

ศาสนาเป็นการแสดงออกตามทฤษฎีของ  
ฟ็อยเออร์บัค ประหนึ่งเป็นดั่งหนทางเชื่อมความเชื่อ  
เพื่อเข้าสู่วัฒนธรรมของชาวกะเหรี่ยง  
ในแถบเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้

On Feuerbach's Idea of Religious Projection  
as a Way of Approaching Religious Inculturation  
among the Karen of South East Asia.

บาทหลวง วีรศักดิ์ ยงศรีปนิธาน

\* บาทหลวงในคริสต์ศาสนจักรโรมันคาทอลิก สังกัดสังฆมณฑลเชียงใหม่

\* อาจารย์ประจำหลักสูตรศิลปศาสตรบัณฑิต สาขาวิชาปรัชญาและศาสนา วิทยาลัยแสงธรรม  
ยอห์น ที จอร์ดาโน

\* อาจารย์ประจำภาควิชาปรัชญาและศาสนา มหาวิทยาลัยอัสสัมชัญแห่งประเทศไทย

Rev.Werasak Yongsripanithan

\* Reverend in Roman Catholic Church, Chiang Mai Diocese.

\* Lecturer, Bachelor of Arts Program in Philosophy and Religion, Saengtham College.

John T. Giordano

\* Lecturer of Graduate School of Philosophy & Religion, Assumption University of Thailand.

ข้อมูลบทความ

\* รับบทความ 18 ธันวาคม 2562

\* แก้ไข 22 มกราคม 2563

\* ตอบรับบทความ 29 มกราคม 2563

## บทคัดย่อ

ลูวิก พ็อยเออร์บัค เจ้าของทฤษฎี ศาสนาเป็นการแสดงออกของมนุษย์ ความคิดนี้มีอิทธิพลต่อนักปรัชญาหลายคน เช่น คาร์ล มาร์กซ์ และซิกมุนด์ ฟรอยด์ ทั้งสองได้เสนอศาสนาประหนึ่งเป็นอุปสรรคต่อความเจริญก้าวหน้า เพราะศาสนาเป็นมายาที่จะต้องถูกแทนที่ด้วยเหตุผลแต่ความคิดของพ็อยเออร์บัคก็เปิดช่องทางให้ถูกตีความในเชิงบวก การแสดงออกทางความเชื่อของวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นและความหมายที่มีอยู่ในศาสนาดั้งเดิมนั้น ผ่านทางการตีความในเชิงบวกของวาร์ทอฟสกีและฮาร์วี ได้สนับสนุนว่าศาสนาเป็นการแสดงออกนั้นมีความหมายในเชิงบวก บทความนี้ได้นำเสนอการประยุกต์ทฤษฎีนี้ในการมองวัฒนธรรมกะเหรี่ยงในแถบเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้และความเข้าใจคริสตศาสนาในบริบทของชาวกะเหรี่ยง และในบทความนี้ให้แสดงให้เห็นด้วยว่าคริสต์ศาสนานั้นได้เข้าสู่ชาวกะเหรี่ยงซึ่งมีรากฐานความเข้าใจ ธรรมชาติ และสุดท้าย บทความนี้ได้นำเสนอความเชื่อมโยงระหว่างศาสนาดั้งเดิมของกะเหรี่ยงกับคริสตศาสนาซึ่งส่งผลต่อความเข้าใจและสร้างความสมดุลในการดำรงชีวิตทั้งสองมิติคือวัตุถุ์บริหาร ธรรม

**คำสำคัญ:** พ็อยเออร์บัค  
 การแสดงออกทางศาสนา  
 การเข้าสู่วัฒนธรรม  
 กะเหรี่ยง  
 กองบุญข้าว

## On Feuerbach's Idea of Religious Projection as a Way of Approaching Religious Inculturation among the Karen of South East Asia

### Abstract

Ludwig Feuerbach is famous for stating that religion is a projection of man. This was a great influence on such writers as Marx and Freud who view religion as an obstacle to progress or a mere illusion which needs to be replaced by reason. But Feuerbach's ideas can be seen in a more positive way; as recognition of the importance of local culture and the meaning of religion within that culture. After a brief examination of the work of two commenters Wartofsky and Harvey, Feuerbach's theory will be evaluated in a more positive light. This article will then apply these insights concerning religious projection to Karen culture in South East Asia and the way in which Christianity is understood in that cultural context. The article will also show that the Karen appropriation of Christianity is rooted in ecological concerns. Finally, it will show that the connection between traditional Karen faith and Christianity is important for creating a balance between two dimensions of reality – the material and the mysterious.

**Keywords:** Feuerbach  
Religious projection  
Inculturation  
Karen  
Kong Boon Khao.

## Introduction

Christians in Thailand have been commemorating the 350th anniversary of the Church in Siam (1669-2019). The Catholic Church here as in other Asian countries owes a debt of gratitude to all missionaries who dedicated their lives to spreading the Good News of the Gospel throughout the continent. Today, in many countries where the missionaries originally came from, their faith and work are not universally admired. For this reason we have the responsibility to not only spread the Gospel, but to take seriously and confront the critics. Sometimes the criticisms of Christianity can be rich sources of instruction. Sometimes couched within their criticisms are insights that allow us to achieve new and deeper perspectives on our faith. One of the most notorious critics of Christianity is the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. But he was no mere critic of religion but a scholar who dedicated his whole life to critically commenting on the meaning and place of religion in human life.

## Feuerbach's Life and Writings

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72), was a contemporary of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx. He is remembered today especially for his book *The Essence of Christianity* published in 1841. As a student he was an enthusiastic disciple of G.F. Hegel but in later life became one of his sharpest critics. He is best remembered today as the writer who had a deep influence on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and later, Sigmund Freud. He is also the man who asserted that "religion is a projection of man". But the scholar Van Harvey suggests that Feuerbach's approach to religion is much deeper and warns us against seeing him as a mere precursor to the atheism of Marx and Freud.

It is mistaken to accept the conventional opinion that Feuerbach's best insights were mediated to modernity by Marx and Freud. Although there are obvious points of continuity between these two thinkers and Feuerbach the discontinuities are



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even greater and, as I shall argue, more significant as regards the interpretation of religion. This is especially true of the concept of projection. Even though Marx thought he was indebted to Feuerbach for the insight that the gods arise out of a sense of privation and, hence that religion would wither away when this privation was abolished, both the early and later Feuerbach believed that religion is rooted in something more primal and elemental in consciousness itself. (Harvey, 1995, p.12)

Feuerbach's most famous publication was *The Essence of Christianity*. It was published in 1841 and it quickly became a best-seller. None of his many later writings had the same effect. Many readers of *The Essence of Christianity* took away this one clear idea – that religion is no more than a projection of man. Most interpreters understand Feuerbach's use of "projection" as something that man himself

projects; to use Feuerbach's own words man "projects his being into objectivity" (Feuerbach, 1841, p.29). Seen in this way the meaning of projection easily leads to a negative understanding of religion. But we can ask if there a possibility of reading the work of Feuerbach in a way which strengthens our understanding of our faith. In this article I would like to focus on interpreters who see positive elements in Feuerbach's philosophy. The argument will be drawn from the work of two of the best-known Feuerbach interpreters, Max Wartofsky and Van Harvey. They offer alternative interpretations of his thought. At the end of the article I will examine how the Karen Christian practices of "Kong Boon Khao" (Dias, 2004, p.89-93) in Karen Christianity with its "particular experience" (Fung, 2017, p.12), of the world might reflect some of the things that Feuerbach is getting at.

Paul Ricoeur identifies three people, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as "masters of suspicion" (Ricoeur, 1970,

p.28-36). In modern times, each of them looked on Christianity as a product of “projection” by believers. Some may wonder why Ludwig Feuerbach is not included in this list. The theologian Karl Barth has observed that Feuerbach’s thought was “more theological than that of many theologians” (Harvey, 1995, p.3-17). Barth is also one of those who believe that Feuerbach’s idea of religion as a projection could be interpreted from different perspectives. Feuerbach proclaimed that his methodology is to allow religion speak for itself “I constitute myself only its listener and interpreter, not its prompter” (Feuerbach, 1957, xxxvi). It would seem from this that the suggestion that he should not be included among the masters of suspicion. His idea of religion was formulated not only in his books but through his whole life as a philosopher.

Barth concluded that few “had been so intensively, so exclusively and precisely occupied with the problem of theology as Feuerbach - although his

love was an unhappy one” (Feuerbach, 1841: x). He dedicated his life to searching for what he considered to be the real meaning of religion. Man sometimes gives a meaning to religious practice in accordance with his desires or wishes. How does Feuerbach approach the question of the essence of religion in the lives of people? Harvey cautions that “Feuerbach’s view that religion is a function of the emergence of self-consciousness leads to a far more complex interpretation of religion than that practiced by the other three masters of suspicion” (Harvey, 1995, p.13).

In *The Essence of Religion* Loos, the translator of this book writes that

Feuerbach argues that the attributes of God reflect the various needs of human nature. In ancient times, before human beings had any scientific understanding of nature, divine powers were seen behind every natural manifestation, from lightning bolts to the

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change of season. By contrast, in the modern era, when an in-depth understanding of natural causes has been achieved, there is no longer any need to imagine God behind the working of nature. (Alexander Loos, 1873, cover page).

These statements open the way to an alternative interpretation of the word “projection” in Feuerbach’s thought. The way he is interpreted is that religion is nothing else but the projection of man’s essence or species being; that his philosophy should be understood as a mere materialism. But a closer reading opens other possibilities. Projection is not just a product of man’s imagination; there is something real behind and within this projection. Man projects something supernatural, not a product of his imagination, but because there is a mysterious (supernatural) reality within him which is being projected.

This point needs to be taken seriously. Firstly, according to the tradi-

tional interpretation Feuerbach is always interpreted in a negative way. Referring to this theologian and philosopher Hans Küng says: “we must ‘open the eyes’ of religion-and also of speculative philosophy and theology-or’ rather turn its gaze from the internal towards the external” (Küng, 1978, p.199). Many interpreters were not conscious of the other dimensions of Feuerbach’s thought and developed inaccurate understandings. Secondly, the meaning of projection as found in Feuerbach has its own horizon and worldview; it does not see Christianity as something that has no foundation; but as pointing to something real. We will look fairly briefly at how some commentators have analyzed the work of Feuerbach.

### **Wartofsky: Feuerbach Takes Religion Seriously**

The first commentator we will examine is Marx Wartofsky. He places Feuerbach in a different category than the writers of the French Enlightenment



like Diderot or Montesquieu who mocked religious belief. He examines the way Feuerbach's understanding of religion developed.

Feuerbach understood religion as a stage in the growth of human self-consciousness, to be investigated in its own forms of expression – from the 'inside' so to speak. (Wartofsky, 1977, p.6)

Wartofsky points out that this idea of religion as a stage in the growth of human self-consciousness will appear again and again in his writings. In a sense, going back to Hegel, it is the antithesis stage before the new synthesis is arrived at. Religious belief belongs within a specific context and this must be understood or its significance will be missed. Religion is a search for meaning.

Wartofsky refers to the fact that religion is born in different places and is expressed in different ways. Much depends on the condition and culture of a people. Wartofsky quotes from *The Essence of Christianity* in giving an

answer to the question where religion comes from.

Religion rests on the essential difference between men and animals – animals have no religion –But what is this difference? The simplest and most general, as well as the most popular answer to this question is – consciousness...The animal is certainly an object to itself, as an individual – therefore it has self-awareness → but it isn't aware of its species nature. (Feuerbach, 1841, p.1)

What is the meaning of this description of religion? The different levels of consciousness between the human and the other animals is clear. A key difference is that man is capable of reflecting on the fact that he is a member of a species. The more he becomes aware of this species identity the more he will become aware of his own dignity.

In looking for answers to life's mysteries it is clear that Feuerbach



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didn't take shortcuts or accept easy answers. Wartofsky again quotes *The Essence of Christianity*. Here, the extent of our lack of knowledge is underlined but this does not mean that we have to invoke some what Feuerbach calls superstition to fill the gaps.

The origin of life is inexplicable and incomprehensible. So be it. But this incomprehensibility doesn't justify you in the superstitious consequences which theology draws, on the basis of deficiencies in human knowledge, doesn't justify you in going beyond the domain of natural causes. (Wartofsky, 1977, p.398)

Wartofsky comments that "There are, therefore, two levels at which the work may be read. First, there is the manifest thesis that man creates the gods in his own image. But, second, there is the latent and deeper thesis concerning the nature of concept formation not only in religion and theology, but in philoso-

phy itself" (Wartofsky, 1977, p.197). We have to be aware of these levels when we read the *Essence of Christianity*, otherwise it will be difficult to understand Feuerbach.

There are two reflections here on the reality of "speculative philosophy"; "Philosophy itself is to be demystified and recognized as the refracted, abstract image of concrete human existence and the esoteric expression of human consciousness and self-consciousness" (Wartofsky, 1977, p.198). Feuerbach intends to replace "old philosophy" with "new philosophy, to go" from "abstract philosophy to concrete philosophy". Wartofsky evaluates Feuerbach in a positive way. Humans are searching for the truth that lies behind the image. Feuerbach explains his project:

I am nothing but a natural scientist of spirit; but the natural scientist can do nothing without instruments, without material means. In this capacity – as a natural scientist- I have written

this work, which consequently contains nothing but the principle of a new philosophy, one essentially different from previous philosophy, and one which is confirmed practically, i.e., in concreto, in application to a particular, concrete subject matter, but one which has universal significance: namely, to religion, with respect to which this principle is presented, developed, and carried through to its consequences. (Wartofsky, 1977, p.200)

In his critique of religion Feuerbach affirms that the “true” subject of religion is man. But lying under religious belief there is a “mystery” of religion; it’s true object or that which it hides under the external form” (Wartofsky, 1977, p.198). Through it man can arrive at the knowledge of himself as man. His later writings show that his ideas developed through time.

Wartofsky goes on to introduce another element of interpretation that must be taken into account, the terms exoteric and esoteric. What do

these terms mean? Firstly, ‘exoteric’ refers to what is “suitable to be imparted to the public” or “outer”. Wartofsky draws our attention to the fact that we should read “The Essence of Christianity” as a work meant to show in public or demonstrate religion as a “thing”. Secondly, “esoteric” refers to the “mysterious”. “Feuerbach is concerned with the psychological process that generates the image and therefore explains what it is an image” (Wartofsky, 1977, p.253). He calls this level “psychic pathology”. For Wartofsky, the image is generated by a religious consciousness that is trying to find a way to talk about the mysterious.

He writes: “The very distinction of exoteric and esoteric interpretation develops into a two-edged sword, available for the purpose of reading not only the supernatural in the natural but the natural in the supernatural as well”. (Wartofsky, 1977, p.252). The ‘image’ becomes a means which allows some access to the ‘mysterious being’.

### Harvey: Development of Feuerbach's Thought

The second commentator who develops a more positive view of Feuerbach is Van Harvey. Harvey believes that although Feuerbach is not included in Paul Ricoeur's list of the 'masters of suspicion' he deserves to be on it. What is Feuerbach basic argument in the *Essence of Christianity*? "Its basic premise is that the superhuman deities of religion are, in fact, involuntary projections of the essential attributes of human nature, and this projection, in turn, is explained by a theory of human consciousness heavily indebted to Hegel" (Harvey, 1995, p.25). The ground was prepared for Feuerbach not only by Hegel, with whom he came to disagree, but also by his contemporary, the Protestant theologian of the Tübingen School, David Strauss (1808-1874). Strauss applied critical methods to his Bible studies and showed for example that the Gospels were not eyewitness accounts and that there were contra-

dictions in the texts etc. He did not believe in the divinity of Jesus. This kind of thinking had a profound effect of the faith of the more intellectually minded Christians.

Feuerbach reflects: "Man – this is the mystery of religion – projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object of this projected image of him, thus converted into a subject; he thinks of himself as an object to himself, but as the object of an object, of another being than himself." (Feuerbach, 1841, p.29). Feuerbach's stated purpose in writing his book is to help Christians understand what he sees to be the true nature of religion. His book *the Essence of Christianity* is divided into two parts. He says that the first part is positive. He sets out to show that so many of the qualities or 'predicates' that Christian believers attribute to God are nothing more than the product of human imagination. For example, the compassion they attribute to God is nothing more than an idealized version



of the human quality of compassion. He calls this part ‘The true or anthropological Essence of Religion’. The second part of this book, he calls ‘The False or theological Essence of Religion’. Here his intention is to show the many mistakes and false beliefs that Christians can be led into if they do not understand what he says in the first part. That is if they do not know that the contents of their beliefs do not refer to a divine being but are merely collections of human desires.

Commentators on Feuerbach agree that his theory of projection is difficult to understand. At one level it can be stated in a very simple way such as that God is a product of human desire and imagination. Over two thousand years before Feuerbach the Greek philosopher Xenophanes said something similar. But there are other levels in Feuerbach’s concept that go far beyond Xenophanes; the most important of these is his Hegelian background. He begins by asking what distinguishes the human from

other animals; just as we saw in Wartofsky, it is consciousness.

This consciousness is achieved through the person’s contact with another person, a Thou, and the realization that this person is like ‘me’ – of the same species. The special elements of this consciousness are reason, will and feeling. The primary mode of this contact is not abstract but concrete, through the senses, the body. Every species relates to the world around it in the manner its organism permits.

Humans can attain happiness, for example, if they can use the powers of their nature. Humans become aware that they belong to a species and that the species will continue into the future but each person, as an individual, will die. This causes suffering and is one explanation for the ‘invention’ of a God and belief in life after death; “The root of religion in humans comes not from reason but from feeling and imagination.” (Feuerbach,



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1841, p.125-6). These are two important elements in the process of projection. Feelings produce the activities of longing and wishing. These two activities, when they become very strong, bring the wished-for object into (imaginary) existence. Because the person feels it or longs for it so deeply it 'must' exist. The imagination is also extremely important in religious thought. "The imagination can create worlds; it can work with abstractions. It can by-pass the laws of nature and invent many things – even separate divine beings" (Feuerbach, 1841, p.139). The most important qualities or predicates of the human species are reason, will and feeling. Is God something invented by reason? Feuerbach says that a god like this would be too cold and distant. A god who represents good moral standards and a god who loves are also required to meet human longings – not just the cold god produced by reason. How does Harvey sum up what religion is for Feuerbach?

Religion can best be described as a type of anthropomorphism rooted in the structure of self-consciousness; more precisely in the twofold differentiation of the self from nature, on the one hand, and persons, on the other. This twofold distinction creates the correlative desires to be free from nature and to gain recognition from other subjects. The gods satisfy both structural desires uniquely. They can set aside the limits of nature by performing miracles and they can offer a recognition that transcends that which can be given by any finite person. (Harvey, 1995, p.63)

For the younger Feuerbach "Religion is man's earliest and indirect form of self-knowledge" (Feuerbach, 1841, p.13). Harvey asserted that this was "a necessary stage in the development of human consciousness" (Harvey, 1995, p.229). However "the idea of the divine is primarily generated

from within and is only indirectly a response to anything external” (Harvey, 1995, p.229). Therefore the idea of God in religion always remains something mysterious. Feuerbach shows that to touch a transcendent reality is to go out from oneself. In his Lectures on the Essence of Religion he writes: “What am I? Where have I come from? To what end? And this feeling that I am nothing without a not-I which is distinct from me yet intimately related to me, something other, which is at the same time my own being, in the religious feeling” (Feuerbach, 1967, p.311). Man projects himself beyond of the ‘I’ because he is looking for something that is beyond himself. This is the nature of the religious projection. But Feuerbach wants to focus not on abstractions but on “man who eats and drinks”.

Harvey asks if Feuerbach could be fitted into any of the present-day theories of projection. He says that all these theories can be put into two broad categories. The first classification

he calls the ‘beam theory.’ The metaphor is taken from what happens in the cinema where a projector ‘beams’ an image to the screen (to outside itself). These theories describe projection as the externalization of the self or its attributes. They tend to postulate some kinds of inner psychic mechanism which causes religious belief and explains the projection. Some of these ideas are later found in Freud and collective consciousness of Jung. This kind of projection can have “latent and hidden meanings from the projectors themselves are not even aware” (Harvey, 1995, p.236). The beam metaphor provides criteria for a judgment about what can be justified as true or false. Religion, for them, is an illusion of believers. It may be healthy or not, it depends on who believes, but there is an assumption that there can be a healthy illusion (Harvey, 1995, p.236).

Harvey goes on to introduce the second general classification of present-day projection theories. Here the

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model used is taken from map-makers who use a grid to show the layout of towns etc. Harvey writes that “there is another type of projection in which the term “projection” is used to refer not to the externalization of some aspect of the self - its feelings, attributes, or subjectivity itself- but to the symbolic or conceptual forms that human beings superimpose on the experience in order to make it intelligible” (Harvey, 1995, p. 246). Just as map-makers use the grid to organize their material likewise humans use religion to organize the elements of their life. This is the Grid metaphor which presents the meaning of projection within the framework of man in the process of and orienting his life. Harvey writes: “The term ‘projection’ to include religion itself has seemed to many philosophers of religion like a natural move once a religion is regarded as a conceptual scheme or worldview by means of which people orient themselves to life” (Harvey, 1995, p.247). Here reli-

gion is seen as a projection; an element of life organization within the human system of belief.

The two concepts of the “Beam metaphor” and “Esoteric” offer the possibility to interpret Feuerbach’s theory in a more positive way. Harvey and Wartofsky underline projection as part of the effort to understand the “mysterious” in life and the human search for what is beyond the merely material.

To finish, we can consider a few observations on projection by Fokke Sierksma, a Dutch psychologist of religion. He says man worries about the balance between the external and internal world. Man is searching not only for material things but “the meaning of life” as well. What lies behind it all? (Sierksma, 1990, p.100). He writes:

(Man) becomes aware of “something” in himself that judgeshim, unseen and not objectifiable; when he shudders before the mystery of the groundless



ground of his own soul. It is precisely that which is unknowable, ungraspable, overpowering, mysterious that gives man the feeling that he is no longer at home in his trusted, stabilized perceptual world, that he is unheimlich (homeless)... He experiences bodily that man stands in nothingness; that, although with his perception and his hands he has conquered a part of the world, of which he thought it was the world, this turns out to be only a small part of the world, a Merkwelt...Beyond it is the reverse side of the world, is mystery. (Sierksma, 1990, p.102)

Wartofsky, Harvey and Sierksma interpret the projection theory of Feuerbach in a deeper way. What the human being projects in the form of religion is not just a material essence but a spiritual one.

### **Has Feuerbach Any Relevance to Understanding Karen Culture**

Aloysius Pieris, was a Sri Lankan theologian who wrote about three levels that we must be aware of when we approach inter-religious dialogue. These three levels are what he calls the Primordial experience, the Collective Memory and the Interpretation. Examples of the primordial experience might be the life of Jesus or Buddha. The collective memory is what is handed on in the culture through scripture, story tradition etc. The interpretation is how a religion interpreted and given relevance today. These elements which Pieris distinguishes are very helpful in applying Feuerbach's theory and his interpreters to an understanding of Karen religious belief.

There is a story which is important to understanding the essence of Karen Christianity in the north of Thailand.



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An orphan lived alone and other people discriminated against him. A heavenly angel saw his suffering then transfigured as a grandmother came to stay with this orphan. She taught him how to cultivate rice. The orphan survived, and got strong and a time came when the grandmother wanted to say goodbye to him. He didn't want her to go back to heaven; he asked her to stay with him forever. Finally this grandmother was transfigured into rice. Karen culture has a rice ritual to recall the spirit of rice which is represented as a black bird. (Historical Documentation, 2019, p.121-131)

But we will look at three significant elements to be interpreted in this story.

i) Firstly, there is the Karen consciousness of living in an orphan situation. Their life is full of suffering, something often expressed in songs. The culture has many stories like this. They often feel abandoned.

In Karen language the word “Haufhkof” means “the World” “a place where we are crying”. Most Karen see this world as a temporary home and believe that one day they will rest in a better place where it is called “Moohkof” or “living place.” “Moo” means “life” and “Hkof” means “place”. Karen consciousness is conscious that they are poor and limited by many conditions. They were cruelly treated by other nations, often having to go from place to place. Marshall writes that “Karen is accustomed to say of themselves that they put a thing in the heart” (Marshall, 1922, 26). And Marshall mentions that “they are cautious in entering into friendship, but, having done so, are faithful and sincere to those whose confidence they accept in exchange for the other” (Marshall, 1922, p.26). Their personality is to keep quiet and be careful when establishing relationships with other nations. They think deeply and they put thing in their heart. In the story the orphan is aban-

doned by others, but struggled a lot to live and even in a terrible situation is faithful to life and tries to earn his living. The Karen accept the fate of life according to “Hta” (Ancient Poem); Hpo qai le ple pgaz tooj e, htof lauz auf bu le lejkhle, Hpo qai le ple tooj saf wi, hez htauf bu laj kai htauf piv iv (The orphan, in the past, was treated badly. He planted rice on a rock and suffered famine. The wrapped grain became cooked-rice). The orphan in the story is a projection of the Karen consciousness that life should be simple and honest. (Simplicity and Honesty as Essence of Life) Simplicity and honesty are the important elements of life, but like the iceberg, much of what is essential in life is hidden under the water; it is mysterious.

ii) Secondly, we find in the story the intervention of an angel in the form of a grandmother (Hpi muj mai). In many Karen fables there are two relevant persons – a grandmother and an orphan. They usually live together and help each other but

occasionally people around envy them and attempt to destroy them. They never win because this grandmother or Hpi is an agent coming from heaven to help the poor orphan. This projection of the grandmother who saves can fit into the Feuerbach the idea of the defenseless person who is searching for something that can save him from a terrible situation. Man is treated badly by fate but finds, or imagines he finds, a savior. The intervention of the grandmother is an awareness, or at least a desire of something more that lies beyond the merely human, a consciousness of mysterious being. For Karen is a real consciousness in which is represented in several places in songs, poems, Htas and sayings.

iii) Finally the grandmother becomes the grain for the orphan; “Streams of rice came out from under her fingernails, her toenails, her eyelids, her hair, her nose, her mouth, and her clothes and began to fill the

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hut with a loud noise. The old widow's whole body became a beautiful golden yellow of paddy" (from Karen folklore). The rice is from the mystic grandmother who lived with the orphan. The grain is not only to satisfy physical need but also the consolation and closeness of this grandmother. From now on the link between the orphan and the grandmother is an anthropomorphic one represented in this mysterious relationship.

Perhaps we could go back for a moment to the three levels of primordial experience, collective memory and interpretation used by Pieris. In Karen culture, Primordial experience is connected with rice which is not only a source of nutrition but somehow connects their consciousness to mysterious form of being. For Collective Memory, Karen people have the story as "The Lost Book" which can be found different part of South East Asia. Its content is fairly similar; in the Karen culture it

is a waiting for the younger brother who would return bringing a book. At the level of Interpretation, the Karen perspective on life is that they interpret all appearances or events in the world as mysterious revelation to man living in the here and now. This harmonizes with Pieris' analysis that religions "are composed of two complementary elements: a cosmic religion functioning as foundation and a metacosmic soteriology constructing the main edifice" (Pieris, 1988, p.71).

There is a traditional saying among the Karen hill tribes: "Those who have more eat less, and the rest must be shared. Those who have less must also share" and "When we have, we all eat together, when we don't have, we all starve together". Each village has a rice merit group in Karen language is called "Bupaxkauz". "Bu" means "rice", "Pax" means "keeping" and "Kauz" means "everlasting" or "sustainable" (Wongjomporn, Interviewed on August 2, 2019). For long periods in the past the Karen people



suffered from hunger, poverty and disease. Sharing became an important part of Karen consciousness. Their saying “we live or starve together” echoed in the heart of this hill-tribe. “Bupaxkauz” became a symbol of communion with the other. Robert White writes that “The religious impulse they contain is a comprehensive source of spiritual, social, and intellectual resources” (White, 1994, p,110). Love is not an abstract idea but an action in which Karen see life not only for oneself alone but also community.

A prayer from the Karen hill tribe illuminates the central place of rice in the culture.

Pru! Come rice, come up! Bird of the rice spirit, widowed grandmother, call the paddy up, call the milled rice up, call the rice up in the barn, call the rice up in the granary, rice in the sky, rice in the ground, rice from the north, rice from the south, rice from the east, rice from the

west, rice from the big field, rice from the big paddy field, rice from the great Mae-khong, rice from the great Salween, rice from the great mountain, rice from the high peak, rice from Chiang Mai, rice from Bangkok, make yourself come up, make yourself increase, come up and eat the first rice, come up and drink pure water, come up and eat bird meat, come up and eat chicken meat, come up and join together, come up and be together, come up and unite, come up and be in solidarity, come up and fill the barn, come up and fill the granary, come up and fill the field hut, come up and fill the resting place!. (Historical Documentation, 2019, p.121)

This prayer is recited by the Karen hill tribes in Northern Thailand during the threshing of the rice paddy after harvesting. Here again we have the reference to “bird of the rice



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spirit” and the “widowed grandmother.” Rice as a gift, something essential from the mysterious being. The Kong Boon Khao or Rice Merit Network found today in Karen villages is a concrete expression of the central place of rice in the culture of the people and their awareness that “we live or starve together”.

Feuerbach asserts that “It is true that man places the aim of his action in God, but God has no other aim of action than the moral and eternal salvation of man: thus man has in fact no other aim than himself. The divine activity is not distinct from the human” (Feuerbach, 1841, p.30). Feuerbach thinks that God, Christianity and religious practice in general is a projection of man. The writings of both Wartofsky and Harvey give a positive assessment of the idea of projection that allow us to grasp other latent and hidden meanings.

There may be elements of projection in the Karen culture and the beliefs that underlie Kong Boon Khao

expressed in the saying that we live or starve together; a projection with its meaning of man’s suffering for other.

The Christian religion distinguished the impulses and passions of man according to their quality, their character; it represented only good emotions, good dispositions, good thought, as revelations, operations-that is, as dispositions, feelings, thoughts, - of God; for what God reveals is a quality of God himself. (Feuerbach, 1841, p.31).

Harvey’s ‘beam’ metaphor of projection might be a useful instrument to apply some ideas from Feuerbach to the Karen view of life. This metaphor is taken from what happens in a cinema when a projector ‘projects’ a beam on to a screen. In human projection what is ‘projected’ is not just illusion but the story and meaning and emotions of the one who projects. In the stories and practices of the Karen there is plenty of past stories and present emotions.

There are many elements in Karen culture that prepared them to give a welcome to Christianity. People who have as a basic principle of life the realization that we live or starve together open to Christian ideas such as God is Love. And their expectation for the future is not for one where there is just plenty of rice but also some contact with a mysterious being which is the fulfilment of the mystery inside of them.

### Conclusion

Feuerbach said of religion: “I constitute myself only its listener and interpreter, not its prompter”. Some think he interpreted religion as nothing more than an anthropomorphic invention. At the end of his life he was much less negative about the relevance of religion. It was still a projection but it was also the recognition that our human existence has much that is mysterious. The Kong Boon Khao may have elements of projection but it is also the ‘beam’ which projects forward the meaning, direction and purpose of a living local culture.

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