

THE “TOUCHDOWN JESUS,” GIGANTIC STATUES, AND SPIRITUAL TITANISM

By Nick Gier

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Christ became man so that we might become God

--Church Father Athanasius

Shouldn't we be a little past making statues and
icons of God and worshiping humans as Gods?

--Reader comment on the demise of the “Touchdown Jesus”

The more notable a statue is, the more people
will hear of it, see it, and have the chance to benefit from it.

--Justification for the 500-foot Buddha of the Maitreya Project



The 62-foot Jesus statue (left) erected by Monroe, Ohio’s Solid Rock Baptist Church went up in flames on the night of June 14. It is not the first religious statue to be hit by lightning, but complete destruction, as in this case, is rare. For their story in *The Washington Post* the two reporters



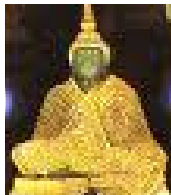
found that in 2008 the world-famous 130-foot Christ the Redeemer (left) above Rio de Janeiro was just “singed on the eyebrows and fingers.” In 2007 a heavenly bolt severed the arm and damaged the feet of a 33-foot Christ outside of Golden, Colorado.



In Wikipedia's list of tallest statues there are 28 devoted to Jesus or Mary and only two are higher than 100 feet. In Asia there are 69 Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu statues taller than Ohio's "Touchdown Jesus," so named because of his triumphant, up-stretched arms. The Spring Temple Buddha (left) in Lushan, China is the highest at 420 feet. There are six over 300 feet, seven over 200 feet, and 23 over 100 feet. Except for a large Thai Buddha statue that was destroyed by lightning in the 16th Century, all of these colossi have successfully braved the elements in a climate just as prone to violent thunder storms as the American Mid-West.



The huge Bamiyan Buddhas (175-feet [image left]/120 feet) in Afghanistan survived for 1,500 years until they were destroyed in 2001--not by natural or supernatural forces--but by Taliban artillery and sappers. (The face was chiseled off by Muslim invaders in the 11th Century.) Similarly, in 1937 an 80-foot Maitreya Buddha in Mongolia was brought down by godless Communists not divine wrath.



Lightning was actually the savior for one Buddhist statue. In 1434 the Emerald Buddha (left), the most precious object in Thailand, was liberated from its plaster cast by a bolt of lightning. Buddhist monks, who had disguised the statue to prevent theft, took this as a sign that the 21-inch-tall statue ought to be publicly displayed. Today visitors from all over the world throng to see the object that embodies the sovereignty of the Thai kingdom.

Some observers are wondering why the gigantic Hustler Hollywood sign for a porno shop across the street from Solid Rock Baptist was not hit instead. God must indeed have an odd sense of humor. Eliminating the factor that church steeples attract lightning, a study done of tornado damage showed that the twisters touched down far more often on churches than taverns and houses of prostitution.

The *Washington Post* story on the Touchdown Jesus opened with: "It appears God has sacrificed his only son. Again." Two readers objected that this lead was "tacky, tasteless, and mocking" and did not belong in the "On Faith" section. Darlene Bishop, co-pastor of Solid Rock Baptist, appears to reject this charge of blasphemy. She told her parishioners that "Jesus took a hit for you last night." Her view is that Jesus, in the form of the \$250,000 structure, sacrificed himself so that the church could survive.

The insurance company involved will of course declare the strike an "act of God." Another reader of the *Washington Post* article agrees: "God is real! He had this statue made so he could destroy it and awaken the nation whom he and he alone founded!" Another person on the

Post's blog believed that this was punishment for the church's hubris, the over-weening pride made famous in the Greek story of Prometheus, the Titan who dared to challenge Zeus.

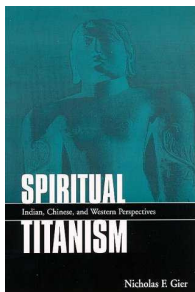
Early in my academic career I started a 20-year study of hubris and the world religions. The result was a book entitled *Spiritual Titanism*, which I define as an extreme form of humanism in which humans take on divine attributes and prerogatives. For the book's cover I



chose an image of a 59-foot statue of a well endowed and naked Jain saint in Southern India. Image on left: Jain Saint Bahubali, Shravanabelgola, Karnataka State, India.

One of the conclusions of my book was that orthodox Christianity is not guilty of spiritual Titanism, because God is always in control and humans are innately finite and imperfect. If we are made, as the Apostle Paul promises, "new beings in Christ," it is God that does it not us. This is how we should understand the famous statement by the early Church father Athanasius: "Christ became man so that we might become God."

Some Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists, however, believe that human beings, on their own initiative and power, can make themselves into pure spiritual beings. As one Jain philosopher states: "Our saints attained fullest self-realization and absolute perfection, bringing out to the full the divinity and godhood inherent in man." For some Buddhists and Jains their saints are much greater than the gods.



The Jain statue on my book cover has stood unmolested for a 1,000 years, and an even taller 82-foot statue of a Jain saint in Northern India has stood unharmed since the 12th Century. Evidently, the heavenly powers do not seem to be angry at such displays of extreme humanism. They certainly do not appear to mind the 7 foot penis on the 59-foot statue, which my prudish editors at State University of New York Press discreetly covered up by the title of my book. See image on left.



In the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh Tibetan Buddhists are planning to build a gigantic statue of the Maitreya Buddha, who just like Christ, promises to come in the future to save humankind. The statue (left) will be 500 feet tall--80 feet higher than the Spring Temple Buddha in China--and will be the main feature of a large cultural and educational center. Weighing in at 1,000 tons this Maitreya Buddha will dwarf the 8-ton Touchdown Jesus.

On the website of the Maitreya Project, the expense and effort is justified as follows: "The more notable a statue is, the more people will hear of it,

see it, and have the chance to benefit from it. The project intends to bring as much benefit as possible--spiritually, in education and healthcare, and economically--through the direct and indirect creation of employment opportunities in northern India.”

Vietnamese businessman Dao Trong Cuong is a veritable Titan. Claiming that he likes “big, manly things,” he was the first--at the cost of \$300,000--to import a Hummer into Vietnam. Owner of a gem mine, Dao has announced plans to carve the world’s largest jade Buddha. “We hope to get it into the Guinness Book of World Records,” bragged Dao. Dao is so wrapped up in himself that he neglected to do a google search, which shows that China has the largest jade Buddha at 261 tons. His 20 ton statue will be a midget compared to the Anshan Buddha in Liaoning Province.

Gigantic religious statues say a lot more about the egos of devotees rather than the nature of the gods they worship. I’m certain that Jesus and the Buddha would be really embarrassed by these expressions of Spiritual Titanism. The Buddha would also be upset by his deification and unnecessary magnification in many Buddhist schools.

There may be no supernatural powers and the relatively few Asian statues destroyed may just be the result of nature’s roll of the dice. But if there is a God who intervenes in nature and history, there is one theological lesson that we could draw. It is not so much uppity humans that God dislikes; rather, it is a religion that describes God as vindictive and wrathful, as the *Washington Post* blogger wrote above. Another reader takes a slightly different but similar line: “Well, isn't that just like the Judeo-Christian God? We act up but Jesus takes the hit.”

There is also one practical lesson that we can draw. The Asian statues are made of stone, and one would have thought that the Solid Rock Baptists would know from Jesus’ teachings that a statue built mostly of wood, styrofoam, and fiberglass would simply not last. The Solid Rock pastor reassured a distraught parishioner: “Honey, it’s just some fiberglass,” so a *Washington Post* blogger may be forgiven for exclaiming “He is Resin!” Solid rock Buddhas stand the tests of time, but a fiberglass Jesus is no match for the great forces of Mother Nature, blessed be her name!

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.