

The Playboy Bunny and Contextualization

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I see it all over the place. It's on T-shirts, handbags, motorcycles, car windows and wherever else is fashionable. The image of the Playboy Bunny seems to be everywhere in Thailand these days. However, I suspect that most Thais are not aware that it is the official symbol of a well known pornography magazine. A young woman at church was wearing a stylish t-shirt with the Playboy bunny on the front and asked her if she knew where the rabbit picture comes from. She replied, "No" and I explained that it is the symbol used by a well known

pornography magazine in America. "Oh" she responded uninterestedly, "I didn't know that". I thought that perhaps I had been unclear in my explanation so I went on, "When Westerners see this rabbit picture they are reminded of a magazine with naked women in it. A pornography magazine." She still seemed unconcerned that she had the logo of a porn mag emblazoned on the front of her shirt. "Why do you like the rabbit picture?" I inquired further. At this point, I might have guessed her reply. "It's cute. I like it."

Regardless of its original context, the rabbit image of the Playboy Bunny has been imported into Thailand and turned into a popular fashion image in a way that has no relation to pornography. On the one hand, I suppose that this is a good thing in the sense that the image itself has been redeemed and disassociated with its sleazy origin. On the other hand, I don't think that I will ever be able to see that symbol without thinking, "That's from a porn magazine". Even if I was into the latest fashions, I don't think I would ever want to own or use any product with that label on it because of the association that I make with it. Maybe some people can get past that (and that is fine), and apparently many Thai think nothing of the Playboy Bunny more than merely being a cute symbol. In their cultural background, the Playboy Bunny means nothing but I would never use it because in my cultural background it does. It is not a right or wrong issue but merely a cultural issue. Although, in my culture, it's wrong. As much as I would like to see the Playboy Bunny disappear from Thai fashion, it is the Thais themselves who make the decision as to what they will (and will not) import from other countries and cultures and how they will use it. Many times, imports from elsewhere take on a life of their own in new soil and whoever originated the item has no control over how it is used or adapted.

Related to the contextualization of the Christian message and church practice, as a missionary I may see some sort of practice or custom in Thai religion that could be adapted and redeemed for use in Thai Christian practice. As an outsider, I may think to myself, "This is a great idea. Adapting this existing Thai Buddhist practice for use in the

church will reduce the foreignness of Christianity and help Thai Christians to be more Thai.” Perhaps it is a good idea or perhaps it is not, but if Thai Christians don’t want to use it because of its previous association with Buddhist or animistic practice, then it’s not going to work. As an outsider, I may have some ideas for contextualization but in the end it is the Thai themselves who need to live with whatever way church is to be done in Thailand. An outsider’s perspective can be helpful in thinking things through and making suggestions but the insider’s perspective is equally, if not more important, in deciding what is going to be the best way to live out the truth of Scripture in the Thai context.

With that said, the fate of the Playboy Bunny symbol in Thailand needs to be decided by the Thai themselves. Maybe many don’t care - or won’t care that it did come from a porn magazine originally, even if they knew. It doesn’t mean much of anything in the Thai context so if Thai folks want to wear the bunny, that’s fine. However, if I were to meet a Thai exchange student in America who was wearing a Playboy Bunny shirt that she brought with her from Thailand, I would do all that I can to let her know what that symbol is communicating to those around her and let her know the potential trouble it could invite. If she chooses to continue to wear it after that, that’s up to her, but I would at least want her to know that in America, the Playboy Bunny symbol is not just a cute rabbit picture.