

Fetuses in a Thai Buddhist Temple as Chaotic Irruption and Public Embarrassment

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Abstract

In late 2010, about 2000 human fetuses were discovered in the mortuary of a Buddhist temple in Bangkok. This article examines the subsequent affair from two perspectives: the magico-religious and the socio-political. The first deals with the fetuses as a symbol: it examines the beliefs regarding fetuses in Buddhism and Thai folk religion, and the manner with which the irruption of the fetuses into the Buddhist temple was dealt with. The second deals with the fetuses as an exposure of a widespread social problem with complex legal and social policy implications, and the way the authorities treated it. The two perspectives are related through Buddhism, which helped to resolve the magico-religious issue of dispatching the fetuses' spirits, while constituting a barrier to the resolution of the socio-political issue of change in the Thai abortion law. This created an irresolvable conundrum: the issue of abortion cannot be resolved in a sustainable way without affecting some of the fundamental premises on which Thailand's abortion law and its "regime of images" is based. The authorities preferred to uphold the law and sustain the image, rather

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than to resolve the basic underlying problem of which the discovered fetuses were just the most blatant symptom. This problem is the discrepancy between the restrictive abortion law and current sexual practices, which have engendered a growing demand for abortions by the younger generation of Thai urbanites.