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Sunday Evenings for the People.

SIAM AND THE SIAMESE :

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BY

SIR JOHN BOWRING

AT

ST. MARTIN'S HALL,

ON

FEBRUARY 17, 1867.

ALSO

THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS

OF

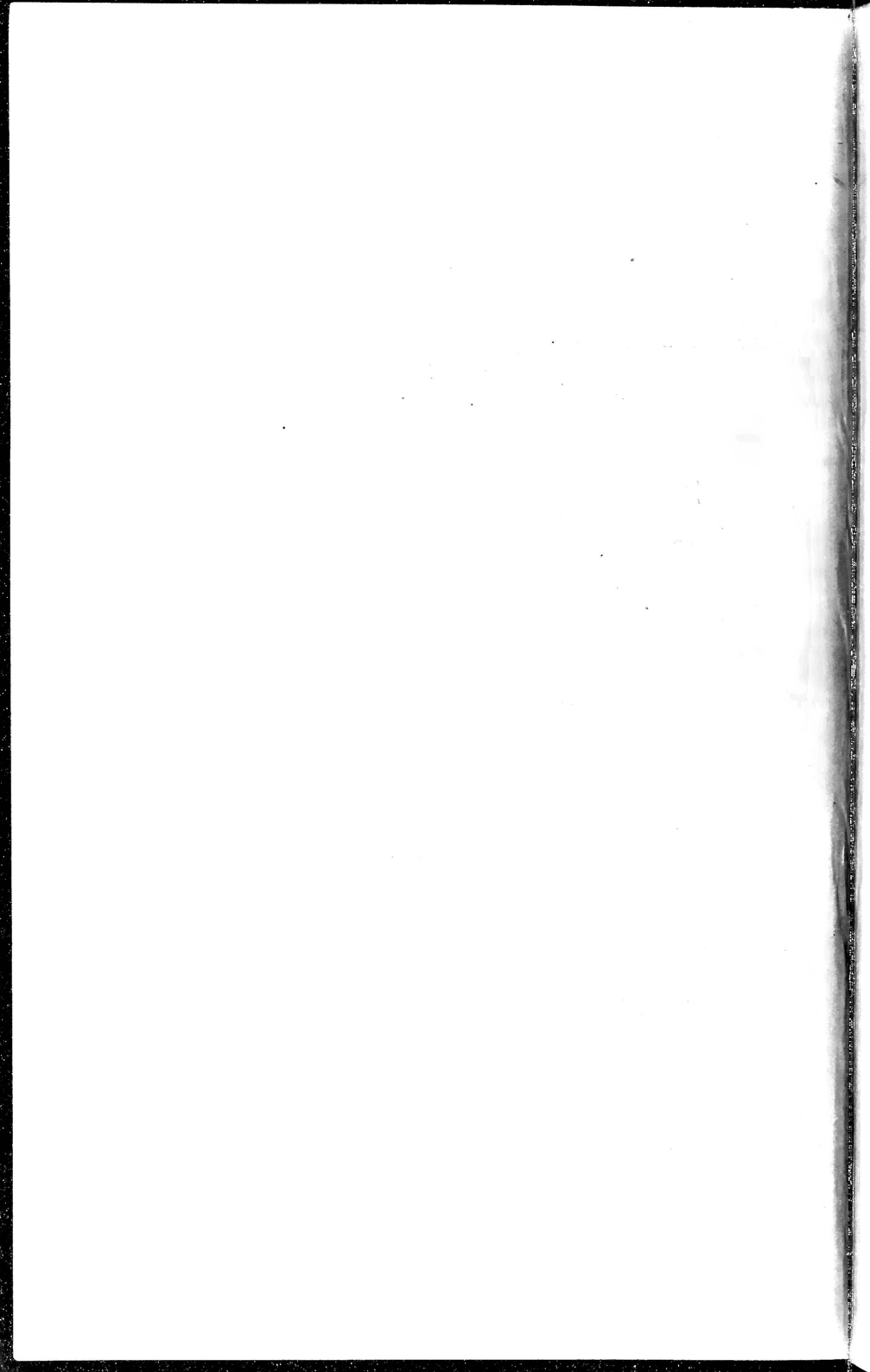
J. BAXTER LANGLEY, Esq., M.R.C.S., F.L.S.

LONDON :

TRÜBNER & CO., 60, PATERNOSTER ROW.

1867.

Price, 2d.

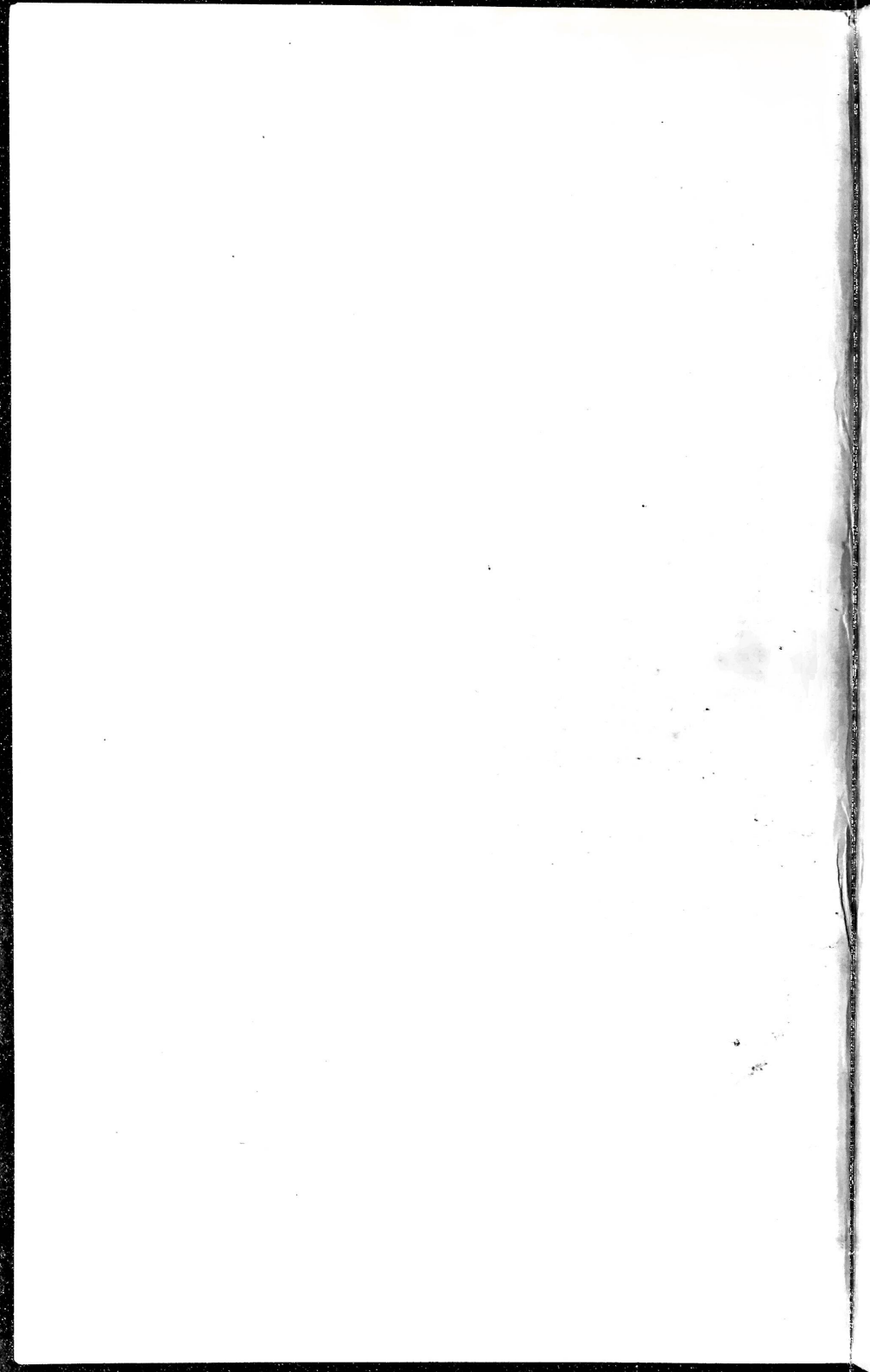


J. BAXTER LANGLEY, Esq., said—

I congratulate myself that in assembling for the sixth time to continue these services, under the title of Sunday Evenings for the People, and I am sure you will unite in congratulating me on the fact that the attendance of those whom I see around me in such large numbers, indicates that these services meet an obvious want of the people of London. It has been my custom to notice in my opening address some of the events of the preceding week, and though on this platform we know no politics, and have no antagonism to any established creed, it is my duty to recognise the fact that on Monday evening when the Minister of the Crown brought forward the programme of the Session; he alluded to a condition of things which I think germane to the matter which we in assembling here have in hand, and which has a bearing on what we have undertaken here. The passage is as follows:—

“ Since 1832 this country has, no doubt, made great progress; but it is during the last ten years that that progress has been most remarkable. I will not now attempt to inquire into the particular causes that have brought about this great advance, but I think I may say there is one sovereign cause which is at the bottom of everything, we suggest, and that is, the increased application of science to social life. (Hear hear.) We are all familiar with the material results which that application of science has produced. They are prodigious, but in my mind the moral results are not less remarkable. That revolution in locomotion which would strike us every day as a miracle if we were not familiar with it, has given to the great body of the inhabitants of this country in some degree the enlightening advantages of travel. The mode in which steam power is applied to the printing press in this country produces effects more startling than the first discovery in the 15th century. It is science that has raised wages; it is science that has increased the desires and the opportunities of labour; it is science that has ennobled labour.”

Here we have sought to erect a Church for the future. Recognizing the advantage of the services in the ordinary churches, we feel that they do not meet the exigencies of the people at large. There is too much disposition to regard science as antagonistic to religion; but here we make science the handmaid of religion. We do not seek to oppose the churches, but we seek to supplement them; and since literature and the fine arts have an elevating and ennobling effect on all who come in contact with them, we seek to supply, by the aid of the most eminent men in every branch of science, the information which cannot fail to be valuable, leaving you to apply the truths which they will teach; and asking you to unite with us in seeking to develop our organization, which in the future shall produce greater results than we can even foresee in the present.



SIR JOHN BOWRING'S DISCOURSE

ON

SIAM AND THE SIAMESE.

Between the two most peopled and most powerful empires that the world has ever known—China, with a population of more than 400,000,000 of human beings, and the British Empire in India, with scarcely less than half that number, there is a tract of country sometimes called a Peninsula, but erroneously so, inhabited by three nations—the Annamites—commonly called Cochin Chinese, by the Burmans, and by the Siamese. The Siamese are the most advanced and civilized of these peoples, having a language and literature of their own, occupying a territory of about 250,000 square miles, maintaining a population of from five to six millions. There is a Siamese manuscript, some centuries old, giving an account of their earliest introduction to the European world, and it seems that in those remote times a French ship visited that country. The captain made his way to the capital, and was introduced to the Sovereign of Siam. He, with very natural patriotism, talked to the Siamese of the greatness of the country from which he came. He described Paris, no doubt, somewhat in a romantic style, as if “all its streets were paved with gold, and all its folks were witty.” But certainly he did inspire the minds of the King and people of Siam with a desire to know more of the wondrous land of the West. And the narrative is interesting. The King determined to send an embassy to France, and to represent in that embassy whatever was honorable to and characteristic of the Siamese kingdom, and prominent amongst the officials was, as was customary in those times, a magician, who was considered an important member in the staff of an ambassador. Even at the present day it is not an unusual thing to nominate men acquainted with the arts of necromancy to accompany official travellers; and the

man selected on this occasion is reported to have been one of the most eminent of his class. When the vessel which conveyed the embassy reached the coasts of France there was a terrible storm, and the magician was requested to use his superhuman power that they might arrive safely on land. And he is said to have subdued the winds and the waves, so that the vessel reached its destined port in safety ; then inquiry was made of him as to the influences which had enabled him to still the adverse elements ; he said it was because he was empowered to unite the influences of the French with those of the Siamese that the storm abated, and the vessel arrived unharmed. I will read from the document the statement which the ambassador made on returning to the Siamese Court :—

“ They were admitted to the presence of the King, and the King ordered a company of 500 French soldiers, all good marksmen, to be drawn up in two ranks, facing each other, 250 on each side. They were commanded to fire. They fired, and each soldier lodged his ball in the musket barrel of the soldier opposite. The King asked the Siamese ambassador if there were any sharpshooters as good in Siam ; and the ambassador replied that the King of Siam did not esteem this kind of skill as worth much in war. The King of France was displeased, and asked what kind of skill the King of Siam did esteem, and what kind of soldiers he did appreciate ? The ambassador replied, “ The King admires soldiers who are well skilled in the magical arts ; and such as, if good marksmen like your Majesty’s soldiers here, should fire at them the bullets would not touch their bodies. His Majesty the King of Siam has soldiers who can go unseen into the midst of the battle, and cut off the heads of the officers and men in the enemy’s ranks, and return unmolested. He has others who can stand under the weapons of the enemy to be shot at or pierced with swords and spears, and yet not receive the least wound or injury. Soldiers skilled in this kind of art he values very highly, but he keeps them for his special use in his own country.” When the French King heard this he was unwilling to have the trial made ; but the ambassador said, “ You need not fear : they have an art by which they can ward off your bullets.” They were ordered to come forth, and they came. The French soldiers all fired several rounds, some at a distance, some near, but the powder would not ignite, and the guns made no report. The magician desired the French soldiers not to be discouraged : “ They shall fire and the guns shall go off.” They fired—all the balls fell to the ground before they reached the Siamese soldiers, of whom not one was struck.”

Such was the first state of relations between Siam and France ; and I have no doubt that the European credulity was almost as great as the Siamese. But Siam has long been an object of interest to Europeans. There is an account of a conversation between Mr. Boswell and Dr. Johnson, in which the latter declared that the Siamese might have sent missions

to Europe, but that the Europeans had never sent missions to the Siamese. It is surprising that a man of such universal knowledge should have made so strange a mistake. There have been many missions from Europe to Siam. The most illustrious of Portuguese poets, Camoens, was wrecked in the Meinam river, of which he gives a poetical picture, and he is said to have escaped with his *Lusiads* in his hand. And the Portuguese have left in that country remarkable vestiges. With them all objects of commerce or conquest were subordinate to purposes of conversion. I found in that country Catholics bearing Portuguese names, and representing the traditions of many generations, who wore Portuguese garments, and were proud to trace their origin to the Portuguese of the 16th century. The Dutch never went to Siam to convert anybody or anything, except to convert men and merchandise into money as fast as was possible. They have left there no names, no traditions, and no marks of any influence. I saw the ruins of their factories, but I never heard in Siam a Dutch name or a Dutch word. The Spaniards frequently and vainly tried to establish themselves in Siam. They made elaborate efforts, and one of their expeditions cost seventy thousand dollars, and is much vaunted in the history of the Philippines, whence the envoys took their departure. But the most remarkable fact in Siamese history is the attempt made in the reign of the King whom the vanity and prostration of his courtiers called the "Grand Monarque" to cultivate and perpetuate relations with France. A man named Falcon was wrecked on the coast, and made his way to the Siamese Court. He brought with him European civilisation, and exercised so wide an influence that he became the Prime Minister of the country. The news of his good fortune reached Europe, and it was thought in France that through his agency and his zeal for Catholicism, French rule and Papal authority might be established in Siam. A remarkable letter was written by the famous French Minister Colbert, and a large number of gentlemen went to Siam, and were received in a very friendly spirit. The ambassador's name was Chaumont, and he published a remarkable account of his reception in Siam. As I had the good fortune to follow in his steps, I was struck with the fact that the court ceremonials and the manners of the Sovereign and the people had undergone few changes in the course of two centuries. As soon as the Siamese discovered that the purpose of the Pope and the monks was to tamper with their religion, and that of the King and his representatives was to interfere with their Government, a rebellion broke out. Falcon was executed, the monks and foreigners were exiled, and from that time Siam seems to have been forgotten for something like a century and a half. But it was known to be a rich and progressive country, and in process of time successive attempts were made to open negotiations and establish commerce with the Siamese government and people. It is not necessary

to trouble you with the detail of the causes which led to the failure of four expeditions from England and two from the United States. They had very little effect, and the project had apparently fallen into abeyance, when it was my privilege to receive Her Majesty's commands to take steps if an opportunity offered for the establishment of amicable and trading intercourse with Siam. I was fortunate in having had much previous correspondence with the King, who is one of the most extraordinary men with whom in the course of my life I have ever come into contact. He was the eldest legitimate son of the King of Siam, but when his father died he, being under age, was superseded by an illegitimate brother, who seized upon the Government. And to protect himself from the perils to which the heir to an oriental throne is always exposed when that throne is occupied by an usurper, he "made himself holy"—that is to say, he entered into a Buddhist temple. There he remained eleven years, and devoted himself to the study of literature, science, and the acquirement of a knowledge of the sacred languages, the Pali and the Sanscrit. He also found time to learn the English and the Latin. On the death of his brother which happened too suddenly to enable him to convey the sceptre to his own descendants, the nobility and the people demanded the proclamation of the legitimate King, who was made the ruler of the country; and it was through his influence that Siam was thrown open to the commerce not only of Britain but of the world. In 1855 I had the satisfaction of entering into a treaty of friendship and commerce with that country. In those days the whole shipping trade of Siam was represented by 20 vessels—one half foreign and the other Siamese. Now 400 cargoes are annually shipped from Bangkok alone. Before proceeding to Bangkok I wrote to the King stating that our public relations were of a very unsatisfactory character, but that I wished to approach him in a friendly spirit; that I had a force which I had no desire to display; but if he would meet me and enable me to show him that our interests were his and that his interests were ours, if I should persuade him that we were made rather to love than to hate, rather mutually to serve and conciliate than to distrust and repel each other, I hoped he would allow me to present my credentials at his Court; that I would come with a large force, if necessary for my purpose, but that I would much rather appeal to his feelings of respect for the position of the country which I represented. I implored him to allow me to come in amity. The American missionaries, with whom I was in correspondence, did not encourage us. They thought, whatever assurances I might have received from the King, that I should be met with a feeling of repugnance. I had better hopes, and I went. We reached the mouth of the Meinam River, of which the Siamese are very proud—as all nations are proud of their rivers! We English boast of our "Silver Thames" whose silver indeed is somewhat tarnished! The Portuguese

daunt their "Golden Tagus", though gold is no longer found in its sands. We have all heard of the love of the people of Egypt for the Nile; and one of the most emphatic benedictions I remember is that, when I gave three or four pence to a poor Arab woman for holding my horse, she said, "May you always be blessed by Allah as he blessed the sources of the Nile." So in India the Ganges is regarded as blessed by the Godhead and as blessing those who have had the privilege of dying on its shores. I have seen Christians, Mahomedans, and Jews bathing together in the waters of the Jordan, and uniting in common thanksgiving that they have been permitted to enjoy so great a glory. Chinese poetry is full of the Yang-tze-Kiang—"the Son of the Ocean." Nor are these feelings confined to the ancient world: the Americans of the North sing the praises of their Mississippi and Missouri; and those of the South of the Amazon and the Plate. The Siamese call their Meinam the "Mother of Waters." When we reached the mouth of that river, we were told "you must not enter it with your ships of war." So the King sent down a fleet of the most splendid galleys, like coronetted dragons, beautifully gilt and painted; and I was told to "Come up in these galleys, and abandon your ships of war." I said, "I shall accept your attention and come in your galleys, and the ships shall follow; and you must tell your people that I am coming as a friend and not as a foe." And the King issued a proclamation declaring that we were coming not as an enemy to humiliate, but as a friend to extend friendship. We had many difficulties as to receptions and invitations, but the King requested me to come to meet him in his palace at midnight. A magnificent palace it is! He said, "I want to see you as a friend, and now I wish you to assent to one condition: in your country people wear swords in the presence of the Sovereign, but that is against our custom." I said, "Undoubtedly I am bound to pay your Majesty all the attention that I pay to my own Queen, and the wearing of a sword is a point of etiquette." He said, "It is never the case at our Court." But I was able to give evidence that the point had been conceded at the reception of the ambassadors of Louis XIV.; and the King allowed that, as the British Queen was at least as great a Sovereign as the French King, her envoys had a claim to every honor which had ever been granted. And so I and my suite were received in the Great Hall, standing erect and wearing our swords, while the Siamese dignitaries lay prostrate on their faces, and not one of them dared to lift his head to the King, who sat upon a superb throne. The ceremonies being over, the King asked me to come to him in the palace. I went and found the King of Siam (whom a short time before I had seen encumbered with the robes of royalty, with bright gems glittering from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet) with nothing on him but his shirt. He had a child upon his knee, and the only thing it wore was a garland of white flowers upon its head. I contrasted the grandeur and glory of the Monarch with the simplicity and the affection of the tender parent, and the latter appeared to me more worthy of homage than the potent King. I spoke of the

Meinam. It is a wonderful river. It is somewhat like the Nile, its yellow waters being fringed with emerald banks fertilized by its inundations. I don't know whether it is more attractive by night or by day. By night the fire flies cover the trees with marvellous splendour, the loud noise of the Ghik lizard is heard, and animal and insect life is as vital as by day ; when beautiful birds, and beetles, and butterflies are full of activity; and fish that speak, and fight, and travel by land, and strange reptiles and quadrupeds abound. Siam gives great evidence of Chinese influence. Chinese houses, with their red and yellow ornaments, are seen all along the banks of the Meinam. The Chinese are the great civilizers of the East, and a million and a half of them are settled in Siam. They are the most advanced, industrious, persevering and economical of all the oriental nations. Bangkok is an aquatic City, almost all the houses are on the water, and when the inhabitants shift their residences, they move their entire habitations up and down the river. And as the Siamese are proud of their rivers, they are also proud of their towns. One is called the town of ten million elephants, one is the town of pure gold, another, the town of the diamond walls, another, the celestial hill, another, the paradise of Archangels! This may be vanity, but it is a very common and natural one. Does not a Swiss exalt in the grandeur of his native mountains? and I once met with an Icelander who said "How can you tolerate a country in which there are no snow storms?"

The Siamese religion is more identified with the national character and customs than any other religion in the world. I speak of Buddhism. I cannot go into the details of that religion, for they occupy sixty volumes, but I will point out some of its characteristics as evidence of the fact that no religion ever exercised a great influence over millions of men unless there were in it many elements of truth and wisdom ; and if, instead of attacking everything which they find in the religion of foreign nations, missionaries would recognize that we are not the monopolists of truth and wisdom, but, that truth and wisdom are to be found elsewhere, many stumbling blocks would be removed which now arrest their way. Buddhism is, as I have said, a part and portion of the social institutions of the land, and has a strong hold upon the feelings of the people. No man enters upon or enjoys the rights of citizenship till he has passed a certain time in a Buddhist Convent, and has gone through a certain religious examination. The maintenance of the temples and of the priests is wholly dependent upon public opinion. There are in Bankok 1,000 wats or temples, and 10,000 bonzes or priests, and these wats have cost more than ten millions of dollars, and are supported by voluntary contributions, giving about a million dollars a year. The priests come forth every morning from their convents, they are not allowed to ask for contributions, and they are not permitted to thank the donors. They bear a wallet for articles of food, and a cruise for drink, and they find at every door a contribution waiting their arrival. Given by the people without asking, it is received from them without thanks.

The great outlines of Buddhism are, that every child is born pure

that life is a scene of discipline, and that after infinite processes of purification man will be absorbed in the divinity. If there be much in Buddhism that represents the ignorance of dark ages, there is much that even we might study, and study for our instruction. And Buddhism, like Brahminism, like Christianity itself, is, under the influence of philosophic discovery, being rescued from the false teachings of the half-instructed or the wholly uninformed. Let me give you a few words of wisdom from Buddhist books:—

“Wherever a single ray of divine wisdom penetrates there is worship, there is praise in honour of the universal sovereign.”

“How shall words exhibit the infinities of the mysterious creation, where every atom emanates from all, and all is traceable in every atom, united in one mysterious whole!”

Very beautiful are some of the speculations into the infinity of space and time—

A Phra obtained from Buddha the power of travelling two millions and a half of miles in the time that a shot arrow takes in passing through the shadow of a palm tree. He travelled at this rate for 10 years in search of infinite space; he made no perceptible progress; he continued for hundred years, then for a thousand, then for ten thousand, then for a hundred thousand years, at the rate of two and a half millions of miles in a second, and he returned disappointed to earth, not having approached even the border of infinity.

Another sage applied to Buddha to know something about eternity, and Buddha pointed to a rock of granite sixteen miles long; that rock he said would be touched once in ten thousand years by the hem of a spiritual visitant's muslin garment; and when, by such visits and by such attrition, the rock shall be reduced to the size of a nut, then you may begin to have some notion of eternity.

Patience under suffering and submission to authority are among the prominent teachings of Buddhism. I knew a priest who held his forefinger for hours in the flame of a lamp till the first two joints were burnt away.

Time only allows the mention of a few of the peculiar usages of the Siamese. At the birth of child, the mother is placed for some days before a fire, from which she suffers so much, that frequently death follows. The next stage in the life of the child is the ceremonial of the top-knot. The hair is gathered together, and the rites connected with the removal of the knot, which generally takes place about the age of thirteen, constitute an epoch of existence. The next stage is marriage, which is carried on as it is in China, by those who are employed by the friends of the parties, and who are supposed to know the condition and circumstances of both families. The marriage is performed with the most elaborate ceremonies. As regards death, in the case of persons of high distinction, a funeral pile is made, on which the body is placed, and some of these erections cost thousands of pounds. A great many of the treasures which had belonged to the deceased are placed on the pile, and are collected with the ashes of the dead, and sent to the surviving friends of the deceased.

The claims of the female aristocracy are manifested in a curious way. It is the practice in China for ladies of rank to make themselves useless. Their finger nails are allowed to grow to a length of 5 or 6 inches, and they never go to bed without having them carefully covered up. But the ladies of Siam have a still stranger habit of exhibiting their emancipation from labour. Their elbows are contorted and turned outward, so that deformity is one of the recommendations of a Siamese lady. No doubt you have heard of the reverence with which the white elephant is held in Siam. The stable is beautifully adorned; he is magnificently caparisoned; is fed on the sugar-cane; he has nobles constantly in attendance; and he never goes forth unaccompanied by bands of music. Among the presents given to me for our Queen was a gold box, with a golden key, containing a few hairs of the white elephant's tail, which the King deemed to be the most precious of all the royal gifts. The white elephant is believed to be one of the resting places of Buddha in his transmigration through the dominions of earth. The Siamese invariably place high value upon white animals. The white elephant, white monkey, and the white deer, are peculiarly prized. I don't know whether this was the inspiration of my friend Wordsworth, when he wrote of the "white doe" of Rylstone.

I found in Siam an instructive application of the decimal system—one of the most useful discoveries of human intelligence, and one of the most valuable auxiliaries to human progress, as without it we could scarcely penetrate into the realms of geological and astronomical discovery. The Siamese distinguish the varieties of rank by cyphers. No arithmetic can represent that of the sovereign. The second king stands at 100,000; the half-brother at 50,000; a son, in office, at 40,000; out of office at 15,000. The highest lady in the land at 10,000; the next in rank only at 600. Then, remote cousins of royalty stand at 599 and so down to the lowest denomination.

The value of a living being—in other words, the compensation to be obtained for the loss of such—is regulated by law, and reduced to English money, may be thus represented:—

Male	1 to 3 months old	...	16s. 6d.	Females	11s. 0d.
	" 3 to 4 years	...	55s. 0d.	"	44s. 0d.
Maximum value	26 to 40 do.	...	154s. 0d.	"	21 to 30 yrs.	...	132s. 0d.
	" 86 to 90 do.	...	16s. 6d.	"	86 to 90 do.	...	11s. 0d.
Baby value	" 91 to 100 do.	...	11s. 0d.	"	91 to 100 do.	...	8s. 3d.
Value of female baby							

The allotted time is exhausted. I will, therefore, merely add that I am much obliged to you for your attendance, and for your kind attention, and if you should think that anything which I have said affords you new materials for thought, new motives for the exercise of candour and charity in the estimate of other nations and other religions, I shall rejoice.

The service concluded with a selection of sacred music.