



washingtonpost.com

Did Bad Karma Cause Cyclone?

Advertisement

Burma's People Say Rulers' Crackdown On Monks to Blame

By Daniel Burke
Religion News Service
Saturday, May 17, 2008; B09

After a natural disaster strikes in the United States, the question almost immediately arises: Where was God? Or, did God allow this to happen?

Half a world away, as Burma digs out from a devastating cyclone that experts say could claim 100,000 lives or more, the question -- and answer -- are quite different.

About 80 percent of Burma's estimated 52 million people are Buddhist, and many there rely on the principle of karma to explain the storm, scholars say.

Specifically, many of Burma's people believe [Cyclone Nargis](#) is a karmic consequence of military rulers' brutal crackdown on Buddhist monks last fall, said Ingrid Jordt, an anthropology professor at the [University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee](#) who was once a Buddhist nun in Burma and maintains ties there.

"The immediate explanation was: This is retribution for killing monks," Jordt said. "In any cataclysm, human beings seek to make sense of something that completely destroys the continuity of life. It's an attempt to bring the world back into harmony."

The word "karma" is often misunderstood by Westerners as one's inescapable destiny, scholars say. In Sanskrit, the word means "action" and refers to the act that creates one's fate, not fate itself. For Buddhists, particularly those in Southeast Asia, karma regulates morality as firmly as Newton's law rules motion: To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Karma extends to other Buddhist traditions as well. The [Dalai Lama](#) has reportedly said that Tibet's loss of sovereignty in the 1950s can be at least partially attributed to his country's feudal past. A spokesman for the exiled spiritual leader could not be reached to clarify his comments.

Hindus also believe in karma. [Gandhi](#) claimed that a 1934 earthquake was punishment for India's harsh treatment of its perpetually lower-class "untouchables," Indian author Arvind Sharma has written.

A distant echo of such ideas can perhaps be heard in Christian leaders who tied the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and Hurricane Katrina to sexual immorality in New York City and New Orleans.

American Zen Buddhist and author Brad Warner said blaming Burma's cyclone on bad karma hews uncomfortably close to those ideas.

"To me it sounds like we're just substituting karma for God," he said.

And with so many innocent victims, karma seems a harsh and indiscriminate explanation, Warner said.

But in Burma, weather is tied to rulers' behavior, Jordt said.

Forecasts in the country's state-run papers almost always read, "The weather is fair throughout the land." It's a way of saying everything is fine, karmawise, Jordt said.

But last fall the military junta imprisoned or killed dozens of Buddhist monks who took to the streets to protest rapid inflation. Monks are revered in Burma, and violence against them is thought to send one to hell.

After that, Jordt said, "people knew something was going to happen."

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

; or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company