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Karma versus Magic: Dissonance and Syncretism in Vernacular Thai Buddhism

Kanya Wattanagun*

For a number of scholars, syncretism as an analytical approach to a group's or an individual's religiosity has several shortcomings. Denoting the mixture of tenets or practices belonging to different traditions, syncretism presupposes a clearly demarcated boundary between the syncretized traditions (McDaniel 2011, 17). It also implies scholarly wrought labels and categories, which are hardly shared by the people whose religiosity becomes the subject of academic scrutiny (Tambiah 1970, 42; T. G. Kirsch 2004, 706). In this paper I demonstrate that despite its shortcomings, syncretism can be employed to expound vernacular Thai Buddhism, whose heterogeneous composition has been argued to be "beyond syncretism" (Pattana 2005, 461). Ethnographic cases presented in this paper reveal that several Thai Buddhists, noting a dissonance between the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic, differentiate Buddhist from non-Buddhist elements. The rationalization they employ to resolve this dissonance is a syncretistic activity that renders their multifarious religiosity internally consistent and meaningful. These cases challenge the assumption that syncretism is inapplicable to the highly diversified and hybrid ways Thai Buddhists observe their faith since they neither draw the boundary between diverse religious tenets and customs nor adhere to a single orthodox ideal.

Keywords: vernacular Thai Buddhism, syncretism, magic, karma

Syncretism: A Problematic Analytical Model?

Syncretism as an approach to an individual's or a group's religiosity has been problematized in many respects. Its descriptive definition, which denotes a process in which "elements of two different 'traditions' interact or combine" (Shaw and Stewart 1994, 10), implies a clearly demarcated boundary between the syncretized elements. This boundary, however, presupposes static, universal categories, which hardly exist among diverse ways people interpret and observe their faiths (McDaniel 2011, 17; Pattana 2012, 14). The subjective definition of the term, which means either "illegitimate mixing" in a pejorative sense or "legitimate mixing" in a positive sense, also entails grave pitfalls

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(Droogers 1989, 8). The negative interpretation evokes the image of a pure, authentic tradition that is debased once it is commingled with foreign elements (Shaw and Stewart 1994, 2). The positive application essentializes etic, scholarly wrought categories that are not necessarily adopted by the people whose hybrid religiosity becomes the subject of academic scrutiny (Tambiah 1970, 42; T. G. Kirsch 2004, 706).

This outlook on the discrepancy between emic and etic perspectives, which renders syncretism a problematic analytical model for some scholars, articulates two allied sentiments. First, religion as observed by people in real, diverse contexts is distinct from religion as defined by elites within the hierarchy of institutional religion or by scholars in academia (Yoder 1974, 7–8). Second, it is biased to refer to the elite’s definition of religion as the norm in relation to which laymen’s religiosity is assessed and analyzed (Tambiah 1970, 41; Primiano 1995, 46–47). However, can we discard syncretism on the grounds that since laypeople do not differentiate tenets and practices belonging to diverse belief traditions, they do not syncretize these elements but rather simultaneously adopt them? Or can we propound that syncretism as an analytical concept is inadequate because it inadvertently asserts scholars’ preconceived categories, and laypeople do not make sense of their religiosity in terms of these preconceptions?

This paper presents ethnographic cases from Thailand that reveal ways in which lay and ordained Thai Buddhists resolve a dissonance within their manifold religiosity. Practicing Theravada Buddhism, a branch of Buddhism that gained influence in mainland Southeast Asia beginning in the twelfth century CE (Swearer 2010, ix), Thai Buddhists have an understanding of a religious goal that revolves around the doctrine of karma and its notions of merit (*bun*), demerit (*baab*), and rebirth (Piker 1973, 300). Theravada Buddhism, nonetheless, is not the only tradition that informs Thai Buddhists’ religiosity. Elements of non-Theravada origins, such as magico-animistic and Chinese Mahayana¹⁾ tenets and practices, constitute Thai Buddhists’ religious repertoires. The ethnographic cases presented in the following section demonstrate that these elements from diverse traditions do not always peacefully coexist within the mindset of the believing individual. In several cases, rationalizations are made to impose a hierarchy on contradictory tenets. This cognitive act resolves the dissonance noted by the believing individual and renders his or her manifold religiosity internally coherent. In light of this undertaking, I suggest that Thai Buddhists’ religiosity is not really “beyond syncretism” (Pattana 2005, 461), because, as illustrated by the cases presented in the following section, syncretization is

1) A Chinese Mahayana component whose significance in Thailand’s religious landscape has become most notable in the twentieth century is the worship of the Bodhisattva Guanyin (or *Kuan Im* in Thai). For more on this practice in contemporary Thailand, see Nithi (1994), Jackson (1999), Pattana (2005), Cohen (2008).

one of many strategies adopted by Thai Buddhists to configure their inclusive and heterogeneous religious repertoires.

The thought process Thai Buddhists adopt to align their belief in magic with the doctrine of karma, I argue, evinces syncretism, which in this study specifically means the conscious synthesizing of tenets or practices considered to be of different categories and fundamentally incompatible with one another.²⁾ Many studies of Thai Buddhism have shown that the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic exist side by side in the religious life of Thai Buddhists (Wells 1960, 6; Tambiah 1970, 41; Piker 1972; Terwiel 2012, Chapter 9). As Kenneth E. Wells observes, Thai Buddhism provides its adherents the “means for making merit for self and others” and “assurance of safety and good fortune by means of devotion, good conduct, amulets, and verbal mantras” (Wells 1960, 6). Thai Buddhists’ subscription to the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic contains a dissonance, which is expressed and redressed by Thai Buddhists interviewed in this study: if a person’s karma is accountable for the fortunes and miseries, the successes and failures, that he experiences in his present life, his resort to magic seems illogical. The belief in the efficacy of magic clashes head-on with the doctrine of karma since the former holds that a person can secure success and fortunes without having to perform the deeds that warrant these rewards.

Scholars who explore the relationship between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs in South and Southeast Asia express diverse views about this relationship. Some, as Barend J. Terwiel remarks, are baffled by the way in which Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements “become so intermingled that at present it is impossible to draw a distinction between them” (Terwiel 1976, 391).³⁾ Others, privileging scriptures and scholastic traditions over popular aspects of religion, imply that non-Buddhist elements debase “the so-called noble ideals of Buddhism” (Ames 1964a, 75).⁴⁾ Another group of scholars, sympathetic to lay

2) The word “syncretism” has been used to denote different things by various agents in diverse contexts of usage. In Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a group of Protestant theologians called for the reconciliation of diverse Protestant denominations. Their opponents, however, contended that the reconciliation would lead to syncretism, which means the confusing jumble of religious ideas and practices in this context. In the Renaissance period, the term denoted a continuity between Christian theology and classical philosophy, which the Renaissance philosophers and scholars enthusiastically embraced (Shaw and Stewart 1994, 3). For variable ways in which the word has been used and defined, see Droogers (1989, 7–25) and Shaw and Stewart (1994, 2–9).

3) Some scholars who express this view are John E. deYoung (1963, 110), Michael A. Wright (1968, 1), and Anuman Rajadhon (2009, 35).

4) In a footnote, Ames lists the studies that propound such a view. The list includes Copleston (1908, 272–290), Elliot (1921, 42), Stephen (1953), and Ariyapala (1956). I note here, however, that this view, espoused by some scholars of Buddhism several decades ago, seems to greatly diminish in the present-day scholarship of Buddhism. In the case of Thai Buddhism, the pejorative view of popular Buddhism has been expressed primarily by ordained Buddhists and lay social critics who communicate their comments via mass media. See Taylor (1999, 163–165) and Pattana (2006, 265–267).

adherents and their hybrid religious practices, posit that what doctrinalists construe as a meaningless jumble of Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements does not necessarily bother people who practice Buddhism in real, diverse contexts (Tambiah 1970, 41) and that to interpret this intricate combination based on a scholar's preconceptions of religion is counterproductive (McDaniel 2011, 229).

Despite diverse stances on the problem, I hold that these different approaches fail to recognize the possibility that people who practice "popular" Buddhism can think about their religious practices on a conceptual level. They seem to concur that laypeople do not share concepts and categories held by elites in the institutionalized religion and by scholars who study religion in academia. Therefore, it is quite futile to make sense of their religiosity on the basis of the taxonomy and the idioms formulated within scholastic tradition or academic settings. This connotation, I argue, perpetuates the view that since people who practice popular Buddhism do not adhere to dogmatic categories or the idea of orthodoxy espoused by religious elites and scholars, they incessantly create new combinations of Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements to meet their ever-shifting spiritual needs. And they do so without feeling obligated to justify their hybrid religious practices.⁵⁾ The ethnographic cases presented in this paper prove otherwise. They show that Thai Buddhists do not unreflectively and indiscriminately adopt all religious tenets and practices regardless of their different origins and implications. Individuals interviewed in this study aptly pointed out a dissonance between the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic. They also developed a rationalization aimed at resolving this dissonance. This cognitive process indicates that, to a significant extent, informants make a distinction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements. They subordinate the belief in magic to the doctrine of karma to maintain the orthodoxy of the Buddhist tenet.

Apart from this introduction, I segment this study into three parts. The first part—"Karma versus Magic: Dissonance and Syncretization"—has two subsections. "Karma versus Magic: A Peculiar Mental Scheme?" discusses a mode of thought that perceives a dissonance between the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic. I argue here that this mental scheme is not an idiosyncratic trait peculiar to a few doctrinalists but a recurrent view expressed by several Thai Buddhists who are simultaneously engaged with the "philosophical" and "practical" aspects of Buddhism.⁶⁾ The discussion in this

5) McDaniel (2011, 228) directly expresses this view. Pattana (2005, 464–466) and Jackson (1999, 311) imply the same, noting the decline of the orthodoxy of state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism vis-à-vis the proliferation of newly minted supernatural cults in contemporary, capitalist Thailand.

6) E. R. Leach suggests two strata of a religion: philosophical religion and practical religion. The former is prevalent among the intellectuals, to whom religion is an intricate system of ethical principles and doctrines. The latter is religion as observed by "an ordinary churchgoer" (Leach 1968, 1) whose religious practices are relatively more oriented toward practical, worldly concerns.

part is aimed to contextualize ethnographic cases presented in the succeeding subsection, “Dissonance and Syncretization.” This section analyzes oral statements given by individual Thai Buddhists who note the dissonance and devise rationalizations to reconcile the belief in magic to the karma postulate. I further argue that by these rationalizations, informants can maintain the authority of the doctrine of karma without giving up their faith in instrumental magic. The second part—“Syncretism or Repertoire?”—delineates how ethnographic cases presented in the preceding section contribute to a well-rounded understanding of vernacular Thai Buddhism. The final part—“Problematizing Anti-syncretism”—discusses the ramifications of this study.

Informants’ accounts were collected through my fieldwork in the northeast of Thailand from May to August 2013. In order to protect informants’ privacy, only their first names are given. All Thai sources, when quoted, were translated to English by me.

Karma versus Magic: Dissonance and Syncretization

1. Karma versus Magic: A Peculiar Mental Scheme?

A blog maintained by a lay Buddhist who describes himself as “a college graduate from Chiang Mai who has lived in Bangkok for more than seven years” (Norasath 2011) contains the following remark on the efficacy of amulets:

If we Buddhists grant that the law of karma is the Truth, and that people reap the fruit of their actions, then let’s consider this scenario. A vicious person, wearing a powerful amulet around his neck—let’s say the amulet was consecrated by Somdet To⁷⁾—, do you think it would safeguard him from harm? Or would it render him invulnerable or invincible? I have pondered upon this question, trying to use my personal logic to solve the puzzle. If amulets and talismans are always efficacious, regardless of the moral quality of those who carry them, then what good do we get from observing the law of karma? All sinners just need to get hold of sacred amulets, then they can easily dodge the karmic retribution. (*ibid.*)

The cited excerpt articulates a dissonance that troubles the blogger. He seems to be fully aware of the fundamental incompatibility between the belief in magic and the doctrine of karma, and the fact that both tenets have occupied prominent places in the religious life of Thai Buddhists. Feeling obligated to justify the subscription to conflicting

7) Somdet To is a casual abbreviation of Somdet Phra Phutthachan (To Phrommarangsi), the author of the renowned *Jinapanjara Gatha*. Somdet To has been much revered by Thai Buddhists for his exemplary religious conduct as well as for his reputed spiritual power. He was the originator of the prestigious Somdet Wat Rakang amulets, whose exalted monetary value is well known among Thai amulet collectors.

tenets that characterizes his own as well as his fellow Buddhists' religiosity, the blogger makes the following rationalization:

I do believe that these items [i.e., amulets and talismans] serve virtuous people. Honest bearers can take refuge in their amulets when facing threats, because miracles save only righteous people. (*ibid.*)

The blogger redresses the dissonance by placing a condition on the efficacy of amulets, and this condition is nothing else but bearers' good karma. This cognitive process of positioning magic vis-à-vis karma to remark on or tackle their fundamental incongruity is not an idiosyncratic mental scheme. A decree issued by King Rama I on August 1782 lists the names of spirits and deities that Siamese subjects can legally worship. However, the King maintained the supremacy of the law of karma, denouncing the view that supplication rituals addressing spirits and deities could relieve miseries resulting from volitional acts:

Those whose minds were estranged from the Triple Gems, when tormented by the fruit of their bad karma, are ignorant of the real agent behind their ordeals. They thus seek refuge in spirits and deities, holding the false view that the Triple Gems fail to rescue them from adversities and misfortunes. When the retribution is complete, and the ordeal comes to an end, they falsely assume that spirits and deities respond to their requests. These people, having totally forsaken the Triple Gems, are bound for the lower realms of existence. (Rama I 1986, 418–419)

I share Thomas Kirsch's view that this decree demonstrates the orthodoxy of the doctrine of karma as construed by King Rama I, who holds that "fortune and affliction alike ultimately result from *karma*, not from the actions of spirits or gods" (A. T. Kirsch 1977, 241; emphasis in original). I elaborate on Kirsch's observation by further arguing that the decree gives us a glimpse of the dissonance felt by the King, who seems to perceive that the Siamese belief in the power of spirits and deities clashes with the causal paradigm posited by the doctrine of karma. Stanley Tambiah cogently describes this conflict:

... if the doctrine of karma gives an explanation of present suffering and squarely puts the burden of release on individual effort, then the doctrine that supernatural agents can cause or relieve sufferings and that relief can come through propitiating them contradicts the *karma* postulate. (Tambiah 1970, 41; emphasis in original)

The King positioned the doctrine of karma vis-à-vis spirit worship and discerned the contradictory outlooks on cause and effect these two complexes of tenets imply. Had he not noted the dissonance, he might not have reaffirmed the orthodoxy of the karma

postulate by decrying spirit worship.

Despite different configurations of their religious ideas conditioned by their different subject positions and time periods, the blogger and the King regard the magical means of achieving desirable effects (by resorting to spirits and deities, by carrying magical items, or by means of magical rituals) as antithetical to the concept of volitional acts and their automatic fruition espoused by the doctrine of karma. Their remarks evince a mode of thought that situates karma and magic in contrast to one another. The juxtaposition results in a recognition that these distinct causal schemes espouse contradictory definitions of consequential actions. I note here that not all Thai Buddhists imagine karma and magic in this particular fashion. However, this mental scheme is not uncommon. It has been reflected in oral and written statements made by Thai Buddhists from diverse backgrounds. The noted conflict between the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic presented in this section is neither peculiar to a few Buddhist doctrinalists nor the product of my academic training that indulges in inconsistency on a conceptual level. Instead, it has been discerned by many Thai Buddhists who are not oblivious to underlying meanings of the diverse religious tenets and practices they adopt.

One more example is delineated here to bolster my argument that the felt conflict between karma and magic is not a sentiment peculiar to a few intellectual elites. A book on apotropaic rituals titled *Kao wat kao thi phithi sado khro* (The nine apotropaic rituals of nine temples) provides a detailed description of the rituals performed by nine famous Buddhist monks from nine temples located in different regions of Thailand. Regardless of their varied ritualistic procedures and the types of merit participants believe they convey, all nine rituals address a twofold objective: warding off evil and attracting boons. Given the popular framing of the book, apparent in its emphasis on the efficacy of apotropaic rituals and the mystical power of Buddhist adepts who perform these rituals, it is not unwarranted to regard the monograph as a manifestation of vernacular Thai Buddhism. The author, however, maintains that apotropaic rituals cannot ward off karmic retribution and that people cannot rely solely on rituals for fortunes and merits because all boons are realized by volitional acts that warrant them:

Those cult leaders who tell people to halt or abate karmic retaliation by means of rituals perpetuate the false belief that humans can change or evade the consequence of their actions. Holders of this false view are definitely destined for hell realms. Humans may take refuge in rituals. They may ward off evil luck or summon good fortune by rituals invented for variable purposes. However, they must have faith in the law of karma. They must first and foremost rely on their actions and efforts, which are the surest means to secure fortunes and merits. (Sira 2016, 23–24)

Sira Arsawadeeros, though granting the efficacy of apotropaic rituals, contends that karma

is the supreme causal agent responsible for merits and miseries humans experience in their lives. Karma and magic are positioned in a hierarchical order as the author notices that the granted efficacy of magical rituals contradicts the paramount principle of individual effort upheld by the karma postulate. Similar to the two cases mentioned earlier, this statement reveals the view of its author that karma and magic entail contradictory implications. Therefore, in order to retain them both, Sira feels compelled to resolve the dissonance by subsuming one under the other. The author's rationalization that apotropaic rituals are efficacious but their efficacy does not override the law of karma reveals a syncretism, by which what the believing individual recognizes as incongruous religious tenets are reconciled and retained within a single mindset. In light of this analysis, suffice it to say that the author of the quoted excerpt possesses a hybrid religious mindset in which syncretism is one of several ordering principles employed to maintain sense and consistency. This argument is reified by ethnographic cases presented in the following subsection, which delineates ways in which Thai Buddhists who note the dissonance between karma and magic redress the conflict.

2. Dissonance and Syncretization

The informants whose accounts are presented in this study noted a conflict between the doctrine of karma and the belief in instrumental magic. They addressed this discrepancy in variable fashions. Mr. Woravit, a Thai Buddhist who practices meditation and studies magic spells, stated that despite his belief in the power of magic and rituals in granting a person's wish, he harbors no doubt about the supremacy of a karmic force. Mr. Woravit's justification, which is presented in the following subsection, is indicative of the dissonance between the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic from his perspective: if instrumental magic and rituals unfailingly bring about desirable effects, the doctrine of karma, which rules that worldly achievements are the fruits of a person's good karma, cannot be true.

In a similar fashion, Venerable Ko, a Buddhist monk in a rural monastery in Buriram Province, made a justification that redresses a noted inconsistency within his hybrid religious practice. Being well versed in healing spells and rituals, Venerable Ko claimed that the success or failure of a healing rite was determined by a karmic bond between the healer and his patient. The informant made a causal connection between an individual's karma and the efficacy of healing magic to resolve what he construed as a crucial dissonance: If magic is believed to be invariably successful in producing desirable consequences, then it can be employed to avert the effect of bad karma or to benefit a person despite his vicious deeds. This assumption is problematic as it contradicts the doctrine of karma, which holds that nothing can interfere with the operation of karmic machination.

In the following subsections, I present the accounts given by each informant and discuss their implications.

2.1. Mr. Woravit

Mr. Woravit is a lecturer at a vocational college in Sakon Nakhon, a province in the upper part of northeast Thailand. He is a self-professed Buddhist who construes meditation as “the science of the mind,” by which he means the empirically verifiable method to discipline the mind for certain ends, such as a total elimination of mental defilements or an attainment of mystical power. Considering his educational background and socioeconomic status, Mr. Woravit is a member of the middle class in a provincial city, whose career in the field of electrical technology does not hinder his interest in spiritual matters. He wrote and published a monograph on psychic experiences he had while practicing profound meditation.⁸⁾ He also attested to the reality of past-life recollection, which is a supramundane ability he claimed to have acquired through the vigorous practice of meditation. By the time I interviewed him in July 2013, Mr. Woravit had taken part in an archeological expedition that he and his friend had initiated in search of an ancient Khmer temple Mr. Woravit saw in his psychic vision. In our discussion about the efficacy of instrumental magic, the informant proclaimed the efficacy of charms and spells. However, he argued against the view that magic could yield favorable consequences despite the absence of effort to achieve such effects through natural means. Such belief, he elaborated, exaggerated the power of magic. He said spells and charms do not invoke wealth, luck, or other worldly boons out of thin air. They merely tap into the user’s positive karmic force and make its fruit most favorable to him or her. Within this explanatory scheme, magic is useless without the store of good karma its user has accumulated. This interplay between karma and magic is described by Mr. Woravit:

Magic does not bring about boons and merits. People can obtain them only through their just and persistent effort, that is, through their good karma. Spells are merely means through which a person taps into the store of his good karma. By chanting a spell, the chanter’s mind is calm and receptive of positive karmic force. Metaphorically speaking, when a person does a good deed, he deposits a sum of good karma in his bank account. As he performs more good deeds, his balance

8) Mr. Woravit’s conception of profound meditation and psychic power seems to have a basis in the doctrine of six supranormal knowledges (*abhiññā*) included in the the *Sutta Pitaka* and *Vinaya Pitaka*. The doctrine construes mystical power as a quality achieved by a concentrated mind while dwelling in an advanced stage of profound meditation (*jhāna*). On the relationship between meditation and superhuman power in the Pali canon and Buddhist scholastic traditions, see Clough (2011) and Fiordalis (2008, 134–140). For ways in which this tenet informs lay Buddhists’ conceptions of superhuman power and types of individual who possess this power, see Pranke (2011) on contemporary Burma, and Scott (2011) on modern Thailand.

accumulates. Spells are passcodes that grant access to this bank account. You chant these spells to withdraw your good karma from your account, and its benevolent force rewards you with success, wealth, love, or other good things you wish for. A person may chant a spell for the success of his new business and it works out as he wishes. Why? Because he has a sufficient sum of good karma in his account. Another person may do the same but experience total failure. This is, likewise, due to the absence of—or a shortfall in—his good karma. (Personal interview, July 19, 2013)

Magic that upholds rather than contradicts the law of karma as described by Mr. Woravit is not an idiosyncratic concept. Tambiah quoted the acting abbot of That Thaung temple in Bangkok who explained that Thai people wear small Buddha images around their necks because they “believe that they will give them body protection, and that they will ensure that *good action will yield good returns*” (quoted in Tambiah 1984, 199; italics added). Underlying this explanation is the idea that the magical power of amulets complements the benevolent force of an individual’s good karma. A similar sentiment underlies a comment about the efficacy of magic posted on a Thai website that sells amulets and talismans:

Those who do not possess amulets or do not know any useful spells are totally subject to their karma. But people who make good use of these supplementaries can ameliorate the effect of a hostile karmic force. It does not mean, however, that amulets and spells can negate malevolent karmic effect. Yet they can lessen its severity. To elucidate, a vendor suffering from karmic retribution would be unable to sell a single item. But with the help of amulets and spells, he manages to sell a thing or two. (Krunoi Bandykam 2014)

These comments, like Mr. Woravit’s, reiterate the idea that karmic force is the real agent behind the efficacy of instrumental magic. This justification would not be necessary if Thai Buddhists merely observed the doctrine of karma and took part in magic cults while being unaware of the different connotations underlying these practices. Mr. Woravit, like the acting abbot and the webmaster whose comments are quoted above, recognizes a dissonance underlying his hybrid religious practice in which the role of karma as the supreme causal agent clashes with the given efficacy of instrumental magic. Although the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic can coexist within a mindset, one needs to be subsumed under the other in order to resolve the dissonance, since these two outlooks espouse contradictory views of cause and effect. The former holds that intentional actions automatically yield particular consequences and no external force can compromise this automaticity. The latter, on the contrary, proclaims that intended effects can be induced by tapping into mystical power, which can be harnessed and put to use by means of spells and charms. Mr. Woravit resolves this conflict by subordinating the belief in magic to

the doctrine of karma, maintaining that magic is efficacious only when it agrees with the user's karmic build.

The acting abbot's and the webmaster's comments reveal a striking divergence from the canonical stance on the inalterability of karma. The Buddha, refuting the fatalistic sentiment inherent in the Jain concept of karma, which holds that a person is inevitably doomed once he commits wicked deeds, expounded in the *Sankha Sutta* that the effects of past evil deeds could be alleviated by abstaining from evil acts and by developing a meritorious state of mind.⁹⁾ As evinced in the *Sankha Sutta*, the idea that there is a method to lessen severe karmic force is not a new concept created by Thai Buddhists. Nonetheless, the role of magic in placating hostile karmic force or enhancing benevolent karmic force is a new component not found anywhere in the canon. This new component, I argue, results from an acute awareness of dissonance experienced by Thai Buddhists as they observe the doctrine of karma and enlist the service of instrumental magic. The noted incongruity induces a rationalization that aligns the belief in magic with the karma postulate.¹⁰⁾ This rationalization characterizes a hybrid religious practice in which a person can resort to instrumental magic and still be faithful to his belief in karma.

2.2. Venerable Ko

Venerable Ko, like Mr. Woravit, noted a crucial problem with the belief that magic operates by its own rules and is not subject to the law of karma. Underlying this belief is an implication—as indicated by the informant—that magic can overpower karmic force. Venerable Ko approached this issue from the stance of an ordained Buddhist who also serves as a spiritual healer and exorcist. Venerable Ko grew up in a peasant village in Buriram. Born in the late 1970s to a peasant family, the monk obtained secondary education from a village school then moved to Bangkok, where he worked as a menial worker for a short period of time. The informant then returned to Buriram, entered the monastic order, and served as an abbot for a new temple in Ban Nongbualong village, not far from his native community. In comparison to Mr. Woravit, Venerable Ko may be designated as a member of the working class from a rural area who appears to be more engaged with

9) The *Sankha Sutta* or “The Conch Trumpet” (Thanissaro Bhikkhu 1999b) is included in the *Samyutta Nikāya* of the *Sutta Pitaka*.

10) Steven Piker, in his study of inconsistency in Thai Buddhists' religious beliefs, presents ethnographic cases that manifest variable ways in which Thai Buddhists justify their belief in the power of amulets that contradict the doctrine of karma—“the master explanatory principle” (Piker 1972, 217) that Piker's informants hold onto. Most of his informants proclaimed the supremacy of the karma postulate, maintaining that amulets could not completely negate the effect of one's karma (*ibid.*, 220). Piker's study shows that the noted dissonance between the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic, and the felt obligation to resolve it, are not uncommon among Thai Buddhists.

“folk” than “doctrinal” Buddhism. However, the informant preaches orthodox Buddhist doctrines as often as he redresses problems regarding magic and spirits. Given his versatile role, it is not surprising that the monk recognized a conflict between the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic, which he resolved by construing karma as the agent behind the power of magic.

Michael M. Ames, in his study of the relationship between magical-animistic beliefs and Sinhalese Buddhism, contends that karma, magic, and spirits are causal theories that complement rather than contradict one another. An illness, if cured by a counterspell, is attributed to black magic. If it is healed by a supplication or an exorcising rite, the ailment indicates the evil influence of offended spirits. If it is, however, irresponsive to any remedies, it is taken as retribution for the patient’s bad karma (Ames 1964b, 38). Venerable Ko employed a different explanatory scheme to reason why healing spells work in some cases but fail in others. His reasoning reveals his attempt to resolve the dissonance underlying the belief that magic spells always work in spite of healers’ and patients’ bad karma:

It is next to impossible to guarantee the efficacy of healing spells because several factors are accountable for their therapeutic power. The most pivotal factor, though, is the karmic bond between the healer and his patient. A healing ritual works best when the healer’s positive karmic force is attuned to his patient’s. This agreement is not a matter of chance but the result of a meritorious and mutually benevolent relationship the healer and his patient had with one another in their past lives. A person suffering from a supernatural illness may seek help from numerous ordained and lay healers, only to experience one failure after another. This is either because the person is under the influence of his bad karma, because the healer’s positive karmic force is not sufficient to avert the illness, or because there is an unfavorable or no karmic bond between the healer and his patient. Now you know why some healers cure certain persons but fail to heal others. (Personal interview, June 17, 2013)

Venerable Ko’s explanation solves an ethical problem posed by the image of a wicked soul rescued from karmic retaliation by means of healing spells and rituals. He reiterated Mr. Woravit’s opinion that the efficacy of magic requires support from the individual’s positive karmic force. Magic, therefore, does not override the supremacy of karmic machination. It is noteworthy, however, that Venerable Ko focuses on the interpersonal aspect of karma, while Mr. Woravit construes it as a personal asset. The former regards human relationships as a distinct class of karma, which determines the circle of people a person meets in his present life and the relationships he develops with them. In this particular conception of karma, the power of magic lies in the quality of the past life relationship between healer and patient. If the relationship is, to use the informant’s words, “meritorious and mutually benevolent,” healing magic is believed to yield a sat-

isfactory result.¹¹⁾

The notion of karmic bond is not a new concept invented by an ordained Thai Buddhist. The idea can be traced back to the collection of Jataka stories, which always end with the identification of births or *samodhāna* (Appleton 2010, 6). The Buddha always concludes a story of his past life by matching people from the past with those in the present. Though circumstances change, the Buddha runs into the same group of people through his countless rebirths. Also, the roles of these people in his different lives are quite static. King Śuddhodana always shows up as the Buddha's father, while the Buddha's cousin Devadatta is invariably his archenemy. The *samodhāna* in Jataka stories articulates the view that the relationships a person formed in the past generate a karmic force that binds him to a certain circle of people. This force also prescribes the nature of his present relationships with those people and the way in which these relationships contribute to merits and miseries the person experiences in his life. Venerable Ko seems to draw on this notion of karmic bond as he attributes the efficacy of healing magic to the agreement between healers' and patients' positive karmic forces.

What does Venerable Ko's testimony tell us about the relationship between Buddhist doctrines and indigenous belief traditions? On the one hand, Venerable Ko's account seems to reaffirm the notion that Buddhist doctrines, once transplanted to Thai culture, override indigenous beliefs and become normative postulates in relation to which indigenous beliefs are interpreted and assessed.¹²⁾ Venerable Ko legitimizes his belief in magic by expounding its efficacy in terms of the karma postulate, which, in this case, holds epistemic authority. On the other hand, the way Venerable Ko aligns the belief in magic with the doctrine of karma shows that he makes a distinction between these separate, distinct sets of beliefs. He, like Mr. Woravit and other Thai Buddhists whose rationalizations were presented in the previous subsection, makes a justification that results in a syncretization of an orthodox Buddhist doctrine with local belief in magic. They do not merely adopt tenets and practices belonging to Thai magic cults without thinking about their proper place vis-à-vis the doctrine of karma. I discuss the ramifications of this observation in the next section.

11) A paperback titled *The Best Magical Spells of 129 Masters (Sutyot mon khatha 129 khanajarn)* reveals the four secrets behind the efficacy of a magic spell. Last on the list is the karmic build of the practitioner and the karmic bond he/she has with his/her mentor. The following statement, similar to Venerable Ko's rationalization, articulates the idea that a meritorious karmic tie between pupil and master contributes to the power of instrumental magic:

Some practitioners master magical spells in the initial phase of their training because of their supporting positive karma, or because they were pupils of the masters who invented those spells in their past lives. (Kongka Himalai 2016, 30)

12) Bernard Formoso's studies (1996; 1998) on the influence of Theravada Buddhism on the religious ideas and values of the Tai delineate this interplay.

Syncretism or Repertoire?

In the final chapter of *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, Justin McDaniel (2011) proposes the concept of repertoire, which, he argues, is an analytical scheme devoid of prescribed classification that underlies the theory of syncretism. Syncretism, denoting the amalgamation of ideas or practices belonging to different traditions, implies preconceived, clearly demarcated categories. These preconceptions are counterproductive rather than illuminating when applied to the highly diversified and heterogeneous religious repertoires of Thai Buddhists (McDaniel 2011, 227–229). Scholars go into the field with prescribed labels and categories in their heads, only to discover that the people whose religious experiences they study do not perceive their religiosity on the basis of these labels and categories. Such is the case of Thai Buddhists, who do not seem to make a conceptual or value distinction between diverse religious tenets or practices that they adopt. McDaniel’s description of his experience in Thailand clearly articulates this opinion:

In my experience and interviews, monks or laypeople prostrating in front of a shrine with statues of General Taksin, Kuan Im, Shakyamuni Buddha, Somdet To, Phra Sangkhacchai do not see the shrine as a syncretistic stage or themselves as multireligious. They do not process the images separately, with some being local, some translocal, some Buddhist, and some non-Buddhist. If they did, there would be a more tactical attempt to arrange the objects or justify practices. (*ibid.*, 228)

This seems to be the problem with syncretism as an analytical perspective from McDaniel’s viewpoint: Since syncretism presupposes division and classification, which for Thai Buddhists do not exist, it fails to do justice to the heterogeneous, open, and indiscriminate nature of their religiosity. To do away with this shortfall, McDaniel advocates the concept of repertoire,¹³⁾ which does not invoke the image of “an integrated and prescribed system” (*ibid.*, 230) and thus recognizes the possibility that “a person’s repertoire, religious or otherwise, can be internally inconsistent and contradictory” (*ibid.*, 225). McDaniel further expounds that Thai Buddhists’ religious repertoires are spheres where the scholarly defined incongruity does not hinder the amalgamation of diverse sets of values and axioms. An individual may uphold worldly values such as security and abundance as much as soteriological principles such as nonattachment and imperma-

13) McDaniel defines the word “repertoire” as follows: “A repertoire is a constantly shifting collection of gestures, objects, texts, plots, tropes, ethical maxims, precepts, ritual movements, and expectations that any individual agent employs and draws upon when acting and explaining action” (McDaniel 2011, 225).

nence. Given this propensity to encompass anything an individual devotee considers relevant, a personal religious repertoire as McDaniel experienced in Thailand

. . . usually takes the form of accretion. Thai *religieux* seem to add to their individual repertoires but rarely subtract. Individual memories are expressed in their accumulations. A monastery is valued for its history and the display of that history through its collection of things and recorded events. A monastery accumulates images from many different traditions and many different patrons. Abundance is valued. The accumulated materials can seem like mere bricolage, and sometimes it is, but often it is valuable for its connection to a powerful person, event, or patron. (*ibid.*, 226)

It seems that new items, ideas, or practices can be infinitely added to this inherently inclusive religious repertoire in which abundance is a governing principle. Things that bear some sort of connection to the pre-existing sacral components or entities, when such connection is discerned by the individual devotee, tend to be accepted into his or her personal repertoire. Given this principle of inclusion, an amulet consecrated by a disciple of a renowned monk who produced powerful amulets will be valued for its protective potency as well (*ibid.*). This outlook on Thai Buddhists' religious repertoires seems to suggest that as long as a link between pre-existing and new elements is perceived, an individual repertoire can be incessantly embellished.

I contend that McDaniel's analytical orientation is based on two notions about Thai Buddhism and its adherents that are not always true. First, Thai Buddhists ascribe equal value to Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements; therefore, they combine Buddhist with non-Buddhist practices without feeling obligated to justify their hybrid religiosity. Second, there is no baseline or threshold to restrict diverse elements that Thai Buddhists add to their personal repertoires. Relevance and connection perceived by each individual devotee lead to an infinite accretion of elements within the repertoire, which results in the limitless possibilities of variable, hybrid ways Thai Buddhists observe their faith.¹⁴⁾ Inconsistency and dissonance, therefore, are scholarly wrought problems. On the basis

14) This view is expressed in Peter A. Jackson's study on the excessive desire for wealth that configured religious practices of Thai Buddhists during Thailand's economic boom. Jackson argues that this phenomenon characterizes what he calls "the 'anything goes' days of the boom" (Jackson 1999, 314), by which he means the 1990s—the decade when Thailand experienced rapid economic growth and a limitless proliferation of religious symbols and practices. Jackson argues that the peculiar combinations of religious beliefs and practices in this time period "proliferate beyond the power of any individual or institutional authority to limit or define" (*ibid.*, 311), and that they manifest "a Thai instance of postmodern condition in which faith in the unity of knowledge, power, and being is abandoned" (*ibid.*). It seems that for Jackson, Thai people during the economic boom did not adhere to any orthodox religious concepts nor share any common ideals. Therefore, all new inventions of religious tenets and activities are viable for them.

of the ethnographic cases presented in the foregoing section, I argue against these two notions.

The two informants are cognizant of the conflict between the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic. They are aware that the uncurbed efficacy of instrumental magic defies the karma postulate. If a person can ward off unfortunate events or achieve his heart's desire by merely using magic, then there is no reason to fear karmic retribution or to accumulate good karma. This noted discrepancy compels informants to justify their simultaneous belief in contradicting tenets. Based on the justifications made by my informants, I make two observations about Thai Buddhism and the people who observe it. First, even though there are several circumstances in which Thai Buddhists do not make a value distinction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements, there are also cases in which a hierarchical ordering is made. Mr. Woravit and Venerable Ko feel the need to resolve the dissonance between the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic precisely because they perceive them as two separate sets of tenets that espouse distinct views of the acceptable way to secure favorable consequences. By attributing the efficacy of instrumental magic to its user's or a client's favorable karma, they subordinate a non-Buddhist tenet to a prominent Buddhist doctrine. This "hierarchical ordering" (Tambiah 1970, 41) evinces the notion of orthodoxy held by the informants. For them, the doctrine of karma holds epistemic authority; thus, the belief in magic, espousing the view that mystical power can reward or punish a person regardless of his karmic accumulation, needs to be curtailed in order to maintain the supremacy of the karma postulate. Considering that a distinction and a hierarchical arrangement were made in this case, the concept of repertoire as suggested by McDaniel, which highlights accretion and indiscriminate inclusivity, seems unfit to convey such a process. Even though the informants claim their simultaneous belief in magic and karma, they feel obligated to subordinate the former to the latter. In this light, they seem to syncretize contradicting tenets rather than indiscriminately accept them into their religious repertoires.

This initial observation leads us to the second point. Mr. Woravit's and Venerable Ko's conceptions of magic, which venerate the doctrine of karma, reveal that even though diverse tenets are accepted into informants' religious repertoires, there is a restriction that dictates acceptable and sensible relations between these tenets. Based on my informants' testimonies, I propose that at the core of this restriction lies the orthodoxy of the karma postulate, which rules that non-Buddhist elements can be adopted as long as they do not contradict or compromise the authority of the doctrine of karma. If they do, these elements need to be aligned with this orthodox dogma. As McDaniel lucidly describes in his study, Thai Buddhists worship and supplicate deities of different traditions. They call themselves Buddhists but carry amulets from Tibet and express the desire to possess

a crucifix (McDaniel 2011, 226–228). I suggest that these non-Buddhist elements are adopted not because Thai Buddhists, not adhering to a single orthodox ideal, accept anything from anywhere. Rather, these hybrid religious practices are possible in the context of vernacular Thai Buddhism largely because Thai Buddhists believe that deities or magical objects, regardless of the tradition of their origin, do not wield power over the law of karma. Whenever the supplication to deities and the resort to magic are considered noncompliant with the doctrine of karma, as evinced in the ethnographic data presented earlier, Thai Buddhists tend to make a justification that subsumes the non-Buddhist element under the karma postulate.

Toward the end of his monograph, McDaniel problematizes the analytical perspective that focuses on detecting and pathologizing inconsistencies within a supposedly unified and coherent repertoire of individuals' religious beliefs. He construes this indulgence in consistency as scholars' adherence to the dichotomy between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, which is inadequate to explain the intricacy of and the dynamic within religious repertoires of real people in diverse contexts of practice:

Why can't we expect that a person will hold and act upon simultaneous, multiple ideals? Why don't we see this as an advantage? Why is consistency or orthodoxy seen as the ideal? . . . Perhaps it would be more accurate to abandon the dichotomy of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, to abandon the very notion that these values are inconsistent in favor of a close study of individual events, agents, and objects. (*ibid.*, 228)

McDaniel's argument is cogent since it is based on the ethnographic data he meticulously presents in his study. It is, however, inapplicable to the cases I demonstrate in this study, which convey two salient points. First, consistency and orthodoxy matter to several Thai Buddhists. My informants apparently strived for consistency as they proclaimed that instrumental magic merely tapped into its user's store of karma. They would not have made such a justification had they not deciphered the dissonance between the doctrine of karma and the belief in magic and seen it as problematic. This justification also reflects their attempt to keep their hybrid religious practice in line with the orthodox Buddhist doctrine, precisely the karma postulate.¹⁵ Second, it is true that Thai Buddhists, to use McDaniel's words, "act upon simultaneous, multiple ideals" (*ibid.*, 227). Nonetheless, these multiple ideals do not carry the same weight for all Thai Buddhists. My informants believe that magic can empirically induce intended consequences. Yet they refute the idea that instrumental magic can save wicked souls from their bad karma or condemn the

15) Julia Cassaniti cogently delineates the orthodoxy of the law of karma and its function as the master explanatory scheme Thai Buddhists employ to account for merits and miseries a person experiences in his present life (see Cassaniti 2015, 149–173).

righteous despite their noble deeds. For them, the power of magic and the operation of karmic force are both real. Still, the veracity of the law of karma overrides that of magic.

These two observations lead to the final argument of this section, which proposes that two analytical concepts—syncretism and repertoire—can be combined to make sense of hybrid religious practices adopted by Thai Buddhists. The notion of repertoire, in my opinion, needs a slight modification in order to encompass diverse forms of relationships between Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements in vernacular Thai Buddhism. I espouse Tambiah's view that Thai Buddhism is "a total field" (Tambiah 1970, 41) that expresses various relations between Buddhist and non-Buddhist components. In some cases, as McDaniel's study delineates, these two components exist side by side. They are indiscriminately received by Thai Buddhists who seem not to make a conceptual or a value distinction between them. In other cases, as my study shows, a distinction is made, a conflict is noted, and a hierarchical ordering is made to resolve the dissonance and to maintain the orthodoxy of Buddhist tenets. These different scenarios express the variety of possible relations between Buddhist and non-Buddhist components within a total field of religious beliefs and practices. These possible relations include, but are not limited to, "Distinctions, oppositions, complementarities, linkages, and hierarchy" (*ibid.*, 42). The concept of repertoire, when applied to expound the totality of religious beliefs and practices Thai Buddhists hold onto, should be sensitive to these various forms of possible relations, which certainly do not exclude syncretism.

Problematizing Anti-syncretism

In his study of spirit-medium cults in contemporary Thailand, Pattana Kitiarsa draws on the term "parade of supernaturals" coined by Tambiah to describe the diversified, heterogeneous composition of religious beliefs and practices in modern Thailand.¹⁶⁾ Pattana highlights the hybridization that characterizes contemporary Thai religiosity by describing the assorted components of a Thai spirit altar:

The statue of Buddha is always positioned at the top, since he is regarded as the supreme deity in Thai religious cosmology and since Buddhism is the country's state-sponsored religion and has traditionally formed its sociocultural foundations. Below the statue of Buddha are those of Buddhist saints, male Indian and Chinese deities and royal spirits; these male deities are positioned higher than female deities like Guanyin, Uma or Kali. The bottom of the altar is the usual place for tutelary local spirits and other minor spirits, while flowers, incense, candles and offerings are placed

16) The phrase "parade of supernaturals" is the title of Chapter 10 of Tambiah's *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* (1970).

in vases or other proper containers on the floor. Spirit altars in their symbolic and physical sense bring together deities from diverse backgrounds and origins; the altar is the sacred site where the religious hybridization of popular beliefs actually takes its concrete, collective form. (Pattana 2005, 484)

Pattana contends that since syncretism “implies something contentious, unauthenticated, and impure” (*ibid.*), it fails, as an analytical concept, to account for this hybridization that permeates spirit altars in Thailand. If Thai Buddhists perceived Buddhist elements as emblems of the orthodox faith vis-à-vis heretical, non-Buddhist components, they would never admit non-Buddhist deities or local spirits to the site of worship. For Pattana, syncretism, denoting the subordination of non-Buddhist elements to Buddhist tenets and practices, is problematic because it overstates the paramount position of Buddhism in the Thai religious landscape (*ibid.*, 464). It also downplays the commodification of religious beliefs that has incessantly produced new hybrids to meet the spiritual needs of Thai people in the particular context of contemporary Thailand (*ibid.*, 466). I suggest that the overemphasis on hybrid, diversified components that constitute religious repertoires of Thai Buddhists entails two problematic ramifications. First, it implies that Thai Buddhists, not adhering to any principle or orthodox ideal, indiscriminately adopt everything that they consider relevant to their needs and desires. Second, it reiterates the problematic assumption that people who practice religion at ground level do not share concepts and categories held by elites and intellectuals who study religion in an official, institutional setting. This assumption ultimately perpetuates the dichotomy between popular and elite interpretations of religion.

To deny syncretism is to deny the possibility that the believing individual may make a conceptual or a value distinction between diverse tenets that they hold. In a similar fashion, to say that Thai Buddhists’ religiosity is “beyond syncretism” (*ibid.*, 461) is to downplay the fact that several Thai Buddhists strive to keep their heterogeneous religious repertoires internally coherent and meaningful. As Mr. Woravit’s and Venerable Ko’s accounts show, such notions are misleading. The informants syncretized the doctrine of karma with a local belief in magic, fully aware of different sentiments that grounded these two sets of tenets. Their syncretizing activity, precisely their act of subsuming the belief in magic under the doctrine of karma, reveals that some forms of hybrid religious practice are acceptable only after they are attuned to the authoritative Buddhist doctrine. In fact, the excerpt from Pattana’s study cited above also displays this hierarchical ordering. The fact that the Buddha image is always placed at the top of the altar denotes the supremacy of Buddhism vis-à-vis other belief traditions adopted by Thai Buddhists.

To deny syncretism is to deny the possibility that people who practice popular reli-

gion may adopt a taxonomy or a categorization of religious concepts used by elites within institutional religion and by scholars in academia. Tambiah comments on this ill-founded dichotomy between the doctrinal, official religion of the elites and the practical, popular religion of the folk as follows:

... it has for some curious reason not been seen that contemporary live religion, even that observed in the village, incorporates a great deal of the literary tradition. Brahman priests, Buddhist monks, ritual experts and scribes in some measure deal with literary and oral knowledge transmitted from the past and which they themselves systematically transmitted to their successors. And for the common people at large such texts and knowledge have a referential and legitimating function, even if they themselves have no direct access to them. (Tambiah 1970, 4)

Mr. Woravit's and Venerable Ko's attempts at syncretization reify Tambiah's observation. Had the informants been insensitive to the orthodoxy of the karma postulate articulated by several sutras included in the Pali canon, they would not have felt the need to maintain its authority vis-à-vis the belief in magic. Also, had they not recognized the belief in magic and the doctrine of karma as two distinct sentiments that contradict one another, they would not have made an attempt to syncretize them. Mr. Woravit and Venerable Ko seem to adopt the canonical sentiment that neither magic nor deities overrides the law of karma,¹⁷⁾ therefore they posit that a person's resort to magic is futile without the support of his good karma. The informants' rationalizations highlight the continuity, rather than the incongruity, between the doctrinal and the practical aspects of contemporary Thai Buddhism.

All observations and arguments that I have made in this paper build to this final point: Despite the highly heterogeneous constitution of their religious beliefs and practices, Thai Buddhists do not indiscriminately accept anything from anywhere that suits their whims. At the very least, they consider the orthodoxy of the doctrine of karma, the authority of which they feel obligated to maintain at all cost. Considering the scenario I have presented in this paper, it seems that when it comes to Thai Buddhists' religiosity, we cannot yet do away with syncretism and its connotations of differentiation and categorization. Reconciling magic with karma, my informants and other Thai Buddhists whose accounts are reported in this study syncretized differentiated, contradictory sentiments regarding the legitimate means of producing the intended consequences. They made

17) Some canonical sutras that convey this view are the *Paccha-bhumika Sutta*, the *Devadaha Sutta*, and the *Cula-kammavibhanga Sutta* in the *Samyutta Nikāya* and the *Majjhima Nikāya* of the *Sutta Pitaka*. In the *Paccha-bhumika Sutta*, the Buddha maintains that prayers and supplication rituals cannot alter the consequence of volitional actions. The *Devadaha Sutta* refutes a Jain theory positing that bad karma can be burned up by ascetic practice. The *Cula-kammavibhanga Sutta* portrays karma as the supreme causal agent accountable for humans' fortunes and miseries.

patent an underrated fact that a mindset comprising disparate components does not only indicate the hybrid constitution of that mindset. It also reflects cognitive processes, among which are creative interpretation and adaptation, which render these conflicting sentiments coherently meaningful for the believing individual.

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