

the Merezhkovskii's review, *Novyi put'* (New Path, 1902–1904), founded as a showcase for the new trends in art and thought. Permitted to reopen in 1907, after the Revolution of 1905, branches of the society were later founded in Moscow and in Kiev. Through these public activities and through his writings, Merezhkovskii's ideas reached a wide audience, challenged traditional verities, inspired other reinterpretations of Christianity, and even stimulated the Bolshevik secular religion of "God-building," which featured worship of the collective spirit of humanity instead of God.

The Revolution of 1905 led Merezhkovskii to consider social and political questions. He interpreted it as the first stage of a great religious revolution that would usher in the kingdom of God on earth. He denounced autocracy as a tool of the Antichrist, and advocated religious community, viewed as a kind of Christian anarchism, as the solution to social conflict. Hostile to Marxist materialism and collectivism, he claimed that socialism stifles creativity and argued that Jesus Christ is the supreme affirmation of the individual. Major works of this period are *Dostoevsky: Prophet of the Russian Revolution* (1906), *The Coming Ham* (1906), and *Not Peace but a Sword* (1908). He opposed Russia's entry into World War I, welcomed the February Revolution, but regarded the Bolshevik regime as the reign of the Antichrist. He cooperated with attempts to overthrow it, both before and after his emigration in 1919, until his death in Paris, in 1941.

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MERIT. [This entry comprises three articles, an overview and two separate discussions of the role of merit in Buddhist and Christian soteriology.]

An Overview

The terms *merit* and *merit making* are used in connection with religious practices that have the calculated aim of improving the future spiritual welfare of oneself or others. However, the number of contexts in which a

specific terminology such as *merit* (Lat., *meritum*) or its older analogue, the Buddhist *punya* (Pali, *puñña*) has developed are surprisingly few. It is probably for this reason that most well-known systematic or phenomenological studies of religion have little or nothing to say on the subject. Elsewhere, the use of these terms in writing on religion is widespread but extremely sporadic, occurring mainly in discussions of generally related subjects such as judgment, reward and punishment, grace, and salvation.

In religion west of India, the earliest specific teaching on merit, or merits, is found in rabbinic Judaism, although merit was not the subject of formal definitions. From the third century CE, the concept played an increasingly significant role in Western Christianity; it reached a high point in the Middle Ages, only to be drawn into the vortex of Reformation debate on grace and the relation between works, faith, and man's justification in the sight of God.

Recent years have seen a smooth and indeed justifiable transfer of the English term *merit* (as well as of European equivalents such as the German *Verdienst*) to that area of Buddhist practice and interpretation covered by the Sanskrit term *punya* and its equivalents. The term *merit making* implies an observational, analytic stance not usually found in studies of merit in Christianity, which have been more doctrinal or theological in tone. Nevertheless, interesting parallels can be drawn between Buddhism and Christianity as regards merit. Elsewhere, the relationships are much less clear, and comparative questions have to be suggested much more loosely insofar as they are relevant at all. The following observations should be understood as indicating the general context in which specific teachings on merit have arisen in rabbinic Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

India and China. That religious action has practical effects in this existence and others has been widely assumed in the religious systems of Asia, though with many variations. In the Indian context, the common assumption of post-Vedic religion is that of a series of existences, each conditioned by the *karman*, or accrued causal momentum, of the previous existence. Since *karman* can be either bad or good, there is room for improvement through religious practice or moral effort. Thus, loose analogies exist with other religious teachings on reward and punishment, religious works, and spiritual development. The main characteristic of Indian assumptions on the subject, whether Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist, is that karmic cause and effect are in principle self-regulating, not subject to divine decision, arbitration, or satisfaction.

In Jainism, seven "fields of merit" (*punyaḥṣetra*) are

recognized as conducive to a pleasantly advanced rebirth. These have been presented by Padmanabh S. Jaini in *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley, 1979) as seven categories of meritorious activity: donating an image, donating a building to house an image, having the scriptures copied, giving alms to monks, giving alms to nuns, assisting laymen in their religious or practical needs, assisting laywomen similarly. The concept of *karman* should not in itself, however, be regarded as amounting to a doctrine of merit. This would push the analogy beyond its limits.

In Chinese religion, two relevant strands are discernible. First, there is the tradition of self-discipline and cultivation, in Confucian form oriented socially and pragmatically, in Taoist form linked to the achievement of supernormal powers, longevity, and even immortality. The idea of achieving supernormal physical and psychical powers through strenuous self-discipline is also present in Indian religions, including Buddhism, and hence in all cultural areas influenced by China and India. At the same time, this motivation for religious practice and achievement is not directly related to any concept analogous to merit.

Second, Chinese religion also knows the theme of postmortal judgment, presided over by Yen-lo (counterpart of the Indian god Yama) as god of death and ruler of the hells. Aided by his assistants, Yen-lo brings out the inexorable law of *karman*, and many illustrated works depict this as a warning to the living. (See, for example, the illustrated volumes *Religiöse Malerei aus Taiwan: Katalog und Die Höllentexte*, publications 1 and 2 of the Religionskundliche Sammlung der Philipps-Universität Marburg, 1980, 1981.) Religious imagery of this kind, though clearly related, does not entail a distinct doctrine of merit except insofar as it is influenced by Buddhism.

Egypt and Ancient Near East. In ancient Egypt, the diffusion of the cult of Osiris as lord of the underworld who had died, been judged, and risen again, provided the first common focus for postmortal expectation and concern. Elaborate funerary rites were accompanied by preparations for judgment before Osiris assisted by assessors. The candidate for new life asserted his innocence of numerous moral transgressions and saw his own heart weighed on scales against a feather representing truth in the sense of divine order (*maat*). Gradually, efforts were made to organize the outcome of the judgment in advance by preparing in advance lists of good deeds and declarations of innocence. This process was ritualized and commercialized through the sale of appropriate rolls of text to be filled in with names before death, modern scholars have named these texts collectively *The Book of Going Forth by Day*. On the other

hand, these phenomena may be regarded as the earliest indication of attempts to establish an individual's worth—in effect to “make merit” for him, in order to achieve a desired effect after death.

The idea of merit apparently did not develop in Mesopotamia, where notions of existence after death remained shadowy and pessimistic. Nor did Canaanite or early Hebrew views of death include a postmortal goal toward which the individual could work. The Hebrew concept of She'ol as a silent, forgotten abode beneath the earth was related at least in type to the Babylonian.

The clearly delineated cosmological dualism of Iranian religion gave prominence to the alternatives awaiting the individual after death. The spiritual position of the soul was determined in accordance with its behavior before departure from the body. In principle, the thinking is analogous to the Egyptian conceptions mentioned above, for there is evidence of attempts to influence the judgment. Eschatologically, Iranian ideas strongly influenced developing Judaism, so that She'ol became the place of postmortal punishment, while up to seven heavens were enumerated as abodes of pleasure and bliss.

Theistic Religions. A theistic worldview in the Abrahamic tradition does not necessarily entail a detailed doctrine of merit, as may be seen in the cases of the Qumran community, very early Christianity and, later, Islam. In both the teachings of Qumran and of the New Testament, the concept of calculable merit is entirely lacking. What is required is total, inward obedience to the law, or will, of God. The subsequent development of Christian teachings on merit has been variously described and interpreted. Historical priority must be ascribed to the rabbinic teachings on merit, or merits, which, in a transposed form, underlay Paul's interpretation of the death of Jesus. (This relationship has been skillfully delineated by W. D. Davies in *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 2d ed., London, 1955, pp. 227–284.)

The rabbinic doctrine of merit, though articulated in detail in the first four centuries of the common era, is based on two fundamental ideas which reach much further back in Jewish tradition. These are, first, that keeping the Mosaic covenant with God (i.e., observing the Torah), will lead to blessing and welfare and, second, that the responsibility and benefit of this covenant are essentially corporate and pass from generation to generation. Stated negatively, disobedience leads to punishment in the form of social or political suffering, but this punishment can be moderated by credit accumulated by previous generations. Looking forward, the idea of caring for one's children spiritually as well as physically was a motivating force for assiduousness in religious duty and charitable works. The justifiableness

of a man, his standing before God in these respects, is summed up in the term *zakkut*.

As Davies points out, this line of thought is not without variations: some rabbis taught that the dividing of the waters at the Exodus took place on account of the merits of Abraham, or the combined merits of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, while others stressed the meritorious faith of the Israelites at the time. The underlying spirit of the teaching is neatly expressed in Arthur Marmorstein's summary of the ideas of Rabbi Yanna'i: "A man who kindles light in daytime for his friend when it is light, what benefit has he derived? When does he obtain any advantage from light? In case he kindles it in the night-time, in darkness. The affection Israel has shown in the wilderness was kept for them from that time, from the days of Moses" (Marmorstein, 1920, p. 17). From regarding the keeping of the Torah as meritorious, and beneficial for future generations, it was not far to the idea that God gave the Torah so that merit could be achieved or even the idea that the whole of creation was designed to this end.

As to life beyond death, reference to this was by no means lacking, and it was considered possible that some individuals, through lack of merit, might fail to be rewarded. Nevertheless, the calculation of one's credits and debits was always regarded as ultimately in the hands of God, so that while relatively good men might tremble, even the wicked might hope. In practical terms, merit was typically considered to accrue through "faith, charity, hospitality, the circumcision, Sabbath and festivals, the study of the Torah, repentance, the Holy Land, the Tabernacle, Jerusalem, the tithe, and the observances in general" (*ibid.*, p. 65).

With Islam, it was, and is, expected that realizable duties will be fulfilled. However, God, and only God, knows what is actually possible for each individual; moreover, he is patient of human weakness. Thus, insofar as it is possible, the pilgrimage to Mecca is required of Muslims. This may be regarded as a negative doctrine of merit in that every Muslim has to assess whether or not he or she is able to make the pilgrimage. While Islam has always recognized that some acts are not strictly required but are nevertheless praiseworthy, any assessment of human behavior for the purpose of achieving salvation was quickly ruled out by the strong emphasis on the preeminent knowledge and grace of God, which amounted to predestination. A broadly similar doctrinal structure was to appear, in the Christian world, in Reformation theology, and in Jansenism.

Comparative Reflections. A simple typology of religions with respect to concepts of merit and broadly related aspects of religiosity may be delineated in four parts.

First, it should be noted that much religion simply has not included the concept of merit, especially when notions of the future are shadowy, when a future existence is prepared for by elaborate funerals for royalty only, or when life after death is understood in any case to be the same for everybody. Thus, primal religions—even, for example, the highly developed Japanese Shintō—presuppose neither a radical dividing of the ways based on merit nor any elaborate path of cumulative spiritual development for the individual. Such religions naturally bear powerful religious values, such as a sense of cosmological orientation and belonging. Transactional religiosity, however, is directed in this context towards proximate, this-worldly, goals such as social and economic well-being, the avoidance of disaster and sickness or, in a modern differentiated economy, personal welfare and success.

Second, when clear-cut conceptions of future existence have developed, we see an extension of transactional religiosity into the future, as in Egyptian and Iranian religions, or, in a very different way, in Indian religion. The same holds for Chinese religion, though not without influence from Indian Buddhism. Such transactionalism may or may not be morally differentiated. The key feature here is that an element of future-directed management and even calculation is introduced to cope with an assumed judgment to come or with implications of the present for future existences. In principle, responsibility lies with the individual, although he may seek the assistance of priests, or, in the interesting variation of rabbinic Judaism, draw on the worthy performance of previous generations. Islam also belongs to this type, although in this case there is little interest in calculation and a great reliance on God's compassionate appraisal of what could realistically be expected from each individual in the circumstances of life.

The third type is represented above all by Buddhism and Christianity, although these emerged from quite different assumptions. Here we see that specific doctrines of merit arose at the point of intersection between transactional religiosity and soteriological concern. The natural, or primal, community is left on one side, and the possibility of the transfer of merit from transcendental or intermediate beings is envisaged. Interestingly, this latter idea did not go unopposed in Theravāda Buddhism, where it was criticized on ethical grounds. At the same time, the recommendation of merit-creating activities by the priesthood becomes normal.

Fourth, Buddhism and Christianity are similar not only in having produced an individualized soteriology based, at times, on a doctrine of merit. They have also

both seen movements within the tradition which radically internalized the reception of spiritual assistance or grace. For Christianity, this is connected with the Reformation; for Buddhism, such movements are associated with the teachings of the Japanese patriarchs Hōnen (1133–1212) and, above all, Shinran (1173–1262). The latter argued, for example, that there was no value in reciting the Nembutsu (calling on the name of Amida Buddha) on behalf of the deceased because as a human work it could not benefit them in any way. All that was possible was reliance on the grace of Amida Buddha to effect rebirth in the Pure Land in the western heavens. Thus, the soteriological focus was internalized and the idea of merit was transformed from within. These subjectivizing trends within the Buddhist and Christian traditions, though influential, have not become dominant, and, broadly speaking, the vocabulary of merit continues to play a distinctive role in both.

[See also Judgment of the Dead.]

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Buddhist Concepts

The notion of merit (Skt., *punya* or *kuśala*; Pali, *puñña* or *kusala*) is one of the central concepts of Buddhism, and the practice of merit making is one of the fundamental activities of Buddhists everywhere.

The idea of merit is intimately bound up with the theory of *karman*, the Indian law of cause and effect. According to this theory, every situation in which an individual finds himself is the result of his own deeds in this or a previous lifetime, and every intentional act he now performs will eventually bear its own fruit—good or bad—in this or a future lifetime. Thus present felicity, wealth, physical beauty, or social prestige may be explained as the karmic reward of past deeds of merit, and present suffering, poverty, ugliness, or lack of prestige may be attributed to past acts of demerit. In the same manner, present meritorious deeds may be expected to bring about rebirth in a happier station as a human being or as a deity in one of the heavens, and present demeritorious deeds may result in more suffering and in rebirth as an animal, a hungry ghost (Skt.,

preta), or a being in one of the Buddhist hells. A mixture of meritorious and demeritorious acts will bear mixed karmic results.

This basic understanding of the workings of merit and demerit can be traced back to the time of the Buddha, or the sixth to fifth centuries BCE. It received its fullest elaboration later, however, in the vast collections of *jātakas* (stories of the Buddha's previous lives), *avadānas* (legends), and *ānisaṃsas* (tales of karmic reward), which were and continue to be very popular in both Hinayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Merit-making Activities. There are, according to the Buddhists themselves, many ways of making merit. One of the most comprehensive listings of these is the non-canonical catalog of "ten meritorious deeds" (Pali, *dasakusalakamma*), which has been widely influential in South Asia. It comprises the following practices:

1. Giving (*dāna*)
2. Observing the moral precepts (*sīla*)
3. Meditation (*bhāvanā*)
4. Showing respect to one's superiors (*apacāyana*)
5. Attending to their needs (*veyyāvacca*)
6. Transferring merit (*pattidāna*)
7. Rejoicing at the merit of others (*pattānumodana*)
8. Listening to the Dharma, that is, the Buddha's teachings (*dhammasavaṇa*)
9. Preaching the Dharma (*dhammadesanā*)
10. Having right beliefs (*diṭṭhijjukamma*)

It is noteworthy that most of the deeds on this list (with the possible exception of the ninth, which is more traditionally a monastic function) can be and are practiced both by Buddhist laypersons and by monks. It is clear, then, that merit making in general is a preoccupation not only of the Buddhist laity (as is sometimes claimed) but also of members of the monastic community, the *saṅgha*. In this regard, it is interesting too that meditation—a practice that is sometimes said to be an enterprise not concerned with attaining a better rebirth but aimed solely at enlightenment—is also seen as a merit-making activity and is engaged in as such by both monks and laypersons.

Another noteworthy item on this list is *sīla*, the observance of the moral precepts. For the laity, this consists of following the injunctions against killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxication. On certain occasions, however, *sīla* may also involve the voluntary acceptance of three additional precepts, sometimes counted as four, against eating after noon, attending worldly amusements, using ornaments or perfumes, and sleeping on a high bed. Monks, who by their very status are thought to be more filled with merit than the laity, are expected to observe all the

above precepts at all times; in addition, there is a tenth injunction for monks against the handling of money.

The most meritorious practice on this list, however, is giving, or *dāna*. In many ways, this is the Buddhist act of merit *par excellence*. Monks engage in it by giving the Dharma to laypersons in the form of sermons or advice, or by the example of their own lives. Laypersons practice it by giving to the monks support of a more material kind, especially food, robes, and shelter. The ideology of merit thus cements a symbiotic relationship between the *saṃgha* and the laity that has long been one of the prominent features of Buddhism.

Not all lay acts of *dāna* make equal amounts of merit. The specific karmic efficacy of any gift may depend on what is given (quantity and quality can be significant), how it is given (i.e., whether the gift is offered with proper respect, faith, and intention), when it is given (food offerings, for example, should be made before noon), and, especially, to whom it is given. Although *dāna* may sometimes be thought to include gifts to the poor and the needy, offerings made to the *saṃgha* are seen as karmically much more effective. Thus, making regular food offerings to the monks, giving them new robes and supplies, funding special ceremonies and festivals, building a new monastery, or having a son join the *saṃgha* are all typical lay acts of *dāna*. These activities share a common focus on the monks and are consistently ranked as more highly meritorious than other types of social service; they are even more highly valued than observation of the moral precepts.

Metaphorically, acts of merit are seen as seeds that bear most fruit when they are planted in good fields of merit (Skt., *punyaḥṣetra*), and the most fertile field of merit today is the *saṃgha*. This obviously has had tremendous sociological and economic implications. In Buddhist societies, the *saṃgha* often became the recipient of the excess (and sometimes not so excessive) wealth of the laity, and thus from its roots it quickly grew into a rather richly endowed institution.

Traditionally, however, the best "field of merit" was the Buddha himself. The model acts of *dāna* that are recounted in Buddhist popular literature often depict gifts that are made to him. Today, in addition to donations to the monks, offerings are made to images and other symbolic representations of the Buddha and are still thought of as highly meritorious. The roots of *dāna*, therefore, lie not only in a desire to do one's duty to the *saṃgha* but also to express one's devotion to the faith in the Buddha. This experiential cultic side of merit making has often been overlooked, yet it is frequently emphasized in popular Buddhist literature.

Aims of the Merit Maker. In addition to expressing individual faith and devotion, the merit maker may be

said to be interested in three things. First, an individual wants to obtain karmic rewards for himself in this or the next lifetime. Thus, for example, he might wish, by virtue of his acts of merit, to enjoy long life, good health, and enormous wealth, and never to fall into one of the lower realms of rebirth where suffering runs rampant, but to be reborn as a well-to-do person or a great god in heaven. Many such statements, in fact, may be found in the inscriptions left by pious Buddhists throughout the centuries to record their meritorious deeds, and in anthropologists' descriptions of present-day merit-making practices.

Second, the merit maker may also be interested in enlightenment. It is sometimes claimed that this is not the case, that beyond receiving karmic rewards the merit maker has no real ambition for *nirvāṇa*. To be sure, in the oldest strata of the Buddhist canon *nirvāṇa* is not thought to be attainable by merit making alone, but Buddhist popular literature soon tended to take a different view. In the Avadānas, for example, even the most trivial acts of merit are accompanied by a vow (Skt., *praṇidhāna*) made by the merit maker to obtain some form of enlightenment in the future. This enlightenment may be a long time in coming, but when it does it is portrayed as the fruit of the merit maker's vow and act of merit, and not as the result of any meditative endeavor.

In present-day Theravāda practice, these same vows take the form of ritual resolves to be reborn at the time of the future Buddha Maitreya and to attain enlightenment at that time. Far from rejecting the possibility of *nirvāṇa*, then, the merit maker, by means of a *praṇidhāna*, can link an act of merit to that very soteriological goal.

The Transfer of Merit. Third, the merit maker may also wish to share his or her merit with others, especially with members of the family. By clearly indicating whom the merit maker intends to benefit by a good deed, an individual can transfer the merit accrued to that other person. This does not mean that one thereby loses some of one's own merit; on the contrary, one makes even more, since the transfer of merit is in itself a meritorious act.

Such sharing of merit is sometimes thought to be in contradiction to one of the basic principles of *karman*, according to which merit making is an entirely individual process whereby one reaps only what one has sown oneself. While this may be correct theoretically, and while it is true that the transfer of merit is not mentioned explicitly in the earliest canonical sources, the practice quickly became very common. It had always been the case, of course, that an individual could undertake an act of merit on behalf of a larger social group.

Thus, the housewife who gives food to a monk on his begging round makes merit not only for herself but for her whole family. Buddhist inscriptions and popular literature, however, testify also to the wishes of donors to have their merit benefit somewhat more remote recipients, such as a deceased parent or teacher, the suffering spirits of the dead, or, more generally, all sentient beings.

Probably one of the motivations for such sharing of merit was the desire to continue, in a Buddhist context, the Brahmanical practice of ancestor worship. The transfer of merit by offerings to the *saṃgha* simply replaced the more direct sacrifice of food to the spirits of the dead.

The literalness with which this transfer was sometimes understood is well illustrated by the story of the ghosts of King Bimbisāra's dead relatives. They made horrible noises in his palace at night because they were hungry, for the king had neglected to dedicate to them the merit of a meal he had served to the *saṃgha*. Therefore he had to make a new offering of food to the monks and properly transfer the merit. Once fed, the ghosts no longer complained.

It is worth noting in this story the crucial role played by the field of merit—in this case the *saṃgha*—in successfully transmitting the benefits of meritorious deeds to beings in the other world: the monks act as effective intermediaries between two worlds. They continued to enjoy this role in China and Japan, where their efficacy in transferring merit to the ancestors was much emphasized.

Merit Making and the Bodhisattva Ideal. Although the doctrine of the transfer of merit has its roots in the Hīnayāna, it was most fully developed in the Mahāyāna. There it became one of the basic practices of the *bodhisattva* (Buddha-to-be), who was thought to be able freely to bestow upon others the merit accrued during a greatly extended spiritual career.

Actually, there are two stages to a *bodhisattva's* meritorious career. In the first, while seeking enlightenment, he amasses merit by good deeds toward others. In this, his actions are not much different from those described in the Jātakas and attributed to the Buddha in his former lives. In the second stage, the *bodhisattva* (or, in Pure Land Buddhism, the Buddha Amitābha), infinitely meritorious, dispenses merit to all beings.

After initially awakening in himself the mind intent on enlightenment (Skt., *bodhicitta*), the *bodhisattva* begins his career with the path of accumulation of merit (*sambhāramārga*), during which he performs great acts of self-sacrifice over many lifetimes and begins the practice of the perfections of giving, morality, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom. In all of this, his actions

are governed by his vow for enlightenment (*prañidhāna*). Unlike the vows of the Hīnayānists, however, those of a *bodhisattva* can be quite elaborate (especially in Pure Land Buddhism), and generally involve his willingness to postpone individual attainment of final *nirvāṇa* in order to be able to lead all sentient beings to enlightenment.

As a result of such altruism, certain great *bodhisattvas*, such as Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Kṣitigarbha, or Samantabhadra, came to be seen as having stored up virtually inexhaustible supplies of merit, which they can now dispense to sentient beings in order to allay their sufferings. The mechanism by which this is done is that of the transfer of merit, but this is now seen as a more total and compassionate act than in the Hīnayāna. Not only does the *bodhisattva* confer on others the benefit of specific deeds, but he also seeks to share with them his entire store of merit, or, to use a different simile, his own actual roots of merit (*kuśalamūla*). In this, all desire for a better rebirth for himself has disappeared; the only sentiment remaining is his great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) for all sentient beings in their many states of suffering.

[See also Bodhisattva Path and Karman, article on Buddhist Concepts.]

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Four kinds of sources are most useful in considering the practice of merit making in Buddhism.

First, there are anthologies of popular Buddhist stories illustrating the workings of merit and demerit. These are too vast and numerous to be described here, but they include the Jātakas (tales of Buddha's former lives), the Avadānas (legends about the lives of individual Buddhists), and innumerable stories of karmic rewards either included in commentaries on canonical works or gathered in separate collections. For translations of examples of each of these three types, see *The Jātaka*, 6 vols. (1895–1905; London, 1973), edited by E. B. Cowell; *Avadāna-śataka: Cent légendes bouddhiques*, translated by Léon Feer (Paris, 1891); and *Elucidation of the Intrinsic Meaning: The Commentary on the Peta Stories*, translated by U Ba Kyaw, edited by Peter Masefield (London, 1980).

Second, there are the descriptions and discussions of merit-making practices in present-day Buddhist societies by anthropologists and other observers in the field. For a variety of these works, which also present significant interpretations of merit making, see, for Sri Lanka, Richard F. Gombrich's *Precept and Practice* (Oxford, 1971), chapters 4–7; for Thailand, Stanley J. Tambiah's "The Ideology of Merit and the Social Correlates of Buddhism in a Thai Village," in *Dialectic in Practical Religion* (Cambridge, 1968), edited by Edmund Leach; and, for Burma, Melford E. Spiro's *Buddhism and Society* (New York, 1970).

Third, there are the inscriptions left by merit makers in India and elsewhere to record their acts of merit. Various examples of these invaluable and fascinating documents may be

found in Dines Chandra Sircar's *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, vol. 1, *From the Sixth Century B.C. to the Sixth Century A.D.*, 2d ed. (Calcutta, 1965).

Finally, there are the more specialized scholarly studies of specific aspects of merit making. Only a few of these can be mentioned here. For a fine discussion of the various connotations of the word for "merit," see Jean Filliozat's "Sur le domaine sémantique de puṇya," in *Indianisme et bouddhisme: Mélanges offerts à Mgr. Étienne Lamotte* (Louvain, 1980). For two very helpful studies of the transfer of merit in Hinayāna Buddhism, see G. P. Malalasekera's "'Transference of Merit' in Ceylonese Buddhism," *Philosophy East and West* 17 (1967): 85-90, and Jean-Michel Agasse's "Le transfert de mérite dans le bouddhisme pāli classique," *Journal asiatique* 226 (1978): 311-332. The latter is an especially suggestive article and has an English summary. For a social scientist's view of the way in which merit making combines with other forces in defining social roles and hierarchies, see L. M. Hank's "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order," *American Anthropologist* 64 (1962): 1247-1261. Finally, for a clear discussion of the place of merit in the development of the *bodhisattva* ideal, see A. L. Basham's "The Evolution of the Concept of the Bodhisattva," in *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhism* (Waterloo, Ontario, 1981), edited by Leslie S. Kawamura.

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Christian Concepts

The term *merit* derives directly from the Latin *meritum* as used by theologians in Western Christianity beginning with Tertullian (160?-225?). Earlier Christian apologists had stressed the importance of postbaptismal works as a preparation for eternal life, and indeed this line of thought can be traced back in a general way to various New Testament writings. The important question as to whether the third-century teaching on merit emerged naturally out of early Christianity or whether it was a distortion, or at best a countertheme, is variously assessed by Catholic and Protestant theologians. Thus, in an article on merit (1962), Günther Bornkamm emphasized the absence of any concept of merit in the New Testament, while his co-writer Erdmann Schott roundly declared that "only the Roman Catholic church developed a doctrine of merit." However, both of these writers recognize the presence of those elements in early Christian writings, including the New Testament, which writers with a Catholic viewpoint see as the basis for the development of the doctrine. These elements are none other than judgment, reward, and punishment. Thus according to Anselm Forster (1965) references to such themes are so numerous that the apostolic fathers and the apologists simply brought the idea of merit into their proclamation of salvation as circumstances required, without any need for systematic reflection at that time.

The New Testament writers certainly made much use of this complex of ideas, as seen for example in the vision of judgment in *Matthew* 25. However, such ideas do not in themselves amount to or necessarily require the development of a doctrine of merit, as may be observed in parallel situations in the history of religions. Historically, there certainly was no general belief in the New Testament writings that some sufficient degree of merit either should or even could be accumulated for any purpose. The main thrust of early Christian teaching was rather to overcome any calculating religiosity in favor of a trusting reliance on the promises of God and spontaneous, uncircumscribed works of love. This holds good both for the teaching of Jesus himself, as far as this can be precisely ascertained, and also for the teaching of the major theological exponents, John and Paul. A doctrine of merit as such did not clearly arise until the third century.

Patristic View of Merit. With Tertullian, well known for his legal metaphors, the doctrine of merit came into semiformal existence. He distinguished between good works as a source of merit and nonobligatory good works as a source of extra merit, thus introducing an element of calculation. He also taught that human sinners are required to render satisfaction to God, a satisfaction that could be fulfilled by the offering of merits. Other church fathers accepted Tertullian's teaching, above all with a view to the care of postbaptismal life within the church.

Thus Cyprian (c. 205-258), bishop of Carthage, taught that sins could be purged by charitable works and by faith. This did not refer to those sins contracted before baptism, for they were purged by the blood and sanctification of Christ. But, Cyprian says in *On Works and Charity*, "sic eleemosyne extinguet peccatum" ("as water extinguishes fire, so charitable work extinguishes sin") and "eleemosynis atque operationibus iustis" ("as the fire of Gehenna is extinguished by the water of salvation, so the flame of transgressions is assuaged by almsgiving and just works"). He goes on to say that God is satisfied by just works and that sins are purged by the merits of mercifulness (*miserordiae meritis*). Indeed, by charitable works our prayers are made effective, our lives saved from danger, and our souls liberated from death.

Of importance for later understanding of the doctrine was the debate between Pelagius, Augustine, and others in the first part of the fifth century. Pelagius, whose teaching was current in Rome and North Africa, stressed the power of man through free will to choose and practice the good, and he viewed grace conveyed by the example and stimulus of Christ as a welcome but theoretically not absolutely essential extra. Augustine

considered Pelagius's teaching to present a faulty doctrine of man and to render Christian salvation all but superfluous. For the present subject the debate is of importance in that it had the effect of subordinating teaching on merit to the doctrine of grace. Since Pelagianism was condemned as heretical at the councils of Milevum and Carthage (in 416 and 418), Augustine's treatment of the subject set the framework for later Western definitions and ultimately for the divergence that broke out at the Reformation.

It may be noted in passing that the concept of merit was never worked out in detail and did not become a matter of controversy in the Eastern (Orthodox) churches because the operation of divine grace and human free will were and are seen in terms of synergy. By this is meant a cooperation of powers that are unequal but both essential. Although human response and action are necessary within the event of salvation, the preeminent role of grace means that calculations are of no relevance. The perfect example of synergy is provided by Mary, honored as the mother of God (*theotokos*).

Medieval and Reformation Views of Merit. In medieval Latin Christendom an increasingly carefully defined doctrine of merit was current. This doctrine was, with minor variations, consistent from Peter Abelard up until the Reformation. Both obligatory and nonobligatory (supererogatory) works were regarded as meritorious in the sense that they contributed, within the overall economy of divine grace, to the ensuring of salvation. Grace itself can be understood at various levels: all-important was *gratia praeveniens*, but Peter Lombard distinguished between the self-effective *gratia operans* and the *gratia cooperans* that assists in the creation of merit. Widespread in the Middle Ages was the distinction between acts that ensure divine recognition and acts that merely qualify for it at divine discretion. These two types of merit are referred to as condign merit (*meritum de condigno*) and congruent merit (*meritum de congruo*) respectively. However, the sovereignty of God was maintained by the teaching, for example of Thomas Aquinas, that while merit arises equally from free will and from grace, the effective status assigned to condign merit was itself still dependent ultimately on grace. The underlying idea here, not usually made explicit, is that the church in its teaching function can reliably assert the positive availability of grace in such circumstances. Some discussion centered on the possibility of regaining a state of grace through merit after committing deadly sin, which Bonaventure considered possible and Thomas impossible. Another aspect arose with John Duns Scotus, who emphasized the crucial role of the divine acceptance of merit over against the due inherent in the work itself. This permitted the as-

sertion that God recognizes the merits of supernaturally assisted works within the economy of salvation rather than of those performed by man in his natural state simply because he so wishes. (For more details on these and other aspects of the medieval doctrine of merit, see Schott, 1962.)

The doctrinal subtlety of many medieval theologians was clearly directed toward safeguarding the principle of the prior, determinative grace of God over against any idea that salvation could be ensured by calculated acts on man's part. However, not all medieval Christians had the ability, or, in their often short and hard lives, the leisure, to appreciate these points. Since theology had a place for individual acts that might be meritorious, that is, of assistance in securing salvation rather than damnation, the common assumption was that some of these acts had better be performed. It was plainly believed that bad things had to be compensated for by good things if lengthy or eternal punishment was to be avoided, and this meant in daily religious life: penance, good works, and the sacraments. Thus salvation became for many a transaction, albeit a mysterious one. The sale of indulgences in respect of a plenary remission of sins may be regarded as an extreme example of this and was understandably criticized at the Reformation as an abuse. That the element of weighing, or paying, had become a standard feature of Western Catholic tradition, was evident also, however, in the large numbers of chantries endowed for masses to be said for the patron's benefit, via a transfer of merit, after his death.

The Reformation saw a massive reassertion of grace and a straightforward rejection of reliance on works of any kind. With Martin Luther the language of justification was central but was used paradoxically, as in Pauline literature, to refer to God's gracious justification of man through Christ, even though man himself is not able to stand before God in judgment. With this fundamental shift of emphasis, which became increasingly critical of current religious practice, the doctrine of merit related to works was swept away. Yet the vocabulary of merit did not immediately disappear. Indeed the traditional terminology of condign and congruent merit occurs in Luther's *Dictata super Psalterium* (Lectures on the Psalms) and serves as the basis for a gradual transposition of the concept of merited salvation into that of unmerited salvation (cf. Rupp, 1953, esp. pp. 138f.). Thus the idea of the insufficiency of merit or of works provided Luther at one and the same time with a polemical differentiation from the existing tradition of Western Christianity and an invitation to faith in the saving and transforming power of grace leading to good works as the fruit of Christian life. As far as these matters were concerned, the position of other reformers, in-

cluding John Calvin with his formula *sola gratia* (by grace alone), was essentially similar. As a result, wholesale changes occurred in the practical forms of religion. At the same time the transactional aspect was concentrated in the doctrine of atonement through the merits of the death of Christ.

Merit in Catholicism. The positive significance of merit in the context of the religious life was reaffirmed for Western Catholicism at the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the relevant definitions and thirty-three anathemas being contained in the sixteenth chapter of the text for the sixth session: “De fructu justificationis, hoc est, de merito bonorum operum, deque ipsius meriti ratione” (Denzinger, 1965). The argument is tightly linked to the concept of justification, which is viewed as a process within the believer that leads to meritorious good works. Since the merit of good works was considered to bring about specific results contributing to the increase of grace in the present life, to eternal life itself, and to the increase of glory, room was left for the continued pastoral management of religious life in terms of relative achievement, within the overall context of divine grace. This has essentially been the basis of Catholic religiosity ever since.

Thus the marketing of indulgences was abandoned, but the attainment of an indulgence through devotional practice (e.g., on “the first nine Fridays”) or through special sets of prayers (Our Fathers, Ave Marias, etc.), leading to a reduction of the number of days required to be spent in purgatory (by 500, 1,000, etc.), has continued down to the present. Moreover such remissions can, via the communion of saints and the work of Christ himself, be applied to the suffering of souls already in purgatory, through prayer, fasting, alms, and the saying of Mass. As one popular nineteenth-century work put it: “She [the church] appears before the tribunal of the judge, not only as a suppliant, but also as the stewardess of the treasure of the merits of Christ and his saints, and from it offers to him the ransom for the souls in purgatory, with full confidence that he will accept her offer and release her children from the tortures of the debtor’s prison” (F. J. Shadler, *The Beauties of the Catholic Church*, New York, 1881, p. 404). One could hardly hope to find a clearer statement both of the idea of the transfer of merit and of the transactional manner in which merit is, or can be, understood. Other presentations content themselves with a loose statement of the need for both grace and works, thereby allowing elaboration at the pastoral level. Thus a modern catechism declares: “We can do no good work of ourselves toward our salvation; we need the help of God’s grace,” but also: “Faith alone will not save us without good works; we must also have hope and charity” (Catholic Truth

Society, *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, London, 1971, pp. 22f.). The consciousness of ordinary Catholic believers may be summed up in the view that while one cannot ensure one’s own salvation one is certainly expected to make a contribution.

In recent years theological controversy about merit in the context of Christianity has lost much of its sharpness for three reasons. First, the theme is subsumed, for Protestants, into the greater theme of faith and grace over against works. From this point of view relying on merits or merit is simply a variant form of relying on works and therefore hardly requires separate consideration. Second, although the concept of merit is retained by Catholics, it is usually made clear, at least in formal accounts, that the prior grace of God is an essential condition. Although, admittedly, this does not meet Protestant objections to all and every form of reliance on works, it does mean that from the Catholic side, too, attention is directed fundamentally toward man’s position in the overall economy of divine grace. Third, and this applies to Protestant and Catholic theologians alike, interest is directed toward other issues such as the historical and social responsibilities of Christianity, questions arising through the encounter with non-Christian traditions, and philosophical reflections about the very nature of religious language. In such a perspective, while theological viewpoints regarding merit remain distinct, it is not currently considered to be a matter requiring intense or urgent debate.

[See also Atonement, *article on Christian Concepts*; Free Will and Predestination, *article on Christian Concepts*; Grace; and Justification.]

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