

Saturday, March 21, 2009

## Pass the Pepto Baptismal: The “Hell Being Community” at Wat Phai Rong Wua

Some things in religious thought can really turn one’s stomach. In fact, some notions seem to have been imagined expressly for this purpose. The notion of inescapable misery in an “afterlife” is one of the more graphic examples of this. Westerners are typically well familiar with traditional Christianity’s notion of hell, where the “disobedient” are sent after their death to roast for eternity in unquenchable flames (“seven times hotter than the sun,” as one pastor I knew used to enjoy repeating).

But did you realize that there is a homologous idea in Theravada Buddhism? Sure, there are differences in terms of non-essentials. For instance, the Buddhist notion of “hell” does not involve the “lake of fire” that we all know and love from Christianity. But the meta-ethical underlay of both worldviews operates, to varying degrees, on the premise that an individual’s chosen actions are to be compelled by the threat of a stick. It’s the same “do this - or alternatively, *don’t* do this - or else!” Without the threat of the stick, one is apt to “do wrong.” Clearly one’s actions are not to be chosen on the basis of goal-orientation and the pursuit of personal values.

There is a noteworthy difference between Buddhism and Christianity though. The notion of Karma stands behind the causal process which determines one’s fate as the consequence of his personal behavior. But unlike the Christian notion of divine judgment, Karma cannot be overruled by any being. That’s right, there’s no “get out of jail free” card, no god that can come along and arbitrarily pull someone from the consequences of his own choices and actions and “save” him from what he rightfully deserves. Also, in Buddhism, one can have a say, through his own personal choices, in the fate he is to have after his present life, while in Christianity this is all pre-determined beforehand, irrespective of one’s chosen actions. So in Buddhism there is a kind of ‘tyranny of justice’ of sorts unknown to Christianity. Clearly Buddhism holds justice in higher regard than does Christianity.

On my most recent trip to Thailand, I made it a point to visit Wat Phai Rong Wua (which roughly translates to “temple of the bamboo barn”), a vast temple compound in Suphanburi province which is home to one of the most unforgettable exhibits I have ever seen. Known as the “hell being community” or “city of hell,” this exhibit displays hundreds of life-size (and larger) plaster sculptures depicting every variant of torture and torment one could imagine as a graphic illustration of what awaits those who misbehave in the afterlife to come.

Wat Phai Rong Wua is famous among the Thais as a place of veneration, but it is virtually unknown to foreigners. This is not one of the temples that you’re likely going to visit if you’re traveling through Thailand on a group tour, for instance. I myself saw no westerners there on either of my two visits to this most curious site. On my first visit to Wat Phai Rong Wua, in 2006, I was not prepared for what I was about to see. I took only a few pictures and really had too little time to take in what the temple grounds had to offer. So on this trip, I made it a priority to revisit Wat Phai Rong Wua, and take as many photos as I could of the horrific depictions showcased at the temple’s hell exhibit.

My photos are now online. I invite my readers to check them out [here](#).

As you look through these photos, consider the effort that must have been put into erecting this monument to eternal suffering. Somebody really took this seriously.

While Thailand is, delightfully, as untouched by Christianity as any society on earth today could be, it is still home to an extremely mystical culture. Buddhism, like Christianity, has its own assortment of invisible magic beings, though they are not theistic in nature, and they tend to have more colorful personalities than those found in the Christian religion. This is actually ironic given the Vantillian school’s tendency to cast non-Christian religions as “impersonal.” In Buddhism, some of these magic beings are even not invisible at all to begin with. Take for example the notorious *graseu*, which is a witch consisting of a floating head attached only to its entrails (no broomstick!). Descriptions of this malevolent being bring to mind the image of a kite flying through the air, with a long tail of internal organs flapping in the wind as it flies from haunt to haunt. I joked with my hosts that I was hungry from some “gang graseu” - i.e., “witch soup” - and they really enjoyed that one. Unfortunately I could find no depictions of the graseu at the hell being community of Wat Phai

Rong Wua.

If you're ever planning a trip to Thailand and have never been there, please feel free to contact me if you have questions (e-mail: [sortion@hotmail.com](mailto:sortion@hotmail.com)). I've traveled to this precious kingdom five times now, and it never fails to amaze me. But there are precautions one should keep in mind while visiting "the land of smiles." If you're traveling with a group, you'll probably be better insulated. But I have never traveled with a group in Thailand, and have always mingled only with the locals, which I think is preferable anyway. (Seriously, why go to the other side of the earth only to sit next to some obese sixty-year-old from Indiana the whole time? No, I'm not knocking Indiana...) Then again, moving among the locals can expose you to certain unpleasantries that westerners might not be used to. For me, that's still preferable to hanging around the established tourist traps, which nauseate me to no end.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Buddhism](#), [Hell](#)

*posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 AM](#)*

## 9 Comments:

[madmax](#) said...

Dawson,

Good to have you back!

Interesting post about Thailand. That is a place I must visit. But I have a question. You say:

"...while in Christianity this is all pre-determined beforehand, irrespective of one's chosen actions."

While you were gone, we were having a discussion about free will and Christianity. Robert Bumbalough made the argument, with which I agree, that Christianity's omniscient god demands hard fatalistic determinism. But yet as far as Christian doctrine goes, Christians will argue that we have free will. This is their answer to the problem of evil. Now I don't think for a moment that their free will defense could ever stand given its inherent contradictions. But, in comparing Christianity to Buddhism, the Christian could make the claim that their religion does stand for justice because God gave humans free will. Again, I know that can't be reconciled with omniscience and omnipotence, but it is a Christian doctrine. At least of Catholicism as I understand it. Now, as for Calvinism, well I'm not sure if they still believe in predestination or not.

[March 21, 2009 12:32 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Madmax,

Thanks for your comment and interesting questions.

Madmax: "Interesting post about Thailand. That is a place I must visit."

It really is an amazing experience. It's not like visiting Canada or something so similar to our western culture. Yes, it's a long series of flights, and it's very hot all the time, but if you can stomach these (I can barely, but I do it anyway), then you're in for a real adventure.

I wrote: "...while in Christianity this is all pre-determined beforehand, irrespective of one's chosen actions."

Madmax: "While you were gone, we were having a discussion about free will and Christianity. Robert Bumbalough made the argument, with which I agree, that Christianity's omniscient god demands hard fatalistic determinism."

Right. For instance, Robert wrote (22 Feb. 2009):

“Christianity's doctrine regarding prophecy is problematic. If prophecy is real, then the future already exists, and hard deterministic fatalism is true.”

There's no denying that Christianity affirms a fatalistic determinism.

Madmax: “But yet as far as Christian doctrine goes, Christians will argue that we have free will.”

Well, they will affirm that we have free will, that's true. But clearly this position is undermined by the determinism inherent in New Testament theology. On the Christian view, free will would at best be an illusion. Though you most likely won't find a lot of Christians admitting this. It's one of those "paradoxes" or "apparent contradictions," we're told, the solution to which we may never know, but which "God" knows. (Yes, I've seen this kind of defense before.)

Madmax: “This is their answer to the problem of evil.”

I don't think this is a very good answer to the problem of evil. As I point out in [my last blog](#), which touches on this topic, there are, according to the gospels and other biblical texts, supernatural beings other than the Christian god which are supposed to be evil. There are demons and devils, Satan, etc. Evil spirits. Are these products of human free will? Who created these beings? Were they originally created “good” but misused their free will to become evil? Perhaps that may be something some Christians might argue, but it compromises the position that human beings (collectively) are responsible for the existence of evil. It would acknowledge that evil exists independent of human choices.

Also, does the Christian god have free will? If so, and Christians hold that it will always be good, and will never stray from being good, then they affirm that it is possible to have free will and never do evil. Some Christians have stated that their god would have had to create human beings as robots to guarantee that they would not choose evil over good when the opportunity for such a choice arose. But these same individuals probably do not think their god is a robot, and yet they affirm that it has free will and will never do evil. It seems that it would have been easy for the Christian god to have avoided the problem of evil if it were smarter in its creative decisions: just create human beings (and any other beings endowed with free will) with perfect judgment, that way whenever they face a choice, they always employ their free will according to perfect judgment. Thus they would have free will and also always choose good. But since Adam and Eve, according to the Genesis myth, did choose to do evil (i.e., to “transgress God's law” as it were), this is evidence that they were not created with perfect judgment, that they were actually created with imperfect judgment, which means they could not have been perfect creations. They were created with a flaw, a defect, an imperfection. So one would be wrong to call their creator “perfect,” since clearly it created imperfect creatures. A creator which creates imperfect creatures could not rightly be called a *perfect* creator.

Madmax: “Now I don't think for a moment that their free will defense could ever stand given its inherent contradictions.”

Right. Neither do I.

Madmax: “But, in comparing Christianity to Buddhism, the Christian could make the claim that their religion does stand for justice because God gave humans free will.”

Well, Christians could (and do!) make all kinds of claims all the time. But the assumption that “god gave humans free will” does not undo the fact that orthodox Christian soteriology teaches that all human beings are born into sin, and therefore deserve everlasting punishment, but for no merit of their own certain individuals have been “elected” to escape what they, according to Christian theology, rightly deserve, and enjoy eternity in “paradise” with the creator, who essentially has the power to suspend justice at whim, whenever it feels like it, because it can do whatever it pleases (cf. Psalm 115:3). Simply giving human beings free will does not mean it is a just creator, any more than giving us 10 fingers and two nostrils makes it just. In Buddhism, you earn your fate. In Christianity, there's nothing one can do to earn his fate; it's not in his control whatsoever.

Madmax: “Again, I know that can't be reconciled with omniscience and omnipotence, but it is a Christian doctrine. At least of Catholicism as I understand it. Now, as for Calvinism, well I'm not sure if they still believe in predestination or not.”

Calvinism, even though many of its adherents would protest, is extremely deterministic. It's internal contradictions are especially toxic on this matter. I think [this cartoon](#) is accurate.

Did any of this help answer your questions?

Thanks!  
Dawson

[March 22, 2009 11:38 PM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

"Did any of this help answer your questions?"

Oh yes. Thanks!

The problem for me is that there are so many versions of Christianity that it is difficult to get to the fundamental philosophical premises. I was never certain if predestination was central to all of Christianity or just certain sects. You've made a good argument that it is inherent in Christianity itself.

Regarding Buddhism and the Asian world, one Objectivist recently commented that it might be the Asian world that experiences the next individualist/capitalist enlightenment. His argument was that the Asian world has an advantage in that they are not Christian and therefore do not have to overcome the Judeo/Christian/Kantian moral tradition of self sacrifice. He noted that the Asian world has their own craziness (like that crazy Thai place you mentioned in this post) but they don't have Christianity which is especially toxic.

Glad to have you back Dawson.

[March 23, 2009 12:11 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Madmax,

Very interesting comments!

Madmax: "The problem for me is that there are so many versions of Christianity that it is difficult to get to the fundamental philosophical premises."

You're so right, there are so many different versions of Christianity that criticism of any point is liable to be deflected because it supposedly does not apply to the version held by the individual you're interacting with. But there is a core set of beliefs that is constant within orthodox Christianity, and that is what I try to focus on in my writing.

Madmax: "I was never certain if predestination was central to all of Christianity or just certain sects. You've made a good argument that it is inherent in Christianity itself."

The notion of predestination is present in several passages of the bible, mostly explicitly in some of Paul's writings. But the New Testament is far from wholly consistent on the matter (hence the major divisions on the matter within Christianity). As an example of this, in Edmond Cohen's book *The Mind of the Bible-Believer*, there are two footnotes, on page 19 of the book (footnotes 16 and 17), in which the author lists the verses he found in favor either of Calvinism or Arminianism. He lists 133 verses "clearly militating in favor of Calvinism" and only 23 verses "clearly militating in favor of Arminianism." I have posted these two collections of verses on my website [here](#). Feel free to check them out.

Madmax: "Regarding Buddhism and the Asian world, one Objectivist recently commented that it might be the Asian world that experiences the next individualist/capitalist enlightenment. His argument was that the Asian world has an advantage in that they are not Christian and therefore do not have to overcome the Judeo/Christian/Kantian moral tradition of self sacrifice. He noted that the Asian world has their own craziness (like that crazy Thai place you

mentioned in this post) but they don't have Christianity which is especially toxic.”

That's a most interesting argument, and it's true that a lot of Asian cultures are not saddled with Christianity, which really hampers a culture's maturation. And it really is amazing how much bustling commerce takes place on the street at open markets in places like Thailand. That's always one of my favorite things to do when I go there - go to the open markets. You can find just about anything, and you can haggle if you want. Prices are generally pretty cheap to begin with, but in the more touristed areas they're going to see that you're a westerner and automatically quote you a higher price, since they think you've got money. But overall, you can't find more consensual free trade anywhere else.

On the flipside, in addition to the steep mysticism which pervades the culture, they certainly have a different idea of privacy than most westerners do. It's hard to explain in a brief comment like this, but you'd know what I mean when you go into a men's room and there's a woman in there waiting to clean up after you once you've done your business... That always takes a little getting used to for me upon arrival... I'm reminded of Rand's point that "Civilization is the progress toward a society of privacy" (*For the New Intellectual*, p. 84).

Another point I'd make here is that what many of these cultures are lacking, however, is a strong dose of Aristotelianism, which should not be overlooked.

Definitely some food for thought. Is that argument you mentioned posted online? I'd be interested in examining.

Regards,  
Dawson

[March 24, 2009 6:18 AM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

Dawson,

More excellent comments. Also, the Calvinism vs Arminianism list is very helpful. I read Cohen's book on your recommendation and I found it extremely informative but also very dense. That was one of the most difficult books that I have ever read. Also, Cohen is a Kantian and a Jungian which did undermine his arguments somewhat but nevertheless it was a brilliant book. I forgot about that list. I'm glad that you reminded me of it.

Regarding the Asian enlightenment comments, actually it was Paul Hsieh that made them in the NoodleFood comments. For the life of me I can't remember where though. Funny thing is that he had a pro and con list of reasons for his argument. In the con list he mentioned the same thing you did, namely that the Asian world is also lacking an Aristotelian element. I think the closest they ever came to Aristotle was Confucius who is a poor substitute as I understand it.

That's the funny thing about Christianity. The Plato vs Aristotle battle has played out within Christian history itself. First Plato won via Augustine and then Aristotle made a comeback via Aquinas and Albert. But then Plato made an even bigger comeback via Kant. All of this within the overarching framework of Christianity. Now Rand has smashed through the whole edifice and in time will hopefully bring it all down. But in regards to the Asian/Occidental issue, we have the good and the bad and they have neither. If they could somehow get the good without the bad they could take off so to speak. It will be interesting to see how that plays out but I think it will play out over a longer time frame than my lifetime.

Madmax

[March 24, 2009 1:41 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Ah yes, Paul Hsieh. That makes sense. I've read some of the stuff on NoodleFood before (there's a lot of content there!), but I think mostly from Diana Mertz Hsieh (sp?). It's been a while, but I recall much of the content on Noodlefood being quite refreshing. I really should put a link to their site and look at it more often... (Then there's the time thing... where does it all go?) I will have to look up Paul's thoughts about Asia. I know from my limited experiences in Thailand and some other places in Asia I've visited, there is a conspicuous lack, at least among the locals with whom I

've been acquainted, of a scientific understanding of things. I wouldn't call it *all* superstition per se, but a lot of folksy wisdom and old wives' tales seems to serve as the prevailing explanation to everyday things. Walking in the fog, for instance, will make you sick. Wearing socks will stunt the growth of your ankles (as if the stifling heat weren't motivation enough to go open-toed). Patting someone on the back will give him a heart attack. Singing while cooking food brings bad luck. Etc., etc., etc. It's all very interesting learning these things (I'm reminded of the OT prohibition against shaving one's chin, or eating pork, etc.). I suppose these notions have their basis in something, but it's not science. In many ways, they've done the best they could to survive for centuries in an environment characterized by constant heat, regular flooding, abundant flora and fauna, teeming bug life, persistent mildew, etc. Modern technology is like a salve which eases practical burdens. But an intimate understanding of the principles behind it is as alien to them as some of their cuisine is to many westerners. However, a couple things I do sense when I'm in Thailand that I think we've lost: an emphasis on service (it's full-faucet service everywhere you go there - only gas station attendants know how to fill a car with gas; at the book store, five young ladies wait on me simultaneously when I buy only one book...), a prevailing sense of personal dignity (you don't see people with tattoos on their foreheads and spiky hair-dos running front desks), and an unquenchable drive for progress (seen in their ambitious building and commercial projects). While the economy here in the States is in the doldrums, it's thriving non-stop over there. Skyscrapers are in various stages of construction throughout Bangkok, the malls are still jam-packed with consumers, and everywhere you go people are friendly, optimistic, ready to interact. People are not afraid of each other over there. Here, you can live across the street from someone for five years or more and never learn their name. It wasn't always like that here. Today's America is a lot different from the America of the '70's that I grew up in. In Thailand, you close the doors only to keep the bugs out. In America, you lock them shut and turn on the alarm system to protect your life and limb. Quite a commentary!

I agree, Cohen's book is extremely tedious, way more so than it should be. It would have been very helpful if he or an able editor pared it down some. His whole mind-game approach likens Christianity to a psychological labyrinth, and I think he's right to do so. But sometimes reading him, I feel like I'm wandering into a labyrinth of his own making, simply because in some places he goes on and on, with enormously complicated sentences, often with little sight of any light at the end of the tunnel. He does have a lot to say, and he's trying to say it all. I can empathize with that (look how long some of my stuff rambles!). But I think there could be more focus on relating the points he makes to the topic in which he discusses them, to make the whole easier to comprehend. Reading Cohen, I get the impression of a very agile and tutored mind dictating his stream-of-conscious ideas under the influence of Quaaludes... or something.... Seriously, he probably gets the dense writing structure from Kant, who - as you rightly point out - is one of his chief models. I have no problem filtering out the Kantian garbage, it just makes the process all the more tedious. Nevertheless, in spite of this, Cohen makes some astounding observations, and the different 'devices' which escort the bible-believer's immersion into the cognitive permafrost that is Christianity seems to me a very accurate analysis of the psychosis of bible-belief.

Regards,  
Dawson

[March 25, 2009 9:57 AM](#)

[Robert Bumbalough](#) said...

Hi guys: Check out the babe in [pic 19](#). She's got some kind-O-nice-rack. Her hard erect nipples show how much she is enjoying the spear thrust into her head. Ha LOL. Those Buddhists who made these statues must have a sense of humor.

[April 08, 2009 6:51 AM](#)

[Robert Bumbalough](#) said...

Why are some of the [demons](#) blue and others flesh colored? Does Theravada Buddhism offer a hierarchy of demonic persons? Are the blue guys the bosses? Does the mythology entail significance to the pointed ears and head horns? Do Thais make jokes about the physical attributes of their demons? Why do the demons get to wear clothes while the damned do not? Are the demons not damned, or are they just putting in an honest day's work?

[April 08, 2009 7:01 AM](#)

[Robert Bumbalough](#) said...

Did the skulls in [pic 32](#) once belong to the Golden Monks while they lived?

[April 08, 2009 7:11 AM](#)

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