

HeRD #S1 - Buddhism & Heathenism

Presbyterian missionary views on Buddhism may be described by a number of key interlocking concepts which are interrelated, overlapping, and comprise what might be called a "cognitive ecosystem" of interdependent analysis. These concepts shouldn't be treated in a hierarchical fashion, as if one were the "key" to all of the others. The concept of "heathenism," at the same time, appears frequently and provides a good entry point for studying the whole complex of ideas, feelings, and attitudes. Mary Cort, of the Phet Buri Station, stated the general missionary view of Buddhism as a heathen religion in an 1876 article describing Buddhist funeral rites. Thai Buddhist, according to Cort, cremate their dead and then give themselves over to feasting, to play, and to "wicked and foolish things." She wrote, "They pray for the dead as do the Roman Catholics, and make offerings to the Buddhist priests and to the evil spirits. It is altogether one of the greatest displays of heathenism which this country affords." (p. 151) Cort's description of these funerals reflects a general understanding of heathenism that includes the following elements: It is wicked, foolish, and superstitious. It gives its offerings to mere humans, priests at that. It is "playful" in a frivolous and immoral manner when it should be solemn and respectful. It is overtly animistic. It is Catholic-like.

Cort's analysis betrays both deep-seated cultural and religious attitudes about "people of other faiths." She feels that Thai Buddhists are serious about foolish things and frivolous about solemn things. Middle class, evangelical America arranged things quite differently and, to missionary thinking, much more appropriately. Cort's comparison of Buddhism and Catholicism deserves particular note. Other missionaries also write of the supposed parallels between the two religions. It seems likely that missionary attitudes about Buddhism were partly grounded in or informed by Protestantism's centuries old, deeply held antipathy towards Catholicism.

Source: Mary L. Cort, letter dated July 1876, FOREIGN MISSIONARY 35, 5(October 1876): 150-153.

HeRD #S2 - Buddhism & Satan

For the "old-time" Presbyterian missionaries in Thailand the "heathens" and their religion lived in bondage to Satan and, whether blindly or knowingly, accepted Satan's lordship as their own. In 1875 Jane McFarland described merit making as the sum and the substance of Buddhism. She wrote, "Satan has helped the Siamese to invent thousands of ways by which they suppose they MAKE MERIT." Among her examples of merit making was the case of the "...widowed mother [who] makes merit when she takes the last bowlful of rice from her starving children and gives it to feed the lazy priests." McFarland concluded, "In some SUCH WAY all are busy TRYING TO SAVE themselves. It seems to me that Buddhism is Satan's grand master-piece—his most successful scheme for deluding and destroying souls." It would do well to note that once again we hear the echoes of an age-old Protestant theme, namely salvation by grace alone. The missionary simply could not have viewed merit making in any other light than as the wrong-headed, Satan-begotten denial of God's grace. Equally to the point, the missionaries consigned those who held such views to the realm of Satan. There could be no compromise with them. There could be no acceptance of their beliefs. All of this points to the rigidly dualistic substrata under girding all of missionary thought. Missionary dualism, rooted in a tradition that went back to Persia, divided the world into antagonistic, mutually exclusive spheres of good and evil, God and Satan, and light and darkness. Within this world view, merit-making and Satan were necessarily linked since the former was taken as a denial of Protestantism's central faith in God's grace.

Source: Mrs. McFarland, "King of Siam on His Way to the Temple," FOREIGN MISSIONARY 34, 1(June 1875), 1-3.

HeRD #S3 - Buddhism & Superstition

The concept of "superstition" here is a broad one, and the term itself is an important cognate for "heathenism." The Presbyterian missionaries generally viewed Buddhism as an irrational, illogical system of thought based on ignorance. They would have expected no more from a religion they considered idolatrous and satanic. Dr. Samuel R. House, thus, wrote in an 1853 letter to the Board of Foreign missions

that the Siamese are "those sitting in the gross darkness of Buddhism ignorant alike of there being a God who made them—and a salvation available without money and without price." We should note here that the image of darkness (and "benighted") is one frequently used in missionary literature. It expresses nicely the rigidly dualistic core of missionary thinking that divided the world into two contending spheres of good and evil. Van Dyke, writing in 1871, captured both these dualistic themes nicely when he describe his "dialogue" with monks in a number of temples he visited while on an evangelistic tour. He wrote, "I endeavored to tell them about Christ and the work of redemption, and also compared the teachings of Buddha with the teachings of Christ, showing that on the one side was only doubt and uncertainty, whilst on the other everything was definite and certain." (p. 110) He adds to the dualistic contrast between superstitious Buddhism and Christianity by emphasizing that there is no doubt in Christianity. Things are sure and certain, as well as reasonable and logical. Letty Snyder, writing at the turn of the century, branded Buddhism as a religion of evasion and legalism and stated, "The inability of the Buddhist to work out his own salvation through his own strength, has led to an elaborate system of evasions with which they delude themselves." (p. 127)

Sources: Samuel R. House, "Annual Report of the Siam Mission for the year ending Sept. 30th 1853," v. 2, Records of the Siam Mission, Board of Foreign Missions, Presbyterian Church U.S.A.; J. W. Van Dyke, undated letter, FOREIGN MISSIONARY 30, 4(September 1871): 109-111; and Letty D. Snyder, "The Buddhist Preaching Service in Siam," WOMAN'S WORK FOR WOMAN 15, 5(May 1900): 126-127.

HeRD #S4 - Buddhism & Idolatry

The Presbyterian missionaries believed that idolatry lay at the heart of Thai Buddhist heathenism and was a chief manifest of its alliance with Satan. Mary Cort wrote in her book SIAM, THE HEART OF FARTHER INDIA, "The Siamese are gross idolaters, worshipping these images and bowing before them with clasped hands and faces to the earth in the most abject manner." She described how the idols were given daily offerings, enthroned with royal ceremonies, carried in processions, and taken into the fields at times of drought. These was sure that only a small number of the most intelligent and highest ranking Siamese could look beyond the image to Buddha as the real object of worship. She concluded, "...the Siamese Buddhist, as a nation, must be classed among veritable pagans." Lillian Curtis in THE LAOS OF NORTH SIAM, picked up on the theme that most Thai Buddhists worshipped the Buddha image as an actual idol. She agreed with Cort that it was only the intelligent and highly spiritual people who could look through the image to the Buddha. But, having given Buddhist practice this small modicum of credit, she cynically and rhetorically asked, "But where are the 'intelligent and highly spiritual' to be found under the fostering care of this religion?" Mary McClure, writing to the Board of Foreign Missions in 1891, picked up on another of Cort's themes, the one about the fields. She related how in a dry spell, the Siamese took their "idols" out into the dry fields and showed them the parched land. Two days later, she wrote, it began to rain and there was sufficient rain thereafter. McClure concluded with disgust, "Poor benighted people, they think those poor dumb idols brought the rain!"

Sources: Mary Lovina Cort, SIAM, THE HEART OF FARTHER INDIA (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1886), p. 122; Curtis, Lillian Johnson, THE LAOS OF NORTH SIAM (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1903), p. 93; and Mary McClure to Mitchell, 23 June 1891, v. 8, no. 61, Records of the Siam & Laos Missions, Board of Foreign Missions, Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

HeRD #S5 - Buddhism & Atheism

The missionary critique of Buddhism repeatedly emphasized Buddhism's failings as a theological system. It is always important to remember that the missionaries took their system of beliefs to be an entirely accurate description of the natural world order. That system was, for them, as solid as rocks, as real as the sky, sea, and earth. They held that their theology was rooted in the very fabric of the natural universe, so that denial of Christian theological principles and doctrines was tantamount to denying the natural order of things. This is one reason why they considered Buddhism superstitious, that is irrational.

The point that concerned the missionaries as much as any other was Buddhism's atheism. Dodd wrote, Buddhism is a "religion without a God." House observed that Buddhism teaches that there is no God, no Creator. The world made itself. He noted that Buddhists actually worship the Buddha and places images of him in every temple; but he was a mere man just like them. He has left this world and now cares nothing for the world or anything else. Though not stated baldly, House is charging Buddhism with being, at one and the same time, an atheistic system because it doesn't recognize God and an idolatrous religion that has replaced God with a human being.

The missionaries believed that "Buddhistic atheism" resulted in terrible consequences. Robert Irwin wrote in 1892 that, "There are many interesting things about the monasteries, but the interest dwindles to nothing before the fact that this mighty atheistic and agnostic system of Buddhism, with its absurd combination of high moral principles and degrading superstitions, holds millions of the human race in the grasp of a cold and heartless belief, giving to some the glimmer of a hope of future nothingness, and that hope based on an impossibility." (p. 127) Dodd echoed Irwin's concerns by arguing that Buddhism is a system of ethics with no moral sanction. He elaborated, "...there is no Giver of moral law; no just Judge of all." He goes on to raise the issue whether an ethical system that has no God, no moral sanctions for its ethics, and no help for humanity other than humanity itself can be properly called a religion. (p. 184)

The missionaries general approach to Thai culture and society grew out of their theological critique of Buddhism. The fact that Buddhism was an atheistic and merit-winning religion necessarily meant that Thailand was, at best, a semi-civilized, inferior country. It was, again necessarily, immoral, degraded, and its people were without hope.

Sources: William C. Dodd to Labaree, 10 May 1897, v. 13, no. 80, Records of the Siam & Laos Missions, Board of Foreign Missions, Presbyterian Church U.S.A.; Samuel R. House, "Cholera-Time in Bangkok," SIAM AND LAOS AS SEEN BY OUR AMERICAN MISSIONARIES (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1884): 241-46; Robert Irwin, "On the Maa Wung River, Below Lakawn," WOMAN'S WORK FOR WOMAN 7, 5(May 1892): 126-127; and, William C. Dodd, quoted in Lillian Johnson Curtis, THE LAOS OF NORTH SIAM (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1903), 184.

HeRD #S6 - Buddhism & Works Righteousness

The missionary measure of Buddhism was inherently Protestant, as may be seen from their arguments concerning merit making. The Rev. Stephen Mattoon wrote in 1853, "Practically the Siamese are Atheists and have no God, or perhaps I should rather say, their real gods are merit and demerit. The former the author of all good, and the latter of all evil." He argued that merit making is the foundation of the Buddhist system and holds a most prominent place in that system. It is more important to Buddhism, according to Mattoon, than the worship of a god or religious system. A person may believe anything, so long as she or he performs meritorious acts. Mattoon argued that merit making in Buddhism holds a place similar to Christ in Christianity, that is, it is the Buddhist hope for this life and the next. He observed that the Siamese spend great amounts of money on merit making. All of it was to no purpose, however; because, as the youngest of his readers realized, everyone is a sinner and none can work out their own reward. Therefore, the Siamese, couldn't be saved by their works-righteousness religion.

According to Mattoon's analysis, the crucial failure of Buddhism was not its atheism. Here, in fact, he treats Buddhism as a theistic religion that has replaced Christ with the false god of works righteousness. He especially objects to the idea that Buddhists can believe whatever they want, as this also diametrically contradicts Protestantism's emphasis on salvation by faith. The Rev. J. L. Hartzell contended that the Buddhist system of belief was a self-reinforcing delusion that blinded the northern Thai people from understanding the Christian message. He wrote, "Buddhism, in which these people were reared, knows nothing of the teaching, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' Every act of worship and every offering is made in the spirit of barter so much merit for so much offering, and one of the hardest things for Christian of this Country to learn is, 'Freely ye have received, freely give.'" Again, it is worth noting the importance the missionaries sometimes assigned to merit making. It reinforced the whole idolatrous system they believed Buddhism to be.

The Presbyterian missionary critique of Buddhism, in sum, was primarily a theological critique, as the various categories we've used here all suggest. Their attitudes about Thai culture and society, it must be emphasized, did not grow out of what we would today consider an empirical inspection those phenomena. From their perspective as Old School Presbyterians, however, the fact that Buddhist thought and practice differed radically from their own entirely justified their negative views on Thai society generally. They generally, if subconsciously, treated their religious beliefs as if they were solid, natural phenomena of the same substance and reality as the natural world. They took their beliefs TO BE PART OF the natural world. Thus, the very fact that Buddhist thinking differed radically from their own proved to them that it must be a false, unnatural, immoral, and anti-God hodge podge of superstition.

Sources: S. Mattoon, letter dated 21 February 1853, in FOREIGN MISSIONARY 12, 4(September 1853): 76-77; and J. L. Hartzell, "The Lakawn City Church," LAOS NEWS, 13 [14], 2(May 1917): 63-67.

HeRD #S7 - Buddhism & Immorality

The Presbyterians in Thailand, in particular, and their American evangelical sub-culture, more generally, made a correlation between Thai religious beliefs and the Thai moral condition. The Thai people didn't know God. Their religion, according to the missionaries, was thus necessarily superstitious. Since they were a people without God and without true religion, it followed, again necessarily, that they were immoral as well. Cort in HEART OF FATHER INDIA again provides an especially articulate rendition of missionary thinking. She held that Thai Buddhism was selfish, indolent, indifferent, and vice-ridden. "Nipon" (nirvana) offered nothing more than a cheerless, hopeless future. Of the Thai she wrote, "As they know not the real God, and will not love and serve Him, they have exalted Buddha far beyond his deserts, and attribute to him many superhuman qualities." This ignorance and false adoration of the merely human, in Cort's estimation, was the source of the "gloom and darkness" surrounding the missionaries. Even the priests were ignorant, and she argued that, "Every act of a Buddhist's life is a selfish one, and is believed in some unknown way to augment his merit." (p. 117) In sum, according to Cort, the whole Buddhist system was "rotten and dead." It lacked good fruits, justice, mercy, love, and a purity of heart and life. (p. 120) All of this was proof of the old adage that one rotten apple spoils the whole barrel. In this case, the offending apple was atheism and the consequence for the barrel was a rotting morality.

HeRD #S8 - Depths of Feeling

However we might feel about missionary views on Buddhism, it is important from a historical point of view to understand the depth to which they felt those views. Missionary views about Buddhism were not simply "theological" or "intellectual." They felt a revulsion for it that was as much emotional as anything else. In 1897 the Rev. Hugh Taylor was out touring. When people he met on tour asked him why he had come he explained that he visited them to tell them about religion. They would ask, "What religion?" And he answered, "The Christian religion." He would then tell them about God and sing for them a hymn. He wrote, "This is a strange sound in Laos ears, for they have no music. Buddhism crushes out all the music from the soul. We pray—a strange sound in Laos ears, for in their prayers is no tone of belief, no expectation of answer." (pp. 292-93) This is how most missionaries experienced Buddhism themselves, as a crushing force, a dead weight that squeezed from people all of their songs and all of their hopes. It is, of course, ridiculous to say of any people that "they have no music." At a deeper level, however, Taylor meant they had no SACRED music that SOUNDED like music to him. He could not have accepted the chants of Buddhist ritual as "real" music. At the very least, Buddhism inspired a sense of distaste, and in the more extreme cases the missionaries looked upon it with real loathing. It stood for everything they abhorred.

Source: Hugh Taylor, untitled, WOMAN'S WORK FOR WOMAN 12, 11(November 1897): 292-93.