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THEMED COLLECTION:
THE TURN TO LIFE, PART 2

Karma and grace

Rivalrous reckonings of fortune and misfortune

Neena Mahadev, *Yale-NUS College*

Karma and grace are grammars for material and moral being, each offering onto-cosmological justification for the vicissitudes of destiny. Beyond their scriptural renderings, karma and grace are vernacular cosmologies, which in Sri Lanka, are engaged as repertoires of judgment, reckoning, and discernment of causes of fortune and misfortune. This paper ventures to compare and contrast karma and grace. It queries the agonistic intersection between evangelical imperatives towards Christian proselytism and conversion, and nationalistic imperatives to maintain the Buddhist heritage of Sri Lanka. Pentecostal-charismatic Christians extol conversion as discontinuity, which rests upon surrender to grace. Dedicated Buddhists, in contrast, consider one's life-conditions as righteously inherited through a karmically-governed cosmos, and thus place great value upon religio-moral continuity. In agonistic interchanges between Buddhist nationalists and Christian evangelists in Sri Lanka, we see how karma and grace may be seen as constituting two competing economies of religious belonging.

Keywords: Buddhism, Christianity, theodicy, economic ethics, ontologies of religious belonging

> *If the general term "fortune" covers all the "good" of honor, power, possession, and pleasure, it is the most general formula for the service of legitimation, which religion has had to accomplish for the external and the inner interests of all ruling men, the propertied, the victorious, and the healthy. In short, religion provides the theodicy of good fortune for those who are fortunate. This theodicy is anchored in highly robust ("pharisaical") needs of man and is therefore easily understood, even if sufficient attention is often not paid to its effects.*
> Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of World Religions"

> *We reckon the value of a thing by that which a wise man will give for it, who is not ignorant of it nor under necessity. Christ, the Wisdom of God, gave Himself, His own precious blood, to redeem souls, and He knew what they were and had no need of them.*
> Matthew Henry, "The worth of the soul," *Works of the Puritan divines*

> *For every Buddhist is like a trader who keeps a ledger, with a regular debtor and creditor account, and a daily entry of profit and loss. He must not take, make, or hoard money. He is forbidden to store up a money-balance in a worldly bank, but he is urged to be constantly accumulating merit-balance in the bank of Karma.*
> Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *Buddhism. In its connexion with Brahmanism and Hinduism, and in its contrast with Christianity*

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Miracles of divine grace and congealed karmic benevolence

The massive waves of the tsunami spared New Covenant Church,[1] "by a miracle of God's grace," many of my Sri Lankan Pentecostal interlocutors told me. In 2009, a few years after the disaster, I met the Pastor who they celebrated for shielding the Church from the waves. Pastor Jayanth described to me how he sprang to action in the midst of that Sunday's service, the day after Christmas, to channel grace through his prayers. He prayed as he watched the first massive wave, and later, a second, approach. His prayerful beseechments were rewarded when the black waters were funneled down into a sinkhole that miraculously appeared alongside the Church. The otherwise treacherous waves had demolished the neighboring buildings. He retold the story, just as he had told a BBC2 News documentary crew which had come to Sri Lanka to cover cases of "religious resilience" and miracles in tsunami-affected areas in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. BBC reporters dubbed Pastor Jayanth the littoral city's "Miracle Man." The publicity afforded to the Pastor brought several newcomers to the Pentecostal Church. In one instance, a Christian pastor of a nearby mainline denominational church that had faced faltering attendance credited Pastor Jayanth for bringing renewed attention to his ministry. But in the main, the abundance of attention to the church stoked skepticism and jealousy, and inflamed rivalries, or at least, sheer annoyance, among clergy of neighboring Christian establishments. What is more, the Pastor's evangelical recruitment, and the voluminous sounds of charismatic worship emanating from the church, had on many occasions prior, aggravated animosities held by dedicated Buddhists who are averse to the renewed growth of Christianity in Sri Lanka that has been especially apparent over the last couple of decades.

With 30,000 people killed by the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka alone, few Sri Lankans were without harrowing stories of the disaster, experienced by themselves or by loved ones. Sinhala Buddhists tended to differently recount, and account for, loss and miraculous survival, than did Sri Lankan Christians. In lamenting over the death of loved ones, Sinhala men and women often engaged Buddhist discourses of karma, to explain tragedy and survival. Occasionally, they expressed what appeared like karmic self-righteousness, attributing the fact that they had been spared, compared to less fortunate neighbors, to their own meritorious action carried out in some past life (*puñña karmēyā*). More often though, Sri Lankan Buddhists lamented for their loved ones with resignation over the fact that some unknown karmic demerit once committed had played out, as consequence, through the catastrophe. They generally considered the specificities of those past actions to be unknowable, given the non-linearity of karmic cause and effect. Nevertheless, as anthropologists working in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami have shown, fishing communities in Theravadin contexts of Thailand and Sri Lanka applied karmic theodicy to understand their collective fates, attributing their misfortune to the demerits (*akusula pīn*) accrued by killing fish, in defiance of the Buddhist injunction against willfully taking life (Merli 2005; De Alwis and Hedman 2009).[2] In a reflection upon collectively shared karma, Rohini, a Sinhala woman from Kandy, ruminated with sadness upon situations wherein whole families perished. When I spoke with her in her upcountry abode in 2005, she gave the example of one family she knew who had traveled by car together from the highland region of the country, down the southern coastal road, only to be tragically swept up in the tsunami waters. Because the lives of family members are entangled, karma can bring one family to a shared destiny, Rohini insisted. Shared familial destinies also can be rendered as "generational karma," or *paramparāyika karmaya* in Sinhala. Yet, I found that the idea of generational karma is transmuted in the hands of certain Sinhala Christian pastors who characterize collective suffering in Sri Lanka as the result of "generational sin" or *paramparāyika pāpēya*. In doing so, certain schools of Sinhala Christian evangelists use the notion of karma to condemn inherited ways of being—that is to say, of being Buddhist—as necessarily generative of sin.

In this paper, I hazard a comparison between the concepts of karma and grace. Besides attempting to offer a brief summation of these concepts, situating them within an ethnographic context serves to shed light upon their use amid the agonistic entanglement between Buddhism and Christianity in contemporary Sri Lanka. For 24 months from 2009 to 2011, and during brief

1. Pseudonyms are used for proper names of people and places throughout the paper.

2. The idea that karmic cause and effect may be carried out within one lifetime is substantiated by the doctrine known in Pāli as "*ditta dhamma vēdaneeya karma*," or "immediately-effective karma."

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stints in 2005 and 2016, my fieldwork examined the intensification of Buddhist–Christian controversies over religious conversion in the country that have emerged since the turn of the millennium. These conversion controversies, and Sinhala Buddhists' efforts to create legislation that would criminalize "unethical conversions," intensified within a constellation of several critical events. The first was the death of a prominent Buddhist monk, which many Sinhala Buddhists believed to be the result of a Christian conspiracy to destroy Buddhism (Uyangoda 2007; Berkwitz 2008; Mahadev 2018a). New charismatic forms of Christianity, particularly in the form of Pentecostal ministries, had become more prominent in the Sri Lankan public sphere, drawing the negative attention of Buddhists. This was especially so in the aftermath of the tsunami catastrophe, when Sinhala Buddhists generally perceived Christian and Western humanitarian aid workers to be opportunistically proselytizing (Matthews 2007; Mahadev 2014).[3] The antipathies also intensified during pauses in the civil war and after its conclusion in 2009, when Sinhala Buddhists fixed their attention on the apparent growth and revival of evangelical Christianity. In this context, I have demonstrated how vernacular theologies circulate among Buddhists and Christians in the Sri Lankan public sphere, and have profound consequences in the relations between these religious communities (Mahadev 2016, 2018a). Theological sparring has long occurred between Buddhists and Christians in Sri Lanka (Spencer 1995; Harris 2006; Blackburn 2010). On occasion, this interchange has propelled the creation of profound ritual innovations and even new religious sub-movements (Obeyesekere and Gombrich 1988; Mahadev 2016). Such competitively wrought theological discourses, including those concerning karma and grace, have contributed to the episodic starkening of inter-religious enmity.

As the Sri Lankan case makes clear, distinct sensibilities of karma and grace bear upon one another, and in a politicized milieu, generate an agonistic interrelationality. In what follows, I discuss how karma and grace may be seen as constituting distinct theodicies that are shaped by economic principles foundational to the moral economies of Buddhism and Christianity. Karma and grace each involve a distinct set of cosmologics, which grew out of historically specific economic sensibilities ("economic ethics" in Weber's terminology). At the same time, karma and grace concepts involve modes of reasoning that are prone to ideational and material shifts related to broader changes in the political economy. Elaborating upon Weberian principles of religion and economy, and specifically how the notion of theodicy is shaped by economic factors, anthropologists have begun to attend to practices through which people manage and manipulate personal and collective destinies. I suggest how notions of karma and grace have shifted with capitalist modernity, and moreover, with the interpenetration of these religious discourses in the Buddhist–Christian encounter in the colonial and postcolonial eras.

Buddhists and Christians have tended to use karma and grace in quotidian articulations about religious value. Strikingly, they engage these vernacular cosmological and theological repertoires to cast judgment upon one another over matters of religious difference. "Competitive theologizing" is a prevalent form of interchange that is indicative of the "contentious discursive interplay between Christian evangelism and Buddhist nationalism" (Mahadev 2016). In addition to episodically generating political heat, certain movements within Sinhala Buddhism have been dialogically responsive to evangelical Christian senses of urgency that are signified by the eschatological promise and threat that "Jesus Christ is coming very soon" (ibid., 128). The millenarian urgency to gain new Christian converts provokes Buddhist nationalist anxieties, which I've suggested produces an agonistic intersection of religious forms that is generative of ritual and cosmological innovations. Rather than signifying syncretistic transformation though, I demonstrated how those innovations drew upon horizons of millenarian possibility that are native to Buddhism.

Here, my concern with competitive theologizing is rather different. Rivals cast judgment upon another's religion vis-à-vis one's own categories, reckoning through emphatic differentiation of one from the other in terms of cosmological integrity, moral fortitude, and ritual efficacy. In short, devoted Christians and Buddhists

3. As I have detailed elsewhere (2013), secular humanitarianism was more prevalent after the tsunami, but a few local and international Christian groups did overtly proffer the gospel alongside humanitarian aid (see also Matthews 2007). Often, Sri Lankans in affected villages tended to misrecognize secular humanitarianism, and assumed that Western NGOs were necessarily Christian entities even when they operated upon secular principles (Mahadev 2013).

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engage in a kind of reckoning, and make theological and ontological judgments upon the status of religious others. Such reckoning over religious difference makes evident how karma and grace are concepts applied agonistically in this particular context. To elaborate these ideational dynamics, occasionally in this paper I use the compound terms of "onto-theological," or "onto-cosmological," to describe how the conception of one's state of being is set in relation to one's knowledge of the righteous conduct of god, or, in the case of Buddhism, a fully perfected human or the righteous order of the cosmos.[4] To illuminate this conceptual terrain, I will begin with a discussion of the traits that anthropologists and scholars of religion have found common to the conceptualization of karma and to grace.

Karma and grace in anthropological rendering

In spite of their many conceptual differences, karma and grace both serve as grammars for material and moral being. Each offers onto-cosmological justification for the vicissitudes of personal destiny. In the introduction to a remarkable volume on *Honor and grace in anthropology* published in 1992 with Jean Peristiany, Julian Pitt-Rivers suggested that anthropologists had only recently begun to query the concept of grace in relation to Christian, Judaic, and Islamic theology. Much has changed in this regard in large part due to the flourishing of the anthropology of Christianity since around the turn of the millennium. In the body of literature that relates especially to Pentecostalism, grace is synonymous with the *charism* or God's gifts transmitted through the medium of the Holy Spirit. Theologies of grace—particularly emphasizing a Pauline genealogy of apostolic conversion—are discursively front and center in Pentecostal-charismatic Christian sermons delivered in the vernacular (Coleman 2000; Marshall 2009; Bialecki 2010; Robbins 2010). Theologically, grace is a vitalistic manifestation that animates Born-again being and belonging. Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany (1992) emphasize that grace is a state, as well as an attribute believed to determine one's life conditions and personal destiny.[5] Insofar as grace is constitutive of the qualities of the person, it relates directly to Bourdieu's (1977) notion of *habitus*, rendered sociologically to connote embodied dispositions, which encompass social and class status markers such as linguistic attunement and taste.[6] Although in Bourdieu's secular, sociological terms, *habitus* is inculcated with time and social station to create embodied forms of distinction, Pitt-Rivers reminds us that the Bourdieusian concept is derived from St. Augustine's theological writings on habit and *habitus*, connoting "an acquired disposition to cooperate with the will of God" ([1992] 2011: 429). Somewhat differently, Pentecostal-charismatic Christians consider grace to come swiftly, ineffably, and to inaugurate Born-again conviction miraculously.

In *Honor and grace in anthropology* (1992), Pitt-Rivers called for comparison of grace concepts. He stated that to his knowledge, no anthropologist had at that point probed whether there are concepts comparable to grace in other religions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Taoism, leading him to speculate that this lack may be because these are not "religions of the book" ([1992] 2011). It is likely though that as a point of comparison and contrast to grace, karma has tended to escape the attention of scholars because

4. While Kant and Heidegger have variously used the terms "onto-theology" and "onto-cosmology," my usage is in resonance with anthropological usages of the terms. Usage of onto-theology by anthropologists perhaps can be attributed to their extrapolations from Rene Girard's thesis on sacrifice found within *Violence and the sacred* (1977). As I read these anthropological studies, the onto-theological connotes one's own ontological status vis-à-vis one's understanding of Christ as the sacrificial god-man who ought to be imitated as repayment for the unpayable debt of sacrifice, yet who is ultimate and thus inimitable (Mayblin and Course 2014). As such, onto-theology is distinct from the stand-alone term "theology," meaning knowledge of the divine. Whereas I reserve the use of "onto-theological" for Christianity (or any deist form of religiosity), I use "onto-cosmological" in the case of Buddhism. Though there are deities in existence in most forms of Buddhism, the *summum bonum* task is to emulate the Buddha—a perfected, fully awakened human—such that each individual's enlightenment cumulatively enables society to realize a perfect future cosmos (*Dharma*). (I also use onto-cosmological when discussing Buddhism together with Christianity, since technically the "cosmological" can be applied to both forms of religiosity.)

5. They appear to be writing on Christianity in general, with occasional references to Catholicism specifically.

6. See also Mahadev 2018a where I detail the point in relation to a specific iteration of these spontaneous manifestations of charismatic grace.

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the very ontological aspects of karma appear as contradictions to the ontology-denying Buddhist doctrine of *anattā*, or non-soul (often translated as non-self).[7] Nevertheless, however much the idea of karma may be described as a "doctrine," a number of anthropological studies of Buddhism have shown how a "karmic eschatology" is significant in conceptualizing destiny, selfhood, and the individual's capacities for enlightened vision and Buddhistic ethical striving (Obeyesekere 1968, 2002).[8] Indeed, given the ordinariness of the circulation of karma discourses, as captured in Obeyesekere's (1968) and Tambiah's (1968) early contributions, karma has stood as a vital element in Leach's ethnographic theory of "practical religion" (Leach 1968).

In a karmic eschatology, personal destiny is seen as inherited as a consequence of the ethical quality of one's actions through transmigratory principles enshrined within the *Dhamma* (the awakened Buddha's teachings, and the cosmic order itself), and thus moral cause and ontological effect are considered to play out over time—usually (though not necessarily) across multiple lifetimes. In contrast, as suggested above, grace signifies divine election. What is more, for Christians, grace is the spiritual mechanism that links the immanent world to the transcendent. It relates immanent life to the possibility of escaping disaster—be it an extraordinary event, or a projected millenarian one—and the possibility of realizing "a new life in the hereafter."

Rather than rehearse the entire body of literature that might allow us to compare karma and grace here, it will suffice to say that a thread runs through both sets of literature on the two concepts, and unifies them: scholars have consistently described karma and grace in terms of their oppositional attributes, and their expressly "dialectical" natures. The dialectical approach to the study of karma goes back at least to Leach's 1968 volume on *Dialectic in practical religion*. Surveying the religious studies literature on karma in 1980, Doniger too finds a dialectical thrust to the analysis, and indeed, in the logic of karma itself.[9] In that volume, scholars considered the categorical oppositions between karmic causation and fate (Long, Weiss), karmic causation and ritual expiation (McDermott), amoral rebirth and ethicized karma (Obeyesekere), duality and non-duality (Stablein), minimal and maximal transactions (Marriott), ancestral rites (*śrāddha*) and the idea of reincarnation of the soul (Doniger), to name a few (Doniger 1980, xviii–xxv).

With respect to the concept of grace, Pitt-Rivers ([1992] 2011) focuses not only on the overarching binary between grace and negative grace, and between the sacred and profane. He reminds us also of Weber's distinction between ordinary, rationalized, authority on the one hand, and charismatic authority on the other ([1992] 2011: 436). Additionally, Pitt-Rivers remarks upon the oppositions between grace and calculation, chance and destiny, gift and contract, heart to head, totality of commitment versus limited responsibility, gratuity versus stipulation, among a number of other dualities (437). Simon Coleman's important essay (2004) reflects upon Maussian concerns, and builds upon the work of Bromley and Busching (1988), to consider how the charismatic gift in Pentecostalism hinges upon the

7. Certain scholars of religion have reasoned away the contradiction of *kamma* and *anattā*. For instance, Bechert (1992) argues that karma has implications for continuities that travel across lifetimes through the seeds of *persona*, rather than via an enduring self, constituted by a soul. Also, on *anattā* in the anthropology of karma, see Spiro 1966 and Obeyesekere 1980, and in religious studies, see McDermott 1980.

8. For example, Obeyesekere 1968, 1980, 2002; Tambiah 1968; Keyes and Daniel 1983. Obeyesekere details how "karmic eschatology" involves ethicization, rationalization, and principles of thought and practice oriented towards "universalism." Specifically on the claim of universalism, Obeyesekere points out that the earlier definition of the *sangha* as a small-scale political unit is transformed in the Buddha's usage. The transformation from a lowercase idea of *sangha* as political entity, into a transcendent and transhistorical notion of disciplined quest for Enlightenment, embodied by the uppercase "*Sangha* of the four quarters," signifies the monastic community as a whole, and thus the universal church (Obeyesekere 2002: 120–5). Additionally, Obeyesekere notes that Axial Age thinking (for him, consonant with Weberian rationalization) in Indic religions took a different direction than did ethical prophecy elsewhere (2002: 121–2). He is emphatic that paradox, equivocation, and dialectical "hairsplitting" within Buddhist discourses (such as with the debates over *anattā*, among other concepts) are indicative of the "powerful rationalizing impulse" in Buddhism. He thus places the emergence of Buddhist Enlightenment on a par with Greek and European forms of enlightenment reasoning (2002: 124–5).

9. Doniger notes that it is not only that the Indo-European scholars of karma lapse into dialectical thinking, but that the doctrine of karma itself sprang from ancient Indians, "who were Indo-Europeans *par excellence*" (1980: xviii).

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opposition between secular contract, and the sacred covenant between God and community. In Weber's theses on religion and the economy, the dual sense of reckoning—that of judgment of the eschatological variety, and of calculations in accounting of financial transactions—are conjoined. The oppositional features of both karma and grace concepts make each given to generating criteria for judging and reckoning religious value. As I discussed above, shortly after the turn of the millennium when Buddhist–Christian tensions peaked, Sri Lankans commonly leveraged discourses of karma and grace in making judgments and justifications for religious supremacy. By intensifying discernment about religious difference, practices of reckoning and accounting have had the effect of amplifying inter-religious tensions.

Karmic continuity and graceful discontinuity in the politics of religious conversion

In South Asia, and especially in Sri Lanka where Christianity and Buddhism have long been proximal rivals, a dialectics of derogation and embrace of religious conversion is amply evident (Mahadev 2018a).[10] Pentecostalism represents one of the newest frontiers of rivalrous entanglement between Buddhists and Christians in Sri Lanka.[11] Rituals of deliverance from demons and global Christian polemics of "Spiritual Warfare" thrive upon pentecostalist conceptions of charismatic grace (DeBernardi 2007; Marshall 2009, 2016). Such neo-Pentecostal discourses call upon converts to embrace a new life, and thus emphasize the value of rupture and discontinuity (Meyer 1998; Robbins 2004, 2007; Cannell 2006). Having touched down in Sri Lanka, evangelical and especially Pentecostal-charismatic methods of shoring up Christian belief have tended to provoke a resurgence of Buddhist nationalist anti-conversion polemics. Thus, the cosmologics of karma and grace take on a profoundly competitive valence.

The valuation of karma as the inherited moral consequence of past actions is consonant with an ideology of continuity, whereas the idea of grace—and particularly charismatic grace wherein intercession appears spontaneously, as if by a miracle—is consonant with an ideology of discontinuity (also Mahadev 2018a). The latter point has been richly detailed within the growing body of work in the anthropology of Christianity. The analogue between grace and rupture can be seen in the ways in which Brigit Meyer (1998) has considered Pentecostalist imperatives to make a "complete break from the past," and the discussions by Joel Robbins (2007, 2010) on the value of attending ethnographically and analytically to the discontinuity of Christian conversion. We have already seen the insistence upon discontinuity detailed above in the case of Sri Lanka, wherein certain ministers insist that one must break from "generational sins" (*parampārayika pāpēya*) which come from retaining one's familial links to Buddhist ways of being. Such pentecostalist sensibilities about discontinuity, and the pivotal event of conversion, are rooted in Pauline expressions of grace, which arrive spontaneously from on high via the Holy Spirit, to interrupt the flow of historical and quotidian continuity.[12] In contrast, the concept of karma, particularly in highly politicized contexts in South Asia, often serves to buttress ideologies of continuity—in terms of continuities of substance, bio-morality, and

10. An indicator of potential starkening of antipathies between religious communities may be found in the way in which charismatic Christians diabolize the deities of other religions. This is particularly so in South Asia. But in an unusual case from southern India, Roberts's (2016) ethnography of Dalit Christian slum-dwellers indicates that the tendency of Pentecostalist theology to generate antipathies towards religious others was generally not prevalent—even as the Hindu slum-dwellers encountered by Roberts frequently derided their Christian neighbors. According to Roberts, from the vantage point of Pentecostal slum-dwellers in Chennai, the Hindu deities are not real, but they considered them to be essentially good, not evil, and thus for non-Christians to worship them was not a sin (chapter 5 and footnote 5, p. 262).

11. The advance of Pentecostalism in postcolonial Ceylon follows upon the earlier presence of other varieties of Christianity since the colonial era. Portuguese Catholicism was established in the sixteenth century, and was later pressed to give way to Dutch Calvinism. Later, under British colonial rule, Anglicanism and other Protestant denominations thrived, and Catholicism was allowed to flourish again after a period of Dutch colonial persecution (Malalgoda 1976). The major distinguishing features of Pentecostalism compared to these colonial-era varieties of Christianity is that it has flourished in the postcolonial era under conditions of neo-liberalism, and is "charismatic" in the sense I've elaborated within this paper.

12. On the quintessential event of St. Paul's conversion, see Badiou 2003, and on its uptake in contemporary Pentecostalism, see Bialecki 2010.

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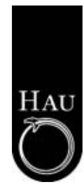

kinship.[13] In India, expressions about karmic inheritances moreover serve to shore up nationalistic claims, which are oppressive to lower caste groups (Cotterill et al. 2014). Ideologies of continuity also underpin nationalistic constructions of the longue durée as unfettered by more recent Western incursions, be they colonial, postcolonial, or neoliberal influences (Mahadev 2018a). Finally, the idea of karmic inheritance also fortifies sensibilities about continuities, relating to family, lineage, and heritage, that are critical to the micropolitics of anti-conversion in South Asia. In the case of Sri Lanka, Buddhist nationalist discourses cast Christian converts as betrayers of righteous continuities of a heritage so defined by the ethno-religious majority (Mahadev 2018a). Nativist sensibilities about karmic inheritance often inform efforts to invalidate Sri Lankan Christians' claims of spontaneous conviction and miraculous grace. Entangled in competing regimes of religious potency, Christian grace and Buddhist karma discourses reinforce inter-religious rivalries in a highly politicized plural milieu.

Theodicy, suffering, and fortune

Oppositional economic ideologies, of Christian affluence and prosperity gospels on the one hand, and relatively more ascetic repertoires in which Theravāda Buddhism is embedded on the other, form the crux of the debate over the politics of religious belonging in contemporary Sri Lanka. However, beyond being a matter of political-economic differences that differently fashion the material manifestations of Buddhist and Christian forms of religiosity, principles of karma and grace found respectively within Buddhism and Christianity reinforce inter-religious rivalries and tensions. From the view of both Pentecostal Christians and devoted Sinhala Buddhists, conversion tends to be seen as constitutionally affecting the character, and indeed the ontological condition of persons: for Christians, being Born-again is considered critical for success, health, prosperity, in the here and now, and for salvation in the hereafter. But as the Buddhist adage has it, "suffering is a teacher only second to the Buddha," and Buddhism thus provides imperatives for moral learning through practices of renunciation and the valuation of suffering, which endure in both monastic and lay practice in Sri Lanka today.[14] In turn, many devoted Sinhala Buddhists tend to consider Christian grace as a promise that seeks to interrupt the trajectory of moral learning, the formation of moral dispositions and other attributes of the individual, and personal destiny—all of which Buddhists typically view as materializing as a direct result of one's past karma. Thus, particularly for Buddhist nationalists averse to the apparent growth of Christianity in Sri Lanka, Christian conversion appears as a mechanism that estranges Buddhists from the possibility of recognizing their righteous, karmic inheritances (also Mahadev 2018a). Such polemical views against Christian grace are articulated especially by Sinhala Buddhists who are anxiety-ridden by the thought that Christianity could, in time, supplant Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage.

Contesting the very idea that Christian grace can instantaneously and miraculously overcome the sinful acts committed by sentient beings, Rohini, mentioned above, stressed that the enduring nature of karma outshines the false and fleeting promises of grace. She impressed upon me how karma shapes one's conditions of being, and in so doing, karma makes known the moral obligations with which one must contend. She was emphatic that one cannot absolve oneself from sins (*akusala karmayā*) accumulated over many lifetimes simply by taking recourse to a savior. As she put it to me, "No one else can suffer for the sins that we have committed in our own lives, no?" (see also Mahadev 2016: 128). Having been educated in a Catholic convent school, Rohini was well aware of Christian theological principles (albeit not specifically Pentecostal ones). I found that other Sinhala Buddhists similarly voiced that Christian shortcuts to salvation could not possibly allay the consequences of one's bad karma (Mahadev 2018a).

Such views on karmic theodicy rang familiar particularly within the assessments of the crimes against Buddhist heritage which Christian evangelists are alleged to commonly commit in the course of spreading "the Good News" (*Subha Aranchiya*). This was nowhere more evident than when devoted Sinhala Buddhists widely surmised that the death of a prominent and well-loved Sri Lankan Buddhist monk in 2003 was the result of the machinations of "Christian fundamentalists" (*Cristiyāni mūladharmawādiyo*) (Mahadev 2018a). Sinhala Buddhists who were stirred by the event tended to leverage

13. On these conjoined concepts of karma and bio-morality, see Parry 1994; Laidlaw 1995; and Copeman 2009.

14. The quotation comes from scholar of Buddhism, Charles Hallisey (2007), who movingly wrote it in a tribute to his late teacher, G. D. Wijeyawardhana, Professor of Sinhala, University of Colombo.

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karma and grace theodicies comparatively, emphasizing that confession and promises of eternal salvation could not possibly ease the pain of karmic justice that was in store for the Christian convert who they widely believed to have plotted the death of the monk (ibid.). Not coincidentally, the alleged culprit was a Sinhala business mogul at the helm of Sri Lanka's largest private corporation, who publicly attributed his radical financial success, and his charitable spirit, to grace that he acquired with his conversion from Buddhism to Christianity in the 1970s. For the Sinhala Buddhists devoted to protecting their religious heritage, Christian grace appeared to have the effect of reorienting the person toward shortcuts to prosperity, happiness, and the good life. In the worst instances—as with the alleged culprit—Christian conversion was considered to be generative of negative characteristics: of fraudulence, attraction to false and fleeting religious and economic promises, as well as antinationalism and seditious sentiments. As I detailed, when the Christian businessman was, in a separate incident, accused and found guilty of defrauding Sri Lankan investors of millions of dollars through malfeasance committed in one of this company's subsidiaries, Sinhala Buddhists who were already convinced that he had conspired against the monk to destroy Buddhism, relished the fact that he lost face. When his character was condemned as a public disgrace, Buddhist anti-conversion activists felt validated in their suspicions; that the alleged culprit in the end received his karmic just-desserts, served as evidence that consequences meted out in a cosmos governed by the *Dhamma* are more potent than more dubious promises of Christian grace (Mahadev 2018a). As Max Weber so deftly remarked upon tendencies toward such *Schadenfreude* as we see here, any "theodicy of suffering can be colored by [Nietzschean] *ressentiment*" ([1917] 2007: 276).

In the view of Sinhala Buddhists dedicated to the monk, Christians' shortcuts to overcome the long path out of suffering (*samsāra*) by way of promises of more immediate access to God's grace, could bear no fruit. From this perspective, I've argued, Sinhala Buddhists understand karma as a righteous inheritance that resides at the core of one's person, and which must be skillfully recognized in order to enable future-life evolution; karma endures, and could never be trumped by Christian grace (Mahadev 2018a). In that episode of interreligious tension, nationalist activists devoted to the Buddha's *Dhamma* made a moral discernment—a reckoning—wherein processes of moral self-betterment were seen to be lacking amid the tricks of spontaneous Christian grace. In short, karma and grace are cosmologics which, in their entanglement, provide ontological justification for religious difference; in so doing, karma and grace discourses are occasionally mobilized to lend justification to the vilification of religious others, thus intensifying political conflicts over religious plurality.

The hermeneutic work of reckoning and passing judgment upon one's graceful or karmic state, I suggest, becomes a significant node of inter- and intra-religious competition and conflict. Processes of reckoning, accounting, and passing onto-cosmological judgments upon religious others, are linked to Weber's delineation of theodicy—that is, cosmological reasoning that seeks to account for human suffering. Building upon Leibniz's theological exposition that, in spite of the existence of an omniscient and omnipotent god posited through Christianity, humanity must logically grapple with the problem of suffering in the world, Weber conceptualized theodicy in terms of ideal-types. Weber ([1917] 2007) identified Zoroastrian dualism, the doctrine of Karma, and the (Calvinist) doctrine of Predestination involving a condition of *deus absconditus* (wherein the divine has left the world without possibility of intercession), as three "ideal types" that are "rationally closed" (275). That is to say, in the Weberian schema, in a pure form, such closed systems of theodicy mean that no act of human agency, and no practical ritual apparatus, could possibly amend one's life's conditions, because one's destiny is pre-determined by god, or by the cosmos (in cases where there is no creator-god). In such exceptional, pure cases, no conceivable "this-worldly" act of negotiating economic ethics can mitigate one's current condition, whether that condition faces in the direction of salvation or damnation. Indeed, Weber's ideal-typical Calvinists, albeit engaged in accountancy, could not affect their fortunes through the act of accounting; at most they could engage in successful profiteering, and use careful practices of accounting in order to verify for oneself which track one might be on. Yet, of course, rarely is it that theodicy is as air-tight as the three ideal-types Weber posits. How fortune is bestowed, and misfortune and suffering doled out in onto-cosmological renderings, is a matter negotiated through what Weber ([1917] 2007) deems as "economic ethics." Further developing a more pliable sense of theodicy and social action than one confined by ideal-typification, in recent years anthropologists have described an economy of moral and material movement that enables, or

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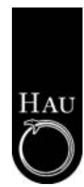

disallows, exertion of control over fortune and misfortune, in terms of "cosmoeconomics" (da Col 2012; da Col and Humphrey 2012; Empson 2019; Henig 2019).

Foundations and transformations in reckoning Christian and Buddhist economic ethics

Throughout the Christian gospels we find that moral judgments are passed upon the qualities of financial conduct. These judgments are foundational to the development of early Christian ethics. One such definitive event for biblical hermeneutics is the moment when Jesus condemned monetary activities, mercantile affairs, and currency changing, so as to cleanse the sacred space of the temple (Matthew 21:12). In a subsequent moment, he resolved the question posed to him by certain adversaries (Pharisees and Herodians) as to whether they ought to pay tribute to Roman authorities, famously replying that they ought "render unto Caesar what is due to Caesar, and render unto God what is due to God." Noting these and several other biblical incidents as constitutive of an early Christian theology of money, philosopher of political economy Philip Goodchild writes that "Jesus opposed the power of God to the power of money" (2009: 4).

Such a firm demarcation between the sovereign authority advancing in the earthly domain through Roman conquest, and the promise of a sovereign kingdom of heavenly riches to come, is recapitulated more than a millennium later, when, in the nascence of mercantile capitalism, Luther insisted that reconciliation with God cannot be achieved through worldly penance, charitable recompense, and least of all through the sale of indulgences. Luther's maxim—*Sola fide*—meant that faith in the transcendental authority alone can guarantee God's grace and salvation. Upon Luther's insistence, no compensation through action ("works") would suffice to expiate sin and enable one to be saved. Otherwise put, no human activity, nor material mediation, could enable reconciliation with God. Thus, in the ideal-typical Protestant Christian form, grace is seen as being given miraculously and exceptionally, irrespective of the qualities of one's conduct. This sensibility is modified only slightly in the portrayal of Calvinists given to us by Weber ([1905] 2009): again, albeit a "this-worldly" activity, accountancy did not stand in competition to the sincerity of faith of the ideal-typical Dutch Calvinists, but rather, profit—that is, success as indicated through careful accounting—paired with diligent work and thrift, served to relieve anxiety and affirm one's predestined state of grace.

Goodchild points to the transformation that Christian theology had undergone with latter-day monetary inventions in the emergence of industrial capitalism. Jesus of Nazareth had proclaimed "a revaluation of all values" by counterposing God's power to the power of money (2009: 4). Whereas the biblical Christ disparages monetary value, Goodchild points out that theology was transformed with modern banking. He writes critically of the transformation, stating that "Every time Christianity has worshiped Christ enthroned as a heavenly Caesar, it has repeated Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus" (4). Goodchild locates the revised theology of money in the establishment of national banks (the Bank of England being a primary example), which "inaugurated a period in which credit effectively functioned as money" (7). In essence, banks, and bankers, were *creators* of value. Overcoming limits of material wealth that had been bound in premodernity, modernity enabled the extraction of new energy sources (fossil fuels); the finitude of currency was overcome by the creation of credit (10–11). Drawing together this empirical reality, Goodchild writes:

> It is easy to observe how this shift naturally leads to secularization and a direct opposition between God and money. Where God promises eternity, money promises the world. Where God offers a delayed reward, money offers a reward in advance. Where God offers himself as grace, money offers itself as a loan. Where God offers spiritual benefits, money offers tangible benefits. Where God accepts all repentant sinners who truly believe, money may be accepted by all who are willing to trust in its value. Where God requires conversion of the soul, money empowers the existing desires and plans of the soul. Money has the advantages of immediacy, universality, tangibility, and utility. Money promises freedom and gives a down payment on the promise of prosperity (2009: 11–12).

While for Goodchild both God and money are transcendent in their value, secularity entails maintaining divinity and economy as two separate domains. In contemporary strands of "prosperity gospel" Christianity however, obtaining salvation through Christ and achieving economic prowess have become virtually synonymous (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). In Pentecostalist prosperity discourses I heard in circulation in Sinhala and English medium church services in Sri Lanka, Jesus

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is extolled as having "paid the bill!"—implying that Christ's sacrifice not only cancels sin as the result of god's love and grace, but through the power of these metaphysical operations, faith in god is a salve capable of canceling financial debts. This calculus is evident in the way that charismatic ministers make pleas to their congregations to demonstrate their love for and surrender to Christ by substantively seeding, loudly beseeching them to "Give *excellently* to Jesus, and [so that in turn] he will give *excellently* to you!"[15]

The relation of banking to the creation of value, and to establishing new sensibilities about value through creation of credit, Goodchild argues, provides the foundation for a new theology in modernity. In other words, banks are creators of the material world and potential riches through the creation of schemes of credit—like God. Pertinent in the relation to god the creator is his conceptual antithesis, embodied as his nemesis, the devil. In turn, the mode of valuation in capitalist modernity lends to the contrapuntal diabolization of practices involving the projection of sacred value onto that which is man-made—as William Pietz has so brilliantly shown in his series of essays on "The problem of the fetish" (1985, 1987). Pietz demonstrates how, in contact with coastal West Africans, Portuguese Catholics classified indigenous objects of worship in pidgin diction as *fetisso*. Pietz traces the etymology of the concept of fetish, locating it in the Latin *Feitiço* meaning "manufactured." In doing so, he discerns how the indigenous practice of worshipping that which is made by man was rendered by Christian missionaries as diabolical, and hence as dialectically opposed to righteous worship of the creator, and to belief in the grace of god.[16]

In the encounter with Theravadin Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Protestant missionaries conceptualized the misrecognition or sublimation of god's grace in very different terms. As the historian Elizabeth Harris (2006) details, the failure on the part of Buddhists to recognize the Christian god's grace was conceptualized as a problem relating to atheism, "idolatry," and demonism. Moreover, the British-era Protestant missionaries attributed the putative failure to the doctrine of karma as a humanist ethical system. In summation of her archival work, Harris writes that Protestant missionaries concluded that a successful moral system could not exist,

> without the commandments of a Supreme Being and the prospect of divine judgment. Since Buddhism provided neither, their first judgment was that Buddhism's moral premises could not be followed. Second, they argued that belief in transmigration, rather than nurturing individual responsibility, destroyed it, because of the fatalism they linked with the law of *kamma*. Third, they claimed that the doctrine of *kamma*, also of necessity, destroyed compassion, because the misfortunes of others were seen as payments for their past misdeed. When, in apparent contradiction, the missionaries witnessed acts of charity among Buddhists, they drew on their fourth judgment that Buddhist acts of goodness were performed purely for the purpose of gaining a better rebirth and were therefore selfish (Harris 2006: 57).

For these British-era missionary commentators on Theravāda Buddhist religiosity, the Buddha, as a human, was empty of divinity, and thus was a mere "idol usurping the place of God" (Harris 2006, 54). Harris cites a missionary, J. Allen, who wrote, "Though they embraced Buddhism, they felt, after all, that there was a void in it somewhere; and Satan and his emissaries had not overlooked this fact" (55). In some of the deliverance ministries I had observed in my fieldwork, similar

15. Contra the disparagements made by critics of the prosperity gospel who consider demands of tithing and seeding as predatory, Premawardhana (2012) has argued that impoverished Pentecostal converts are asked to give only within their means, that they do so willingly, and express the conviction that they reap the rewards of their surrender.

16. The categorical mix-up implied by the Christian missionary conceptualization of the fetish, is mirrored by Marx and Freud when they use the idea of the fetish to describe the ways that materiality is engaged in processes that "mystify" desire for commodities and the nature of sexual objectification (Pietz 1985). The fetish for Marx and Freud became "the sublime object of ideology," as Žižek (1989) put it. However, anthropologist Sansi (2007) argues that the sharpness separating African and Portuguese religiosities (the very division that animated philosophical discourses on the "problem" of the fetish) has been overdrawn due to emphasis on Portuguese Catholic injunctions against their use. Sansi demonstrates that within the Lusophone African colonial encounter, a creole Afro-Portuguese sociality developed, such that the Portuguese themselves engaged *fetisso* in ritual manipulations.

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talk of how the "emptiness" of the Buddha "idol" allowed the devil to seep into the lives of Buddhists was a prevalent measure of diabolization.[17]

Comparing theology of grace and cosmology of karma

Whereas in Christianity the primary value is placed upon belief in the resurrected Christ as a force for purification and redemption (Ruel 1982; Bynum 2004), in Buddhism it lies within renunciation as a means towards middle-path moderation through meditative practice, enabling one to develop non-attachment as the pathway out of worldly suffering. Prototypically in Christianity, sincere belief promises salvation as its singular yield. In its ultimacy, the onto-theological promises of Christian grace are relatively one-dimensional. In contrast, in the karmic eschatology of Buddhism, the variegated qualities of one's actions (karma) lead to a range of ontological possibilities for rebirth, thus opening a wide horizon for the ascendance or even decline of fortune, aptitude, and moral fortitude across lifetimes. As such, the Buddhist moral logic of karma is not commensurate with the singular Christian sense of the good. This is so, even as Sri Lankan Buddhists and Christians commonly try to use commensuration as a mechanism for competitive theologizing. Selectively, evangelical preachers occasionally render *nibbana* (Pāli, nirvana, awakened release from suffering) as a kind of salvation, but as a substantially inferior one to that offered by Christ—as described in the case of a Sri Lankan Pentecostal pastor who rhetorically presents Jesus as "the shortest way to overcome *samsara*" (Mahadev 2016). That is to say, for the evangelist, the instantaneous grace offered through Pentecostalism is an expeditious and superior avenue out of the countless cycles of death and rebirth in the Buddhist trajectory towards *nibbāna*. Within the space of Pentecostal prayer and deliverance, the *charism*, or gift of grace, is disseminated via the Holy Spirit, which is channeled down by the minister, and liberally diffused upon the congregation. In Pentecostal-charismatic theological esteem, the touch of the Holy Spirit sanctifies the lives of individual persons, purging ailments and unholy, diabolical influences out of the person. The practical theology has it that the Holy Spirit (Sinhala, *Śuddha Ātmaya*) haptically infuses the corporeal and spiritual elements of the person. It then does battle with, and ultimately vanquishes, manifestations of the Devil's spirit (*Yaksha ātmaya*), which is seen as the root of all afflictions.

Karma in Pāli Buddhist and Hindu traditions can be seen to involve a hierarchical order of moral actions, wherein the fruits of action are multi-dimensional. Depicting the hierarchy from the vantage of the pinnacle of karmic ascendance, the *Jātaka* stories depict Gotama Buddha's past lives. In these tales, fortune, moral ascendancy, and proximity to nirvana is signified in the lives of kings, princes, and merchants, who find themselves in dismal conundrums. Despite a number of possibilities for action, at the dramatic apex of each of these stories, the karmically-evolved persona opts to commit the most radical of renunciatory acts, only to be rewarded with supreme advances of fortune and moral fortitude in the next lifetime (Gombrich and Cone 1977; Findly 2003; Collins 2016). The result is a leap in progress along a trajectory toward becoming a fully-awakened *arahant* (one who has achieved nirvana).

On the low end of the spectrum, karmic baseness is embodied by spiritual beings who cling to worldly matter. Included in these lower categories are *prēta* ("hungry-ghosts"), depicted in some Buddhist traditions as having bottomless stomachs and agonizingly narrow throats, and as bearing voracious and unmitigated desires for the worldly things they knew in life. In Sinhala Buddhism, there are variegated categories of *prēta*, but the most common type of apparitions represent deceased kin, who cling to loved ones and to their abodes of the past life. Having been unsated in the previous lifetime, they are chronically given to misfire in carrying out their intended actions. Their expressions of desire fail, subjecting their loved ones to maleficence. The *prēta* are subject to ceaseless thirst and hunger, particularly for relatively undesirable consumables—which is precisely what the living are prescribed to feed them. They are rendered incapable of moving on to a better rebirth within the realm of humanity—humanness being the only position from which they can attain nirvana. In other words, *prēta* are karmically incapacitated by their desire. Thus, in their base conditions of being, they are positioned as

17. Such condemnations involve commentary upon the fact that many Sinhala Buddhists engage in ritual exchanges with deities, demi-gods, and spirits. Scholars of Theravāda Buddhism have argued that it is through the deities that people attend to this-worldly (*laukika*, samsaric) concerns, even as they place ultimate value on other-worldly (*lokkatara*, nibbanic) spiritual end goals.

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conceptual antitheses to Buddhist doctrines on non-attachment, karma, and rebirth. As substantive reflections of negative values, *prēta* serve to authenticate Buddhist values of transcendence.

We have seen already how, as Goodchild demonstrates, the Christian gospels espoused the value of a distinct opposition between worldly riches and fortune in the hereafter, and yet those Christian values have transformed with modern capitalism, producing a revised theology of money. This revisionist Christianity is clearest in Pentecostalism and the evangelical "health and wealth gospel," wherein grace becomes practically synonymous with prosperity. Quite differently, the Buddhist doctrine of karma involves what Obeyesekere (2002) describes as an "ethicization" of Indic religion, signifying the turn away from the materialism of Brahmanical rituals. Obeyesekere argues that this development within the subcontinent coincides with the Axial Age (8th–3rd centuries BCE) as delineated in Jaspers' ([1949] 1953) thesis. Millennia later, following exposure to economic changes that came with European colonialism through much of South and Southeast Asia, Theravāda Buddhist practices generally underwent a transformation—much as Christianity underwent a transformation in response to economic and political changes that coincided with the Reformation (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Ekelund et al. 2002). Buddhist revivalist movements emerged, typically as nationalistic reactions to the colonial encounter. Taking the case of Sri Lanka, Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) argued that the transformation of Buddhism was characterized foremost by the introduction of monastic practices to lay people, which resembled the laicization of the Reformation, thus leading them to classify the change as "Protestant Buddhism." Other scholars have extended this thesis based on cases in various Theravadin countries in South and Southeast Asia, but have instead classified the altered forms of religiosity as "Buddhist modernism" (Blackburn 2010).

The colonial encounter of course intensified the exposure of these countries to the globalized economy, thereby intensifying apparent disparities in wealth, and heightening the visibility of social suffering. In Theravāda Buddhist milieus, these circumstances had profound implications for ideologies of material life, and for Buddhist–Christian relations. As suggested above, Christian missionaries frequently dismissed Buddhism as a "selfish" religion—in large part because in the archetype of giving in Buddhism, laypeople offer provisions of alms (*dāna*) to mendicant monks, and the monks "gracelessly" accept it, instead of offering charity to the poor.[18] Recall again also the Buddhist adage that "suffering is a teacher only second to the Buddha," which implies that suffering must be palpable in order for one to feel compelled to reform one's conduct. By such a logic, some Sinhala Buddhists are critical of the Christian ethos of charity—for one, because giving charity is akin to "bribing" the poor into converting. Secondly, they reason that charity deprives the poor and disadvantaged of the spur to activate one's own karmic upliftment (Mahadev 2014). In his ethnography on Sinhala Buddhism, Southwold (1983) reported that according to the very same logic, relatively poor "village Buddhists" insisted that it is the rich who are karmically incapacitated, because wealth prevents them from experiencing suffering, and thus gives them insufficient incentive to actively improve their conduct so as to make a karmic ascent.

Although what we may deem as a kind of "karmic neoliberalism" might seem to have emerged within certain limited circles of elite Buddhists, economic modernity has simultaneously impelled change in Theravadin contexts that flows in the opposite direction. In some circles, Buddhist goals of compassion have been revised, such that meritorious giving is reconceptualized as giving to the poor, rather than, or alongside, the traditional practice of giving *dāna* (alms) to sustain mendicant monks who opt for an ascetic life (Gajaweera 2013; Mahadev 2013). In other words, in postcolonial Theravadin Buddhist contexts, the direction of giving within the archetype of Indic *dhammadhana*, as per Parry's (1986) delineation, is partially reversed (Mahadev 2013; on the Hindu Indian context, see Copeman 2011).[19] Scholars have described "engaged Buddhism" as hinging upon a "liberalization" of Theravāda Buddhism, which they argue brings Theravāda Buddhism more closely in line with Mahayana Buddhist principles of liberality of giving, worldly engagement, and a relatively more democratic notion of the achievability of nirvana (Queen and King 1996).

18. See also Mahadev 2018b; Harris 2006.

19. In an ethnography of Indian blood donation practices, Copeman 2011 documents similar processes of disambiguation in the concept of *dan*, which provide imperatives for Hindus to give generously.

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Rivalrous reckoning: Accountancy and religious difference

Inhering within Protestant Christianity since its origins is the inclination to negatively appraise any practice of quantifying merits and sin, and any related process that is figured to mitigate the effects of sin. Recall once again that Luther's dictum, *sole fide*—that "faith alone" is the singular avenue through which one can achieve salvation—informed Luther's criticism of Church authorities for selling indulgences to laity wishing to lessen the effects of how the punishments for sin would be meted out in Purgatory. As such, Protestant thinking took it that any calculus aimed to discern and steer one's cosmological placement signifies insincere faith. Such activity stood contra the primacy placed upon sincere belief within Protestantism.[20]

It is the concern for sincerity that animates the derogations against practices of religious accountancy (Coleman 2004; Schlieter 2013)—a point which implicates Theravāda Buddhist–Christian antagonisms directly. Schlieter (2013) has compellingly argued that when Protestant Christian missionaries encountered the concept of karma within the Pāli textual tradition, they were quick to construct the notion of a "karmic bank account," and to attribute to Buddhists the practice of karmic accountancy, and in turn, a disingenuous moral comportment. Protestant missionaries and scholars of Pāli texts perceived Buddhists to be engaged in the practice of "balancing" sins with meritorious deeds, such that the practice seemed to involve calculations over whether one was able to negate sins they'd committed, and be thereby in a position to attain a better rebirth. Schlieter argues, however, that Protestant missionaries familiar with capitalistic accountancy injected their own notions of accountancy into their explanations of Buddhist karma. As Schlieter and other scholars of Buddhism make clear, the Pāli Buddhist texts in fact rely on agrarian metaphors to describe *karma*, and its basic unit, merit (*pīn/ puññakarmaya*). For example, the canonical literature suggests that *karma* produces fruit that ripens, fructifying from seeds that one sews through action. The metaphor of vast "fields of merit" is also prevalent in the Pāli texts, as well as in contemporary Buddhist discourses (Schlieter 2013; also Egge 2002; Findly 2003; Heim 2004). The practice of keeping "merit books" (*puññapotthakka*) had been observed in Burma by Melford Spiro, and was catalogued in the ancient Buddhist chronicle of Sri Lanka (*Mahāvamsa*, 6th century CE) (Schlieter 2013: 474). Protestant missionaries took the existence of merit books to be proof of the calculating instrumentality and faithlessness of Buddhists. Schlieter seems to be writing with an eye toward saving Buddhism from such derogations, and he does so by arguing that in fact, Buddhist practices of accounting for karma appears less like a banking ledger, and rather more as a simple account of deeds. His point is affirmed in the fact that even when shared or transferred, merit never diminishes in return. As Doniger has so elegantly put it, in Buddhism, the classic paradigm has it that "the transfer [of karmic merit] is spiritualized: somehow, the more you give, the more you have, as with love or cell-division" (1980: xix).

Although not especially common over the last century, in Sri Lanka today Sinhala Buddhist monks encourage lay Buddhists to renew the use of merit books *pīn potthak* (*puññapotthakka*) to account for their good deeds. They extol the value of doing so in sermons relating to the transfer of merit to the dead, on occasions of funerals and death-anniversary almsgivings. Specifically, Buddhist discourses encourage family members to read out the account of *puññakarmaya* (meritorious actions) that a loved one carried out over the course of their lifetime, just prior to their death. The act of recollection and remembrance of good karma is understood to effectuate a calm and happy mind-state prior to death. Not only does this have the effect of easing the pain of dying; dying peacefully is also paramount across many schools and sects of Buddhism, because as the doctrine of *cuticitta* has it, the state of mind immediately before death ("the death-experiencing mind") determines the quality and the course of the next rebirth. That is to say, one's mental qualities in the moments immediately before and during death can supersede karmic causation.

The sense that "the death-experiencing mind" determines the conditions of the next rebirth is one factor that, for a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk, whom I refer to as Dhāmmadūtta *Thero*, animates commitment to service work for sick and dying patients. In a less-than-elite sector of urban Sri Lanka, and in rural coastal villages around the country, Dhāmmadūtta *Thero* dedicates his life's work to Buddhist charitability and social service. As he articulated through our many discussions about his vocational commitment, the primary consideration

20. Sincerity of belief being a concern that shows great endurance in Protestantism worldwide, and in religious modernities more generally (see Asad 2003; Keane 2007).

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that motivates his work was the fact that Christians use charity and promises of healing to "unethically convert" born-Buddhists. Dhāmmadūtta *Thero* expressed alarm over Christians' success in proselytism—echoing trends of anti-conversion activism and efforts to set in place a legislative ban against such conversions, which peaked between the early 2000s and 2011. Whereas clergy of established mainline Christian churches tend to simply perform the last rites for dying believers, charismatic Christians are driven in the promise to usher in the grace of god through prayer, and thereby to enable miraculous healing even among terminally-ill patients. Indeed, in such milieus as Sri Lanka's capital Colombo, and to a more muted extent also in the city-state of Singapore, competition between Buddhists and Christians over religious dedication plays out in hospitals, elders' homes, orphanages, in the aftermath of catastrophes, as well as in religious politics. For Buddhists in Sri Lanka, karmic continuity, and, indeed, the very endurance of Buddhism, is contingent upon concerted efforts to undercut Christian promises of what grace-filled discontinuity can do in the world and in the hereafter. At the same time, for Christians, the urgency to bring salvational grace to the world's "demonic strongholds" (DeBernardi 2007), manifests in predominantly Buddhist locales as a struggle to break the generational pull of karmic continuities. The impasses between Christians and Buddhists in Sri Lanka over the issue of conversion and anti-conversion provide a view of how, in their inter-relation, karma and grace may be seen as constituting two competing economies of religious belonging.

Conclusion

I have attempted to bring into ethnographic view the import of theological and cosmological concepts within religious conflicts. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist and Christian disputes over conversion and evangelism became an increasingly visible public concern around the turn of the millennium. Sri Lankan Buddhists have taken the persuasive capacities of charismatic, evangelical forms of Christianity, as turning Buddhists to Christianity, and thereby impinging upon their country's religious heritage. Episodic hostilities between the two communities took root in circumstances wherein charismatic Christians have proffered "miracles of God's grace," while nationalistic Buddhists have emphasized the value of preserving and protecting their country's religious heritage. Karmic eschatology impels dedicated Buddhists to place value on taking the patient, ascetic route, to allow one's own suffering to be the spur that morally impels one to engage in good karmic conduct. This orientation to time, the cosmos, and one's own state of being, demands a sense of continuity from one life to the next, with hope for cumulative improvements over time. Charismatic Christian grace, on the other hand, promises to positively interrupt the course of one's life to generate success in this world, and salvation in the next. In short, while the evangelical Christian orientation to grace propels the demand for discontinuity so as to inaugurate born-again being, I've demonstrated that in this context, karma is a contravening concept and form of practical engagement that produces an orientation toward continuity, and affirms adherence to one's religio-moral inheritances. These conflicting onto-cosmological orientations bolster an adversarial politics of conversion and anti-conversion in South Asia.

In considering how the growth of a minority religion has created fear among majoritarian nationalists that the character of the nation will be indelibly changed, we see that Christian imperatives to convert might at first be conceived by Buddhists as "encroachment" stemming from an external source; but ultimately, conversion is rendered an internal matter of self-constitution (Mahadev 2018b: 688). Hence, my emphasis on the ontological aspects of these religious subjectivities. Whereas grace for evangelical and charismatic Christians entails being Born-again, the supposition of karmic principles for Buddhists entails being born again, again, and again, until one accumulates the moral fortitude to ultimately be released from *samsāra*. These orientations not only shape one's conduct, but may also be seen as shaping one's nature and one's ontological status within the course of striving toward broader soteriological (e.g. salvational) goals. Hence my further suggestion that karma and grace are respectively onto-cosmological and onto-theological concepts.

The friction between these two orientations has fueled conflict on the level of discourse and practice. Max Weber ([1905] 2009) pointed out that a prime feature in the making of the modern economy was the work of disambiguation through the precise reckoning of accounts. He famously connected the reckoning of accounts to the religious dread that came from the doctrine of Predestination. Indeed, reckoning relates also to judgment by god. The karmically principled cosmos, through its ineffable mechanics, similarly judges and sorts people into various social stations. Buddhists

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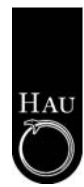

and Christians alike (and indeed humanity in general) read the signs of their social and material existence as ontological significations of their destinies. A Buddhist might feel that they are karmically well-endowed. An evangelical Christian may feel that they are exceptionally blessed—and may well feel the obligation to feel as such, irrespective of their material circumstances. Another may pay penance, or otherwise experience suffering for a past misdeed. Others might feel subject to unpredictable combinations of joy and suffering, flourishing in some domains and moments, whilst languishing in other aspects of life. Indeed, people reckon their own onto-cosmological status. They also reckon that of others. It is in part through the negative reckoning of religious others, through this chafing of Buddhist and Christian sensibilities over the preference to maintain one's religious inheritance or break from it, that inter-religious antagonisms in Sri Lanka have tended to die hard.

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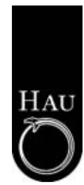

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Neena Mahadev is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and the Social Sciences at Yale-NUS College in Singapore. She carried out her dissertation fieldwork in Sri Lanka for 24 months in 2009–2011 with generous support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. She received her PhD in Anthropology from Johns Hopkins University (2013), and was a Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, and at the University of Göttingen (Germany). She is working on a book project entitled *Of karma and grace: Conversion, conflict, and the politics of belonging in millennial Sri Lanka*.

Neena Mahadev
Yale-NUS College
16 College Avenue West, #01-220
Singapore 138527
neena.mahadev@yale-nus.edu.sg

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