

An Exploration of the Place of Buddhism in the Tham Luang Cave Rescue and Its Aftermath

Authors : Hamish de Nett

Abstract : On 23rd June 2018, twelve young footballers from the Wild Boar Academy and their coach went to explore the Tham Luang cave in the Doi Nang Non mountain range in Chiang Rai Province, Northern Thailand. Whilst they were inside the cave, monsoon rains hit, and the complex became partially flooded. In the following days, Thai Navy SEALs and an international team of expert divers assembled at the cave complex in order to rescue the boys. Although it was only marginally reported in the Western press, Buddhism and ritual activities played a major role in the rescue and its aftermath. This paper utilises numerous news articles and books written by reporters who covered the cave rescue to uncover what the place of Buddhism was in the Tham Luang cave rescue. This paper initially sets out the development of Thai Buddhism and the Thai nation state, paying particular note to the tension in Thai Buddhism between Buddhism as it is popularly practised and normative, state-favoured Buddhism. Secondly, this paper demonstrates that, during the Tham Luang cave rescue, Buddhism helped people cope with the disaster, provided an explanation for its occurrence, and allowed bystanders some efficacy in the process. Thirdly, this paper discusses how Buddhism helped people to give thanks after the rescue, achieve reconciliation, and gain closure. Finally, this paper analyses how the government and the political sphere utilised Buddhism during the rescue. The conclusion reached is that the Buddhism practiced during the Tham Luang cave rescue and its aftermath is representative of the wider tension between popular Buddhism and normative state-favoured Buddhism that is currently present within Thai Buddhism and has been for centuries.

Keywords : cave rescue, contemporary Buddhism, lived religion, Thai Buddhism, Tham Luang cave rescue

Conference Title : ICBB 2019 : International Conference on Buddhism and Buddha

Conference Location : London, United Kingdom

Conference Dates : November 18-19, 2019