a black tee shirt over my equally unacceptable tank top. King Rama IX had died a couple of months earlier, and in spite of the non-stop merriment of Khao San Road, the country was deep into a year-long period of royal mourning. Thousands of black-clad Thais had come to the palace to show their respects for their much beloved late king, who had ruled the kingdom for 70 years—1946-2016 according to the Western calendar, the planet’s longest ruling monarch.

The many armed warrior god Rama. Rama is the royal title taken by Thai Monarchs.

In spite of the multitudes of Buddhist monks preparing for the royal funeral and the ever-present Buddha statues in the palace, Buddhism did not provide the central rituals and symbols for the royal funeral. It was the ancient myths and rituals of Hinduism that provided the 6-day royal funeral and 100-day royal mourning period with its funeral ceremonies and the royal chariot that would carry the body to its cremation and internment.[23] Both the Western and the Buddhist calendars stepped aside when it came to the burial of a Thai king. In their place, the much more ancient Hindu calendar took over and the kingdom was plunged to the mythical world of the emergence of Hinduism during the Indus Valley Civilization over 11,000 years ago.[24]

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

The royal barge that would bear the late king was a gilded model of Mount Sumeru, the sacred multi-tiered mountain in northern India that was abode of the Hindu god Indra, chief of the heavenly beings. The brochure provided by the Royal Museum “Royal Carriages and Palanquins in the Royal Cremation Ceremony” wrote that in Thailand the achievement of individual Nirvana has become the domain of the Buddhist monks and monasteries, while the affairs of government and kingship remained the domain of Hinduism.[25]

Artisans built the Royal Great Victory Carriage following the concept of the Hindu cosmology. The Thai kings claimed to be the reincarnations of the god Rama, who single-handedly defeated the demon army of Ravana. He is always depicted armed, often having many arms each with a different weapon. According to the brochure, “when he departs, concluding his mission on earth, he returns to his heavenly dwelling on Mount Sumeru.” There he will reside with all the Hindu gods and goddesses forever.

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copyright restrictions.

The late King Rama IX surrounded by Hindu deities. Thai kings claim to be reincarnations of Rama, the green-skinned deity on the right. The display was in front of the Hua Hin municipal building.

When a monarch dies, newspapers noted the day of his death in the Western calendar October 13, 2016 but according to the Hindu calendar the king died in the year 5119. The rituals that surrounded the funeral plunge the country back to the first day of the Hindu year “0,” which according the Western calendar would be January 23, 3102 BC. During the funeral of a king, Thailand is not only transported to a distant time but deep into a different land that is today Pakistan and India. This was the land that witnessed the rise and flowering of the glorious Indus Valley Civilization (3300-1300 BC), the Aryan invasions, the Vedic Period of Hinduism, and the Hindu civilization that flowered between 400 and 1200 AD. From its homeland on the India-Pakistan border, Hinduism spread to Afghanistan, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and on into the archipelagos of modern-day Indonesia and Malaysia. The monumental Hindu temple complexes of Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Indonesia remain as reminders of this golden age. They, like the multi-tiered gilded carriage that carried the body of the late king, preserve the memory of Mount Sumeru and the golden age of Hindu civilization.[26]

After Buddhism swept across South-East Asia and replaced Hinduism as the dominant religion, the attainment of Nirvana became the chief preoccupation of the masses. Monks taught the path to enlightenment, and even today begging monks are a daily sight throughout the country. Royal monasteries are in every city, princes are expected to undergo training as monks before ascending the throne, and monks feature prominently in royal ceremonies including funerals. Unlike Hinduism, Judaism and Islam, which provided a complete blueprint for daily life that included what the faithful can and cannot eat, what to wear, how to pray, how to wage war, and who should rule, Buddhism ignored such earthly matters. The quest for enlightenment was the sole preoccupation of the Buddha. Earthly concerns were obstacles to the achievement of enlightenment, so the Thai kings were forced back on the ancient Indus Valley civilization to find legitimacy. Thus, the ruling dynasties of South-East Asia remained deeply rooted in Hinduism as a religion that offered legitimacy to their rule.[27]

Each transition of Thai society and culture was marked by the adoption of a calendar. The ancient Hindu calendar bound the Thais to ancient Indus Valley culture and made the kingdom part of the vast South Asian Hindu civilization, one of the great world civilizations of antiquity. The Buddhist calendar marked the membership of Thailand in a still vaster Buddhist universe that stretched from Sri Lanka to Japan and remains today the primary faith of the nation. Finally, the adoption of the Western calendar marked the domination of Europe and America and Thailand's entrance into the planet's first global culture. But as we shall see, these are not the only calendars that thrive and even conflict in the kingdom.

Each of these three calendars enjoyed a precarious coexistence that both bound the kingdom to three distinct cultures and threatened to tear it apart. During my visit in January 2017 Thailand was experiencing one of those crises that threatened to plunge the nation into war. Even funeral ceremonies for the much-loved King Rama IX were in full progress, his little loved and even less respected playboy son and successor was laboring to gain the respect of his subjects. Photos of his stylishly tattooed torso were banned in the country, as was any mention of his three wives and his lavish doings in the fleshpots of Europe.

Three powers were competing for control of the country in January 2017. The supporters of the recently overthrown democratic government of Prime Minister Niwatthamrong, the military regime of General Prayut Chan-o-cha that replaced it on May 22, 2014, and the new, not yet enthroned King Rama X.[28] Each of the three powers claimed the right to rule. The democratic government buttressed its claim in the name of democracy, free elections, modernization, and westernization. The military regime stoked the fires of Thai nationalism and order. The new king insisted on his right of succession to an ancient throne and the continuing legitimacy of the Hindu traditions upon which it rested. All three vied for the blessing of the Buddhist establishment. The new king surrounded himself with orange clad monks, regularly visited the many royal Wats, and displayed posters of both his father and himself dressed as monks. But the monarchy's deep roots in Hinduism served to weaken the position of the new king, undermine the status of the monarchy, and strengthen the position of those seeking to abolish or severely limit its power.[29]

Toward the end of January, the Thai newspaper *The Nation* published an article titled "Royal Funeral Rites Explained." [30] The very fact that the funeral rites have to be explained is evidence of the foreignness of the Thai monarchy and its surrounding rites.[31] The article described the role of the Phra Meru, the royal cremation palace where the actual cremation would take place, and called it "one of the clearest manifestations of Hindu influence." The country's leading authority on royal rituals, Ajarn Tongthong, the article continued, was undertaking a national tour to instruct the public of these year-long ceremonies that seemed so foreign.[32]

In addition to the royal funeral chariot and Phra Meru funeral palace that rooted the Thai monarchy firmly in the world of Hinduism, even the royal title "Rama" claims that the king is an avatars (incarnation) of the Hindu god Rama. The late King Bhumibol Adulyadej was King Rama IX and his son was soon to be crowned Rama X of the Chakri dynasty. According to "The Origins of the Sukhodaya Dynasty," a history of the Thai monarchy by G. Coedes, the historic and current concept of Thai kingship is based on the Hindu caste Kshatriya, the warrior-ruler caste that derives its legitimacy from military might.[33]

According to "Royal Funeral Rites Explained," the military junta has reinforced this cult of the warrior king. The junta has jailed critics of the monarchy, censored the press, and launched a "Worship, protect, and uphold the Monarchy" campaign that includes television commercials, seminars in schools and prisons, singing contests, and writing and film competitions and prizes in praise of the king. In 2016, \$514 million of the national budget was allocated for "upholding, protecting, and preserving the monarchy."

Fortunately, all three parties realized that the tourism industry was vital to the prosperity of the nation and the hundreds of thousands of tourists enjoyed their vacations in peace. But the country was being torn apart by these three powers. During dinner at one of the many seafood restaurants on a pier jutting out into the Bay of Thailand, a friend entertained us with pictures of the King cavorting in the flesh pots of Europe, displaying his tattoo-covered torso and hanging out with disco queens. He would shut off his phone every time a waiter walked by, because the under the junta such pictures and even conversations were severely punished.

The next day was Sunday, and what I hoped would be a pleasant respite from the hurricane swirl of Thai calendars would only add to the chaos.

The Feast of the Epiphany

Following an exciting week in Bangkok and thrilled that I had found a research project to occupy my vacation, at the invitation of my Swiss friend Bernie I took a minivan to the seaside vacation town of Hua Hin, some four hours south of the city. I barely glanced at my minivan ticket that again informed me that the year was actually 2560. Bernie had retired to Hua Hin some years earlier and joined the multitude of Western men of a certain age who pair up with Thai girls or boys of much younger years. We spent several days indulging in seafood and wine, travelling into the mountains to the Burmese border and visiting nature preserves and mountain lakes.

I checked into my new hotel and Bernie and his young Thai friend Chai met me for dinner. When Sunday rolled around I decided to visit the new Catholic church of St. Theresa that I had noticed not far from Bernie's apartment. Like most Swiss, Bernie had nothing but disdain for religions, all religions, so I was left to myself to visit the church. The early Mass was in Thai, attended by a handful of older Western men and their much younger Thai wives who had given them children. Very few Thais converted to Catholicism, the elderly Italian priest informed me before Mass, even after almost half a century of Catholic missionary activity in Hua Hin and the presence of a Catholic school with some 4,000 students. I explored the church and school campus before the Thai-language Mass.

The flier that the usher handed me announced that January 8, 2017 was the feast of the Epiphany of the Lord.[34] The holiday commemorates the arrival of the three Kings from the Orient to pay homage to the newborn king. Christian theologians cherish this holiday as the first revelation of Jesus to the Gentile (non-Jewish) World. Both the belief that the three kings were from the Orient and the welcome of the Gentiles into the new faith are notions that are especially meaningful to Thai Catholics.

With this holiday and its Thai-language Mass in the background, I plunged into the Catholic calendar that like all calendars divides, categorizes, highlights, and exercises its distinct dominion over every minute, day, month, year, and even century. Having been raised Catholic myself, an altar boy in my Pennsylvania hometown, attended a Catholic high school seminary for three years, and spent four years at a Catholic college, I knew well the complex dominion that the Holy Mother Church has imposed on the flow of time. The seasons

of Lent and Advent lead to the Holy Days of Easter and Christmas, and every event of Jesus' life is assigned a special day. Countless saints have their special days, and a plethora of rituals ranging from collective rosary recitations, benedictions, Stations of the Cross, and perpetual adorations, joined Sunday and Holy Day Mass schedules, making sure that no minute of the year was left uncelebrated.[35]

Spiritually the congregation was transported to the far-away land of Israel, where the newborn baby Jesus, the son of the Virgin Mary, and her husband Joseph, were visited by the Three Magi from the Orient. The congregation had just celebrated the birth of this child on December 25 with much solemnity, and would in turn commemorate every event of Jesus' life throughout the year. The lives of great saints would also transport Thai Catholics to distant lands, and of course they looked with love to their spiritual father in Rome.[36] Who knows, maybe some saintly Thai, even the late Monsignor Gaetano Pasotti who had founded the church, would one day be canonized a saint and assigned a day of celebration. Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Rome and the sacred events of Jesus' life were as important to Thai Catholics as Mount Sumeru and Hinduism were to the late king, Bodhi Gaya and the events of the life of the Buddha were for the Thai Buddhists, and the crystal ball drop and Guy Lombardo's rendition of *Alde Lange Syne* were to New Year's revelers.

After Mass I walked back to my hotel in the middle of Hua Hin and was struck by the radical disconnect between the church and the city. It was like leaving a wild Khao San disco and entering the nearby Buddhist temple. Two worlds seemingly coexisted side by side. But as I researched the history of the Christian churches in Thailand I realized that the universe of the January 8, 2017 Feast of the Epiphany only existed inside the church. Outside it was the Buddhist year 2560 or the Hindu year 5119, and this seeming pacific coexistence was also a battlefield for the soul of Thailand.

According to Alex G. Smith's book *Siamese Gold*,[37] which I found in the church bookshop, King Rama IV, in addition to introducing the Western calendar, military uniforms, railroads, and public schools in his effort to modernize his kingdom and stave off British and French colonial designs on his country, also permitted Catholic and Protestant missionaries to open churches and religious schools.[38]

Unlike Buddhism that was more concerned with achieving enlightenment than worshipping a deity, or Hinduism that had a plethora of gods and was ever open to adding new ones, the Christian missionaries demanded that prospective converts abandon their heathen gods and idols and accept Jesus as their one and only savior. While Catholic missionaries preached a doctrine of gradual conversion, the Protestants demanded immediate renunciation of all other gods. The missionaries initially sugar coated their evangelical designs with care for the bodies—hospitals, and care for the minds—schools, but their primary concern was for the souls—churches for the Thais. Periodic persecutions punctuated the slow but steady growth of the churches in Thailand until the rise of Imperial Japan threatened to expel French, British, American, and Dutch colonialism in Asia. The Thais sided with the Japanese during the Second World War and adopted their policy of expelling Western influences. The government closed missions, secularized religious schools, expelled foreign missionaries, and many indigenous Christians reverted to Buddhism. Seven Thai Catholics were martyred in 1940, and December 26 is the holy day in their honor.

Of course, the Japanese era was short in duration, but following the war the European and American colonial empires ended and new nations emerged. Political independence achieved in the 1960s did not readily lead to economic and cultural sovereignty, which remained elusive until the 1990s and first decade of the third millennium. In the Theravada Buddhist countries of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, militant forms of Buddhism demanded the end of Muslim and Christian missionizing and that their nations return to their original Buddhist faith. Militant Buddhism, like militant Hinduism in India, militant Islam in the Muslim world, and the growing militant Christianity in the USA, was well described by Huntington as an ingredient in "The Clash of Civilizations."

The *Time* magazine issue of July 1, 2013 featured the face of a Buddhist monk on its cover with the headline "The Face of Buddhist Terror" as monks seek to transform their countries into Buddhist states.[39] In Thailand Buddhist militants and activists are pushing to make Buddhism the state religion. Central to this campaign is the end of Christian missionary work, government takeover of Christian schools and hospitals, and an end to Christian advertisements, publishing, and charities. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported on October 25, 2015 that in the current troubled state of junta-ruled Thailand, with its playboy monarch struggling for legitimacy, the drive to establish Buddhism as the state religion to curry favor with the masses and the younger generation of militant monks is gaining traction.[40]

Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang wrote in *New Mandala* that the new Buddhist militancy "is leading Thailand down a dangerous path." [41] He cited recent Buddhist violence against Muslims in the south of Thailand and against "the growing popularity of Christianity among the [Thai] population." While other than in the southern part of the country the small Catholic minority in Thailand seems relatively safe from the rising tide of Buddhist militancy, perhaps on a future visit to Hua Hin I might see more Christian martyrs added to the Catholic calendar at St. Theresa's Church.

The Muslim Calendar

After a week in Hua Hin, I decided to travel to the predominately Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat in the far south of Thailand. On my way I spent a night in Phuket, the famous tourist destination of overweight Russian women in tiny bikinis, newly tattooed Germans, beer guzzling Americans, sunburned Fins, and 20 Baht *a minute* Internet cafes; two days was more than enough. An all-night bus took me to Narathiwat, a city of some 40,000 just shy of the Malaysian border and in the heart of the Muslim south. The tourist

agencies and even the American government warned me to avoid this area because of the ongoing war between the Buddhist government and the Muslim majority population. Even the tourist guide I was using titled the chapter on the south “Trouble in the Deep South” and titled one section “Should You Go?” The American State Department travel advisory website informed me that violence in the southern provinces “has resulted in more than 6,500 deaths since 2004,” martial law “is in force in this region,” and tourists were urged “to defer non-emergency travel there.”[42] But I had endured the Yom Kippur War in Israel, earthquakes in Mexico, typhoons in the South Pacific, the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York City and many other catastrophes. So a week in an area noted for terrorism, government oppression, mysterious mass graves, military roadblocks, and armored cars at every street corner did not intimidate me.

Almost every woman in the south wore a headscarf, and many even shrouded all but their eyes in black. “The men go off into the jungle to fight the government with guns, we women wage warfare with our headscarves,” one woman told me. The only place I could find a bottle of wine was in the back room of a Chinese grocery store. Not one tattoo parlor was to be found, no massage girls beckoned from storefronts, the night was not marked by the thump, thump, thump of disco music, and I was the only Westerner I saw my entire week in the “Deep South.”

I had barely settled into my 500 Baht room at the Ocean Blue Mansion Hotel when I heard the call from the nearby Rayo Mosque, often called the Old Central Mosque, echoing across the neighborhood calling the faithful to prayer. From every direction, from the small storefront neighborhood mosques to the massive new Central Mosque of 1981 near the sea, the call emanated from the minarets. I walked to the Rayo Mosque and watched the congregation arrive for their prayers. With martial law in effect, just the short four-block walk to the Rayo Mosque forced me to pass through three military roadblocks. Atop the mosque was a green and gold inscription in Arabic and Thai announcing that the mosque dated from the Islamic year 1361, which was 1940 according to the Western calendar.

Along with headscarves and the massive 1981 New Central Mosque, there were signs of Muslim resistance against the Buddhist government and army and a reminder that for centuries the Muslim Pattani Kingdom had ruled the area. In 1909 the British unceremoniously handed the kingdom over to the Buddhist Thais, and the area has been racked by resistance movements ever since.[43]

The Buddhist kingdom had no intention of granting independence or even autonomy to the ancient Muslim kingdom of Pattani. As a sign of Buddhist domination, the government constructed a 302-foot tall, gilded statue of the Buddha that the town brochure noted was the tallest in the southern part of the kingdom and the ninth-tallest in the world. But the statue and new Buddhist temples that were eerily empty when I visited them did not detract from the overwhelming Muslim character of the city. I tried to go the nearby beach for an afternoon, but when I saw that even the men were covered head to toe, I thought better of baring my chest and legs for a dip in the sea.

As the Muslim call to prayer (*adhan*) echoed across the cities, landscape, and families of southern Thailand, I got the impression that in spite of the ruling junta’s oppressive tactics, the secession of the three southern provinces was already accomplished, *de facto* if not *de jure*. Every time the five-times-a-day call to prayer and the call to Friday evening congregational prayers echoed through the city calling the population to turn toward their sacred city of Mecca and intone the holy Arabic-language words revealed to the Prophet Mohammed 1438 years earlier, I felt I was no longer in Thailand. In front of every mosque a panel announced that day’s official time for the five daily prayers that slowly crept around the globe minute by minute. Inside the mosque it was not the newly celebrated year 2017, or the Buddhist year 2560, or the Hindu year 5119. It was the year 1438 of the Muslim calendar.[44]

Shortly before I left Thailand to return to New York City, I was sitting in my hotel lobby in Bangkok when I noticed a group of young schoolgirls from Malaysia. They were all stylishly dressed, had the latest in electrical music gear, and were as lively and animated as teenage girls anywhere. The only thing that made them stand out was the tightly drawn colorful head scarves that they wore. Since they were speaking English, I feigned reading but listened to their conversations. At one point, one of their teachers sat near me to take a phone call. After the call I asked him about the group, and he explained that the girls were in his English class back in Malaysia and that they were on a mission to visit Islamic schools in Bangkok and north Thailand. I explained that I was a college teacher back in New York.

The teacher asked me to join them and talk about the importance of learning English, the international language of commerce, culture, politics, and education. I apologized for my informal vacation attire, a tank top and shorts, and after overcoming their school girl shyness, a lively conversation ensued. The planned to become doctors and nurses, absolutely loved Lady Gaga, and dreamed of visiting New York.

Barely into our conversation, there was a flurry of activity as everyone glanced at their watches, cell phones, or smart phones and hurried into one corner of the lounge, turned toward Mecca, and recited their Arabic prayers. Soon they were back in a circle chatting in a mixture of English and Malaysian. Suddenly, at the stroke of the moment of evening prayers, a corner of the entrance lobby of a Bangkok hotel was transformed to a small island of Islam. Suddenly, for a few minutes, the girls and their teachers withdrew from the year 2017 and plunged 1438 years back to the Arabian town of Medina, where the Prophet Mohammed had fled to escape certain death from his enemies in Mecca. Briefly forgotten were the Western, Hindu, and Buddhist calendars.

After a week in three Muslim southern provinces of Thailand, I returned to Hua Hin to bid farewell to Bernie and Chai and then back to Bangkok for my last week. I had more than enough material for my holiday article, but this last week of January would prove to be a gold mine of new efforts to achieve dominion over the fleeting pace of time.

The Jewish Calendar

Eager to escape the all-night thumping of disco music I took a hotel room a bit off Khoa San Road. It had AC, cable TV, and was reasonable in price. I went out to explore my new neighborhood and immediately confronted by a burly, bearded Western-looking guy. He looked at me, half smiled, and asked me in English, “Are you a Jew?” Being from New York I was accustomed to the Lubavitcher missionaries laboring to recover lost Jews, handing out brochures from their brightly colored Mitzvah Tanks that circulated through the streets announcing the arrival of a holiday or the beginning of the Sabbath. Here they were replaced by young guys inviting Jewish tourists to the local Chabad House for a free Friday evening meal and maybe even a prayer. The House was just across the street from my hotel, so when he asked me if I was Jewish in English I simply answered in Hebrew that I had learned from my five years of study in Jerusalem. I said that I was a tourist from New York, had lived in Jerusalem for five years, and that my name was Ron, which is a very common Hebrew name. I let him assume what he would.

The late Rabbi Menachem Schneerson had revived the Lubavitcher movement after the Holocaust in Brooklyn, New York, and gave it the mission of salvaging lost Jews from the ravages of the modern world. Nobody was turned away from their many centers, from the icy world of Alaska to Argentina and from South Africa to Siberia.[45]

As if the Western, Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim calendars were not enough for my planned article, the guy informed me that the Sabbath began in fourteen minutes and I was welcome to join and stay for a kosher dinner afterwards. As I had learned from my years in Jerusalem and teaching at Touro College in New York City, the beginning of the Sabbath was strictly regulated by the rising and setting of the sun and the holidays by the cycles of the moon. For Jews there was no 9:00 and 11 o'clock Sunday Mass, but an ever-changing time determined by the phases of the sun, the moon, and the stars.[46] Modern-day observant Jews like the Lubavitchers consulted Websites, synagogue bulletins, or learned rabbis to find out the exact minute when the Sabbath began. Both the young guy at the door and the sign beside it informed me that the Sabbath began at 5:54 P.M.[47]

With nothing better to do that evening and the promise of a free meal, I walked into the brand new building that had been donated by a certain Michael Rozenblit. A rather motley gang of Jews followed me in, some dressed for a Sabbath service, a couple already wearing skull caps, some in dirty cut offs and even tank tops, and a few even had their back packs with them hoping for not only a free meal but a bed for the night. For most attending the service it was Friday, January 20, 2017, but the synagogue flier noted that according to the Jewish calendar it was the 22 day of the month of Tevet, in the year 5777, 5777 years after the creation of the world according to the Book of Genesis.

The Torah reading for that day was the first six verses of the Book of Exodus, which describe the story of Moses being put adrift in a wicker basket, his rise to power and wealth, the beginning of his efforts to free the Hebrews from slavery. Around the world, each Jewish congregation at its appointed time reads the same passage. With the striking of the clock they are transported back to slavery in Egypt, the martyrdom of all male babies at birth by the Pharaoh, and Moses' miraculous survival.

Some members of the group no doubt made the connection between this seminal event in Jewish history with the present situation of the Jews in the world and even in Bangkok, where most of the Jews in the city were still recuperating from the previous night's orgy of alcohol, drugs, dancing and sex, hoping they could hold down a meal at a nearby Chinese restaurant to give them the strength for a wild Friday night. Maybe the Lubavitcher rabbi hoped one person present could be rescued from the wild world of Khao San Road and possibly become a future leader of the Jewish people.

But for most of the attendees the evening was simply a reminder that they were members of what in Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* is the Jewish Civilization. For these modern Jews, along with Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and others, their religion had evolved to become a civilization. The Moses story of Exodus was not a question of God's intervention in history but a seminal episode in the collective history of the Jews. The year 5777, the month Tevet, the day 22, and the time 5:54 P.M. were traditions that bound Jews into a historical community that had somehow survived for thousands of years. The sound of Hebrew, which most participants did not understand, nonetheless faintly reminded them that they belonged to a distinct people; as did the kosher food that followed. Most no longer believed in a god, heaven or hell, but there remained a faint feeling that they belonged to a people and shared a distinct civilization.

Chinese New Year in Bangkok

Having moved to a new hotel and hoping to just enjoy my last days in Bangkok, I put my mountain of research materials aside. Alas, a stroll to Bangkok's sprawling and ancient Chinatown added another chapter to my research. Strung across the streets in brilliant gold and red colors were wishes for a healthy and prosperous Chinese New Year. Stores promoted the red envelopes that parents used to give crisp currencies to their children, statues and pictures of the rooster were everywhere, and prepared gift packages of wine, fruit, and candy were piled high. Still another calendar was exercising dominion over time.

My guidebook informed me that the Chinese had in fact founded the harbor city of Bangkok when the ancient capital of Siam was still the inland city of Ayudhya. Western visitors to the city in the 1820s “were astonished at the number of Chinese trading ships” in the river and “assumed that the Chinese formed the majority of Bangkok’s population.” Thus, the Chinese brought their dominion of time to the city long ago.

I saw no mention of the actual Chinese year, which was 4715. The Chinese were satisfied with celebrating the arrival of the New Year and the reign of the Rooster.[48] For many Chinese, and no doubt the Chinese government in not so far away Beijing, the festive Rooster was but the first warrior in an army that would eventually rule the world. The Chinese New Year’s tradition of gift giving and festivities had already grown into a 55 billion Baht (\$1.5 billion) industry, one of Thailand’s largest. The Mall Group Company, the largest owner of commercial malls in Thailand, The Siam Center, and other retail giants sponsored massive Chinese New Year campaigns with names like “Glorious Chinese New Year” with art exhibits, ceremonies, and publicity for its chain of malls.[49] Not only were these attended by Thai Chinese and increasingly Thais, but by thousands of tourists from China who accounted for over half of the revenue.[50] During the “Golden Week” that preceded the holiday, I saw packed hotels, bars, and restaurants, Chinese tourists carting giant packages from the stores and malls of the city, sleek busses with Chinese markings carting tourists from famed Buddhist temple to shrine, and gigantic signs in Thai, Chinese, and English luring tourists to their stores and websites.

If the Jewish calendar at the Lubavitcher Center was an anchor to a civilization, the Chinese New Year was a Chinese air craft carrier storming the shores of Thailand to mark the rise of the planet’s new superpower. The Golden Week does not yet rival the Western Christmas shopping season in terms of revenue, but the Bangkok *Nation* wrote on January 26, 2017 that the average Chinese tourist spent 6,000 Baht (\$171) per day on retail purchases, in addition to hotels, food, entertainment, alcohol, prostitutes, and massages. Even giant American-based retail chains like Bloomingdales and Macys have recognized its economic potential, with massive online Chinese New Year shopping campaigns as the holiday spreads worldwide. If time is money, as the old adage argues, then the Chinese New Year’s week is worth billions of dollars.

What is viewed in New York City as a delightful, colorful, and fun holiday and by the merchants and tourist industry of Bangkok as a highly profitable season is also feared in Thailand and South Asia as a danger. The Chinese minority has dominated the economies of the area for centuries, and periodic anti-Chinese riots, massacres, and expulsions have ravaged the area. Chinese ruler, traders, fishermen and farmers have been much resented by the indigenous populations. They were often called “The Jews of Asia” and suffered the same hatred and persecutions. In 1998 Indonesian riots led to the deaths of some 1,000 Chinese. Earlier, following the collapse of the American presence in South Vietnam, Chinese suspected of being communists were rounded up, their possessions confiscated, and transported to re-education camps.

Today the situation is even direr with the emerging status of the Chinese homeland as a major, if not the major, world economic power. Behind the festive Chinese New Year’s decorations, pictures of the Rooster, and \$1.5 billion holiday profits, lurks 1.5 billion Chinese, a growing Chinese navy, claims to sovereignty over the South China Sea, and “Made in China” a reality of daily life. Thai royal princes and princesses may attend the Chinese New Year’s festivities and the king may even issue holiday greetings, but many consider the Chinese New Year’s holiday to be a tinsel covered Trojan Rooster.

This fear of a rising China is not limited to the nations of South Asia. Martin Jacques wrote in his book *When China Rules the World* that the emergence of China as a, if not the, major economic world power will profoundly alter global institutions and cultures.[51] He calls on the United States to resist the rise of China with all the weapons at its disposal, as it resisted the rise of Germany and Japan in the Second World War. Americans should not permit the Chinese Yuan to replace the American dollar, accept that Chinese will rival or replace English as the international language, permit Chinese movies, music, and television shows to dominate the cultural scene, or let China rewrite international law and replace international organizations such as the UN, World Bank and International Monetary Fund with those of their liking. Neither should Americans welcome the Chinese New Year as a replacement for the Western one.

Nevertheless, just as each successive civilization from ancient Babylon, Egypt, and the Indus Valley to Napoleonic France, Britain, and the USA has imposed its dominion of time on the world, so the hundreds of thousands of Chinese tourists and their billions of Yuan will impose the Chinese New Year on the planet.

The Adventist Anti-Calendar

As usual, before boarding my flight I made the rounds of the airport collecting reading material. Once on the plane and a glass of red wine firmly in hand I went through the material to see what treasures I had found.

Almost lost in the crumpled pages of a Hong Kong newspaper I found a flier from the Adventist Church. Never one to pitch a flier for a religious group, I read it front to back and was almost convinced that all the human efforts to exercise dominion over time were just dried leaves on an autumn New York City street. William Miller, the founder of the church, preached back in the mid-1800s that the only day that really mattered was the day of Jesus’ return, and as the name of the church illustrates, this Advent is for sure very soon.[52] Unlike Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Confucianism that founded religious, social, economic, political, and cultural institutions to last for

thousands of years, Jesus preached that the end was imminent. Drawing on the apocalyptic and messianic trends of Judaism, he promised that the present generation would not pass away before his return. Leave your husband or wife, give what you have to the poor, and come follow him to prepare for the end of times. But alas, the last of his disciples passed away and Jesus still had not returned.

St. Peter recorded in 2 Peter 3:3-4 that he was daily assailed by scoffers who asked him where this much promised Messiah was. “Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.” At a loss, and unwilling to admit that Jesus had made a false promise, the early Christians elaborated institutions, theologies, hierarchies, holidays, rituals, and calendars to fill the gaping void of years, decades, centuries, and eventually millennia that loomed before them.

Messianism was in the air in mid-nineteenth century America, much as it had been during the time of Jesus. The Oneida Community, The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing (The Shakers), the Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of the latter-day Saints), and a host of other movements, revivalists, and preachers firmly believed that the end was nigh. William Miller even attempted to coax out a precise date from scriptures, but when this failed, his followers under Ellen White settled on the belief that the Second Coming and the Reign of God’s Kingdom on Earth were imminent. Doctrine 11 of the still controversial *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* states, “He will return in a premillennial, personal, imminent second advent.” Bumper stickers, fliers, and billboards ask, “Are you ready to meet your Lord and Savior?”[53]

Burned by William Miller’s erroneous calendars, Ellen White and her followers considered any attempt to determine an actual date for Jesus’ return as sinful. True Adventists lived each day as if the Second Coming would be tomorrow, if not this very evening. They would be ever-ready to meet their Lord and Savior. The early Adventists refused to build houses of worship because the purchase of land, raising funds to construct it, signing bank loans with years-long repayment plans, and construction schedules were signs that they did not truly believe that the end was very soon. They rented or purchased second-hand churches or halls where in worship they would pass those remaining few days or hours.

But like the early Christians who reluctantly admitted that perhaps Jesus’ return was indefinitely delayed, and who set about building institutions, theologies, hierarchies, holidays, rituals, and calendars to fill the gaping void, the Adventists also hired architects and builders to raise monumental houses of worship and elaborated their calendar to exercise dominion over the days, weeks, months, years, decades, centuries, and eventually millennia that loomed before them.

Such were my thoughts that filled the almost 20 hours of flight that awaited me. Another vacation completed and another article on its way. I guess such is my fate, never to relax on a beach with a drink in my hand. Every vacation is a working vacation. Well, it was two thousand and seventeen years and Jesus still hadn’t returned, so putting aside the Adventist warnings, I started organizing my notes for an article on the battle for dominion over time in Thailand.

Conclusion

Mountains can be climbed, rivers can be dammed, elephants can be shot, the moon can be reached, plants can be cultivated, germs can be eliminated, and other humans can be conquered, but of all the parts of creation that God gave us dominion over, time continues to remain the most elusive.

My month in Thailand illustrated that the war for dominion over time is one of the central battlefields of Samuel P. Huntington’s much discussed Clash of Civilizations. While mountains, cities, and even nations can be won or lost in this clash, on a particular holiday the eyes, ears, and prayers of the faithful turn toward a long lost or recently gained bit of real estate. Ancient heroes, saints, teachers, and gods come alive for a day or a month, dead languages re-emerge in their ancient splendor, distant mountains become reality, and worshippers remember ancient teachings.

A calendar, I tell my students, is one of the universal building blocks of all religions. For any new religion to succeed or ancient religion to endure it must prove its ability to have dominion over time. The prospect of an endless and meaningless succession of days, years, centuries, and millennia is unsupportable for any human being, to say nothing of any religious community. Calendars are like maps; they place an individual and a community firmly in a flow of time that began with the creation (or the Big Bang) and will end with the Millennium (or a nuclear war).

Notes

[1] Studies on the importance of calendars in world religions include: Karen Bellenir, *Religious Holidays and Calendars: An Encyclopedic Handbook* (Aston, PA: Omnigraphics Inc., 2004), Broughton Richmond, *Time Measurement and Calendar Construction* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1956), Julius Thomas Fraser, *Time, the Familiar Stranger* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), and Gerald James Whitrow,

What is Time? (Oxford University Press, 2003). For background on time measurement and calendar construction see, Richmond, Time Measurement, pp. 80-82, and Muhammad ibn Ahmad Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations* (Frankfurt: Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 1998).

[2] “2017 Holy Days,” FFWPU USA, December 20, 2016, familyfed.org/news-story/true-parents-birthday-foundation-day-2017-31084/, Retrieved 2/22/2017.

[3] “Moon Family Other Talks, “Quotes from Sun Myung Moon about True God’s Day,” Compiled by Mary Jane Despres, December 26, 2007, www.tparents.org/Moon-Talks/Moon-Other/SunMyungMoon-GodsDat, Retrieved 1/31/2017. For more detailed information see Chung Hwan Kwak, *The Tradition, Book One*, “Holy Days and Holidays,” www.tparents.org/Library/Unification/Books/Ttl/TT1-14.htm, Retrieved 5/18/2016.

[4] “Moon Family Other Talks, “Quotes From Sun Myung Moon About True God’s Day,” Ibid.

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