# Karmic event: Buddhists and the tsunami

by Terry C Muck in the February 22, 2005 issue

When disaster strikes, people turn to religion to help them answer two questions: *Why did this happen*? and *What should we do about it*? Call the first the meaning question and the second the action question. In the aftermath of the tsunami, which struck several predominantly Buddhist lands, one could see Buddists answering these questions in distinctive ways—though not necessarily ways that are entirely incongruent with Christianity.

Consider first the meaning question. Although different Christians might answer the meaning question with slightly different formulations, almost all would develop an answer out of their ethical, monotheistic tradition. Christians believe in a single, powerful God who desires good for the created world, including human beings. The Christian response to disaster, then, is to pray: *Why*, *God*, *did you let this happen*? *How can this possibly be in your plan for us*?

Christians are faced with a theological conundrum called theodicy: how can this act of evil arise from a good God? Though the answers (or at least what are taken as answers) to this question may differ, the act of going to God with the question in the first place is the quintessential Christian act, an act of acknowledging God's power that somehow brings succor to the devastated.

Buddhism, like Christianity, has no single answer to the meaning question. But almost all Buddhists would answer it in the context of the Buddha's teachings on suffering, impermanence and karma. We suffer because everything is impermanent, changing. The world changes according to the laws of karma, an overall web of good and bad deeds by persons and institutions.

For Buddhists, one effects change not by praying to God but by meditating on the complexity of karmic events that are responsible for the moment-to-moment changes that continually alter the world. The problem is that none of us can fully account for the entire karmic web. An answer to the specific "why" eludes us. The

quintessential Buddhist act is to acknowledge impermanence and the resulting suffering, and to vow to contribute positively what one can to the ever-changing karmic web. A certain peace, equanimity, is the result.

The differences between these two systems are profound. One asserts a single, all-powerful God who determines the destiny of the world; the other, if it asserts gods at all, sees them as divine helpers (such as Kuan-Yin, the goddess of compassion) rather than all-powerful determiners. One tradition sees cause and effect as operative only as mitigated by divine fiat and human free will; the other elevates cause and effect to absolute status—at least in the samsaric or earthly world.

Yet the profound differences in these two religious understandings do not produce a radical divergence in answer to the second question, the action question, but rather an awesome congruity. What should we do in the face of unprecedented disaster? First, help the suffering; second, correct what can be identified as causative factors.

In one of his parables Jesus modeled what Christians are to do: “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matt. 25:35-36).

The Christian moves from the meaning question to the action question out of response to God’s commands to help the poor. The poor need not be Christian, as Jesus showed in his parable of the Good Samaritan. Indeed, Christians believe that God made each of us in such a way that we have a disposition to help others, even though that disposition is sometimes stymied by sin.

The Buddha in one of his final charges to his disciples said, “Walk, monks, on tour for the benefit of the people, for the happiness of the people out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the blessing, the happiness of devas and men” (Vinaya Pitika, Mahavagga: 28). Although Buddhists do not do things out of obedience to the Buddha, the fact that the Buddha saw compassionate activity as important makes it a model for human behavior.

One Buddhist relief and development agency in South Asia cites these aims in helping others: “purity of mind, peace in society, and a disaster-free world.” The karmic web creates mutual dependencies that make us all part of a whole. Doing good for others and remembering others in candlelit services brings merit to both

the rememberers and those remembered, and creates a better world.

As relief efforts began, Buddhists and Christians stood shoulder to shoulder helping those in need. Christian agencies like World Vision, Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service worked side by side with agencies like Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka and Tzu Chi in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan and elsewhere.

Not everything has gone smoothly. Some Christians groups have used the disaster as an opportunity for proselytization efforts, making it difficult to establish the trust needed for coordinating relief efforts. On the whole, however, there has been an inspiring witness of interreligious cooperation.

Neither Buddhists nor Christians regard their answers to the meaning questions as irrelevant or interchangeable. And it is the respective answers to the meaning questions that motivate Buddhists and Christians to act. Without those specific answers, their good deeds would be nothing more than human attempts to be good. It is the religious contexts that sanctify the deeds.

But the response to the tsunami disaster has offered the hopeful sign that religions of the world can acknowledge their different religious commitments and at the same time join hands for the purpose of promoting human flourishing. Agreeing for the sake of the present and future right to disagree may not be the easiest thing to do but it is what is required for all our hopes for peace.