

BANGKOK CATHOLIC VIEWS ON THE BUDDHIST CONCEPTS OF KARMA AND REBIRTH

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ABSTRACT

The idea karma, and the ensuing concept of rebirth, is central to Buddhism. It is something taken for granted in Buddhist societies, and scholars have long recognized this. For example, Étienne Lamotte, writing as early as in 1935, said, “The doctrine of the act, karman, is the keystone of the entire Buddhist edifice; the act is the ultimate explanation of existences and of the world.”

For Christianity, on the other hand, no such idea exists. It does not feature in its teachings; neither does it occur in conversations, unless those Christians are influenced by Buddhism, or any other religion or culture that has the idea of karma. What about Christian minorities in predominantly Buddhist societies? They would probably be familiar with the idea of karma. However, being familiar does not amount to accepting it, or believing in it. This article examines the views and attitudes of Bangkok Catholics on the issue of karma and rebirth.

The article will first look into the meaning of karma and its related conception – rebirth – and especially their meanings in Buddhism. Next, it will look into the attitudes of Thai Catholics, a tiny religious minority, toward karma and rebirth. This is done through qualitative interviews with a sample of Thai Catholics living in the Thai capital of Bangkok. Findings from the interviews will then be analyzed in terms of Catholic teachings and the significance of a Catholic minority living within a predominantly Buddhist society.

Karma and Rebirth in Buddhism

Karma can be generally defined as action and its moral results or consequences. According to the Encyclopedia of Buddhism, “Karma is ‘deed’ or ‘action,’ and the accumulated results of action” which “is a widespread concept used to explain events.”¹ The New Catholic Encyclopedia states that karma “literally means ‘action,’ it came to ... signify the chain of cause and effect by which every action necessarily produces a given effect.”² According to the Dictionary of Buddhism, “The doctrine of karma states the implications for ethics of the basic universal law of Dharma, one aspect of which is that freely chosen and intended moral acts inevitably entail consequences.”³ Furthermore, the Encyclopedia of Rebirth and Karma states that “karma is the moral and/or ethical behavior that influences the quality of a person’s past, present, and future lives.”⁴

From the last quote, we can see that karma is intimately connected, or intertwined, with rebirth. This is confirmed by Gananath Obeyesekere, who states that “karma as ethical compensation and reward is intrinsically associated with rebirth,” that “in Buddhism karma refers to intentional ethical action that determines the nature and place of rebirth,” and that Buddhism has “karma and rebirth at the center of (its) eschatological thinking.”⁵ According to the Encyclopedia of Buddhism, “the Buddha stated that karma causes results in this life, the next lifetime, and all successive births.”⁶ The New Catholic Encyclopedia states that the “chain of cause and effect was believed to extend beyond the individual life-span, so that each man’s character and fortune is determined by his past action or karma in a previous life.”⁷

There is no question for the Buddhist as to the existence of past lives, the present life, and future lives for any particular person. It is taken for granted. And these are all tied in with the concept of karma. On the other hand, both karma and rebirth are foreign to Christianity.

Thailand’s Christian Minority

Among Thailand’s population of 69.5 million, 94.6% are Buddhists while Christians comprise only 1%,⁸ and of this 1% around half are Catholics. Two things are of note in the situation of

¹ Irons 2008, 276

² Carson 2003, Vol. 8, 130

³ Keown 2003, 137

⁴ McClelland 2010, 5

⁵ Obeyesekere 2002, 1-2

⁶ Irons 2008, 277

⁷ Carson 2003, Vol. 8, 130

⁸ These figures are the latest according to the CIA World Factbook. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/thailand/#people-and-society>

Thailand. First is that Buddhism dominates the life of the nation not only in terms of the numbers of Buddhist persons but also in terms of very visible manifestations of the life of the nation; for instance, public ceremonies and rituals, public celebrations, and public holidays. In public conversations, it is no surprise that Buddhist concepts like karma and rebirth feature as a matter of fact. Second, the miniscule number of Christians are spread throughout the country and are much assimilated into the mainstream Thai Buddhist culture. They can be said to be fully Thai culturally, and indeed outwardly there is nothing that distinguishes a Christian from a Buddhist. The question, then, is: What of Thai Christians' understanding and acceptance of such Buddhist concepts as karma and rebirth? Do they take on the stand, as faithful Christians, of rejecting these as belonging to a different religion from their own? Or do they embrace these as part of their culture and identity as a Thai national? This study attempts to shed some light into this.

Research Findings

The study limits its scope to some Catholics in Bangkok and is done by means of qualitative interviews. The sampling was done through snowball sampling method, resulting in data from 24 Thai Catholics, who were aged from 20s to 60s, roughly half of whom were women and the other half men. They were asked the question: "Do you believe in karma and rebirth? Explain." They were allowed to speak freely on the topics. The respondents are named, albeit with nicknames that are not their real ones.

Many respondents had a lot to say about both concepts. Nevertheless, their responses were simplified and summarized in the table below. In this summary and simplification, each subject's responses were grouped into whether they believe, do not believe, or believe with qualifications or were tentative in their response, for both the concepts of karma and rebirth.

	Karma				Rebirth		
	Believe	Maybe/ Believe with Conditions	Do not believe		Believe	Maybe/ Not sure	Do not believe
Yo	√					√	
Pitt			√			√	
Nai	√					√	
Boon		√				√	
Wat	√					√	
Net	√					√	
Law			√			√	

Wor		√				√
Nahm	√				√	
See		√				√
Som			√			√
Lai	√				√	
Ting		√				√
Than		√				√
Jo	√					√
Rin	√					√
Nee	√					√
Dee	√				√	
Ran	√				√	
Lee			√			√
Teen	√				√	
Char	√				√	
Pim		√			√	
Ling			√			√

Table 1: Respondents' Answers to Believing in Karma and Rebirth

It can be observed that a high number – 19 out of 24 – of respondents said they either believed in karma or believed with some conditions, while a substantial number – 17 out of 24 – said they rejected rebirth. Recalling that Buddhism meshes together the concepts of karma and rebirth, we can tentatively say that our Thai Catholics make a clear distinction between the two concepts.

Karma

Many of the respondents who said they believed in karma explained that it refers to one's actions and the results of the actions. In this sense, their understanding of the term is in accordance with the original meaning of the term, and no different from the Buddhist understanding of the term. For example, "Karma is exactly what you do" (Yo), "It's the result of action" (Nai), "It's responsibility; what one has done" (Wat), "Whatever we do we will get the result" (Net), "Whatever we've done, we will receive the result" (Nahm), "The consequences for our actions ... if we do good, goodness will be in our hearts; so good karma, good things will come to us (See), "What you do wrong, you have to be responsible for that" (Lai), "If you do something good, you will get a good result" (Than), "If we do good things we receive good; it's like the truth" (Ya), "You reap what you sow; karma is an action" (Nee), "All people have that (karma); you want to (do a) bad thing, that's already bad karma" (Dee), "It was taught in the Bible too; whatever you sow, you reap" (Ran).

We observe that a couple of respondents link karma directly to the biblical teaching: “A man will reap only what he sows.”⁹ In fact, all the other responses to the meaning of karma are variations of this. We can see here that a totally foreign term is appropriated by Thai Catholics to refer to a Christian teaching. This could be done because the meaning of the term has an equivalent in Christianity. Whether or not the term “karma” is ever used in catechism, in religious instructions by catechists and religious leaders, is not known. In any case, the term is well known among Thai Catholics as it is a common word that can occur in everyday conversations among Thais of any religion. The Catholics have appropriated the term and have equated it to an important teaching in their own religion. Furthermore, Nai elaborated that both Buddhists and Christians have embraced this teaching and encapsulated it in an oft-repeated Thai phrase, “ทำดี ได้ดี ทำชั่ว ได้ชั่ว” (tham dee dai dee tham chua dai chua), literally “do good get good, do evil get evil.”

However, a few of the respondents who were more tentative in saying they believed in karma made it clear that they were fully aware that “karma” is a Buddhist, not a Christian, term. They also attempted to explain their understanding of the term as a Buddhist term. Most in this category tried to rationalize why Buddhists commonly use the term and concept. Than, for example, said it is a simple way of teaching what is good and what is bad. Boon saw the teaching of karma to be functional. He said it is a way to explain to simple-minded people why they were born in a certain state in life; in other words, why they were born into either fortunate or unfortunate circumstances. He added that the impact of this way of looking at karma can be positive or negative. The positive impact is when people are galvanized to do good work – to accumulate good karma so that they can have a better next life; the negative impact is when they grow complacent about improving their lives, since it is already determined by one’s karma. “Karma becomes the blame for everything, the answer to everything,” he concluded. He nevertheless believed in the concept and original meaning of karma in accordance with Christian teaching, if not the negative connotations of the term that Thai Buddhists often refer to.

Among the few who said they categorically did not believe in karma, a few pointed out that the idea simply does not exist in Christianity. Pitt, for example, said the concept of karma

⁹ Galatians 6:7. Even though this specific passage in the New Testament is often quoted by Christians to encapsulate a core religious teaching, the idea of reaping what one sows is a common theme throughout the Bible – in both the Old and New Testaments. This imagery is not surprising given the agricultural society of biblical times.

is not compatible with Christian teaching. “They have their own belief system ... We believe in God which is much above that.” Similarly, Law said the beliefs of the two religions are different.

Whether or not a respondent said they believe in karma does not in any way reflect different beliefs among the Catholics. There was no sign that any of the Catholic respondents did not believe in Catholic teaching. This is rather a question of usage of a term – karma. While most have assimilated the term into their Catholic worldview, albeit some cautiously so, a few just did not want to use a “foreign” term altogether.

Rebirth

Having said that many Catholics have appropriated the Buddhist term and concept of karma, it is apparent that not its entire meaning has been appropriated. This is reflected in the large proportion of respondents who said they did not believe in rebirth (17 respondents), while the rest (7 respondents) were unsure and left it an open question. None of the respondents said they categorically believed in rebirth. Most of those who said they don’t believe in rebirth cited that it is not part of the Catholic faith.

For those who were tentative or not sure about rebirth, their explanations were varied. Two respondents – Lai and Pim – alluded to the view that as a minority, Catholics have to respect Buddhism and its teachings: “It’s individual opinion, maybe. I don’t want to meddle with Buddhist (beliefs)” (Pim); “I don’t want to attack ... only know God” (Lai). Leaving the issue “to God” was also expressed by Char, who said, “Under God, anything’s possible ... who are we to set a limit to what God can and cannot do?”

Two other respondents had more unusual ideas about rebirth. Ran equated rebirth with the Catholic belief in purgatory. She said that “purgatory is another lifetime” where purification takes place because in Christianity, “you cannot meet God, you cannot join with God, if you (still) have some sin.” The New Catholic Encyclopedia explains purgatory as follows:

According to the teaching of the Church, the state, place, or condition in the next world, which will continue until the last judgment, where the souls of those who die in the state of grace, but not yet free from all imperfection, make expiation for unforgiven venial sins or for the temporal punishment due to venial and

mortal sins that have already been forgiven and, by so doing, are purified before they enter heaven.¹⁰

The Catechism of the Catholic Church mentions purgatory in the following context:

Every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the "temporal punishment" of sin.¹¹

If we take the above descriptions of purgatory, we see that Ran did not express any view that is definitively contradictory to them. The phrase "state, place, or condition in the next world," or "after death in the state called Purgatory," though generally not thought of by Catholics as being reincarnated as another being on earth, is open to interpretation and speculation. Moreover, the firm belief among Christians that "anything is possible with God,"¹² as mentioned before by Char, can neutralize any objection to the opinion that being reincarnated in the Buddhist sense can never be considered purgatory in the Catholic sense.

Another interesting interpretation of rebirth came from Nahm, a convert from Buddhism. "I believe I had past lives according to karma. But now that I have become a Christian, the cycle stops. There will be no future lives for me because Jesus took the load of karma off me." We see that even after converting to Christianity, she did not abandon the belief in rebirth per se but rather considered that rebirth no longer applied to her, though she implicitly implied that it still applied to Buddhists. This means, first, that for her not all human beings have the same ontological status, and second, that each one's ontological status depends on the religion that they embrace. While she believed that she had past lives, having been reincarnated repeatedly, her present status as a Christian has the effect of stopping the operation of karma, and the ensuing necessity of rebirth.

We have seen that in Buddhism rebirth is inextricably linked to karma. However, not a few of our respondents actually denied this. Claiming to speak for Buddhism, they said belief in rebirth is not in accordance with "true" Buddhist teaching, or "real" Buddhism. Invariably, these respondents are in the category of those who said they categorically did not believe in rebirth. An example is Wor, who said, "The real Buddhists don't believe in this (rebirth)."

¹⁰ Carson 2003, Vol. 11, 824

¹¹ https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P4G.HTM

¹² See Matthew 19:26, Luke 1:37

Law, another convert from Buddhism and claiming she had learned the Buddhist meaning of karma from her late father, who was a teacher of Buddhism, said descriptions of karma and related concepts are “symbolic” and that “real Buddhists” don’t believe that karma results in rebirth, as in being reborn again and again in this world. Rather, rebirth is a metaphor of our repeated vain actions and inclinations throughout this one earthly life. Nai had a similar interpretation of rebirth. He said it is a way of describing life as a cycle in the sense that being born and dying is a daily event. This, he compared to the Christian idea of dying to oneself and rising to life with Christ as a daily event.¹³ In Christian teaching, dying to oneself, or denying oneself, (taking up one’s cross), is a necessary daily action in order to rise with Jesus Christ in his Resurrection. This is most often interpreted as one’s daily battle of keeping in check one’s base desires and inclinations, aspiring to higher spiritual and moral goals.

One interesting Gospel text was brought up by Nee in the discussion on rebirth. Though she did not believe in rebirth, she mentioned the account of the conversation between Jesus and his three closest Apostles after his Transfiguration on a mountain. The account in the Gospel is as follows:

The disciples put this question to him: “Why do the scribes claim that Elijah must come first?” In reply he said: “Elijah is indeed coming, and he will restore everything. I assure you, though, that Elijah has already come, but they did not recognize him and they did as they pleased with him. The Son of Man will suffer at their hands in the same way.” The disciples then realized that he had been speaking to them about John the Baptizer.¹⁴

This passage speaks as if it was natural to believe that Elijah would be reborn and indeed was reborn as John the Baptizer. Another Gospel passage that speaks of something similar is as follows:

When Jesus came to the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples this question: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They

¹³ See 1 Corinthians 15:31, Galatians 6:14, Matthew 16:24, Luke 9:23.

¹⁴ Matthew 17: 10-13. Other parts of the Gospel tell of John the Baptizer being the one who comes before Jesus to prepare the way, and also the one who baptized Jesus. John was later beheaded by King Herod Antipas.

replied, “Some say John the Baptizer, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “And you,” he said to them, “who do you say that I am?”¹⁵

To be sure, the purpose of the dialogue in this text is to prepare his disciples for the revelation of the identity of Jesus, and certainly not a discussion on rebirth. However, we cannot fail to notice the people’s apparent belief that prophets might be reborn. The Church has no teaching on rebirth and it is generally not even a theological question. This has been implied by many of our respondents. However, the presence of this biblical passage and perhaps a few others show why rebirth cannot be categorically dismissed as a concept that is totally alien in Christianity.

Conclusion

From our findings and discussion, we can draw two broad conclusions. First is the appropriation of Buddhist terminology for a concept that can fit in with Catholic values. Karma, a term totally foreign to Christianity, has no problem finding Catholic expression as its fundamental meaning – action and the result of action – finds an equivalent to the Christian teaching: As you sow, so shall you reap. Because it has equivalence to a very important value and teaching in Christianity, Thai Catholics, who live in a Buddhist milieu, can accept the term and may even use the term for themselves, though not officially.

Notwithstanding its acceptance, the meaning attached to the term would only go as far as what is permissible in Catholicism. Rebirth, as a natural extension of karma in Buddhism, is not accepted by Thai Catholics as integral to the meaning of karma, as it has no place in Catholic teaching and doctrine. This leads to the second conclusion, which is that a minority of Catholics find ways, some perhaps more creative than others, of integrating rebirth, a belief so common and widespread in the larger Buddhist society, into their own belief system by taking on a certain interpretation, or reinterpretation, of Catholic beliefs and teaching.

This is done in several ways. Some rationalize that rebirth does have a Catholic equivalent: the idea of death and resurrection, which is central to the Christian faith and encapsulated as a singular event in the life of Jesus Christ but which faithful Christians are to imitate and live out in spirit in their daily lives. Another way is to consider rebirth as equivalent to purgatory, a specifically Catholic concept.¹⁶ Still another way is to consider rebirth, as

¹⁵ Matthew 16: 13-14

¹⁶ Protestants generally do not believe in purgatory but assert that after death only heaven or hell awaits.

commonly believed by Buddhists, to be a possibility even for Christianity, based on some cursory glances at some biblical narratives. This shows that the idea might not be too foreign in the context of the cultural environments where Christianity developed. Indeed, the Encyclopedia of Rebirth and Karma states that “variations on these themes have played a key role in the thought of the ancient Greeks, the Celts, the medieval Cathars, Jewish Kabbalists,”¹⁷ among others. Finally, the possibility of rebirth, as with any possibility, cannot be categorically dismissed on the grounds of the firm Christian assertion that nothing is impossible for God.

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¹⁷ McClelland 2010, 3.