

## **THE PATH TO SAINTHOOD: Celibacy in Catholicism and Pabbajita in Buddhism**

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### **Abstract**

Celibacy is a spiritual act of worship that can be found in Catholicism and Buddhism. Some cases show an inability to continue the spiritual journey of celibacy. This research was conducted to describe the concept of celibacy in Catholicism and Buddhism and its comparison. The explanation and analysis of the central concept of celibacy are based on studies conducted through literature studies. The results of this study indicate: First, celibacy in Catholicism is a choice made by someone not to enter into marriage ties as a form of devotion to God. Meanwhile, in Buddhism, celibacy is one way to achieve peace. Second, the basis for practicing celibacy for Catholics comes from the prohibition of marriage in the Letter of Matthew in a message from Jesus. Whereas in Buddhism, celibacy is a way of life from Pabbajita, what the Buddha taught. Third, the controversy over celibacy in Catholicism began when Peter, the Pope at that time, was married, as well as cases of sexual harassment by priests. Whereas in Buddhism, especially Theravada, the debate is not big because it is a moral code of Pattimokkha given directly from Buddha Siddharta Gautama for those who wish to attain Nibbana. This article argues that celibacy in Catholicism and Buddhism is dynamic and controversial.

**Keyword:** Buddhism; Catholicism; Celibacy; Religious Leaders.

### **Abstrak**

*Selibat adalah tindakan ibadah spiritual yang dapat ditemukan dalam agama Katolik dan Budha. Beberapa kasus menunjukkan ketidakmampuan untuk melanjutkan perjalanan spiritual selibat. Penelitian ini dilakukan untuk mendeskripsikan konsep selibat dalam agama Katolik dan Buddha serta perbandingannya. Penjelasan dan analisis konsep sentral selibat didasarkan pada studi yang dilakukan melalui studi literatur. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan: Pertama, selibat dalam agama Katolik adalah pilihan yang dilakukan oleh seseorang untuk tidak melangsungkan ikatan perkawinan sebagai bentuk pengabdian kepada Tuhan. Sedangkan dalam agama Buddha, selibat adalah salah satu cara untuk mencapai kedamaian. Kedua, dasar untuk mempraktikkan selibat bagi umat Katolik berasal dari larangan pernikahan dalam Surat Matius dalam pesan dari Yesus. Sedangkan dalam Buddhisme, selibat adalah cara hidup dan Pabbajita apa yang diajarkan Sang Buddha. Ketiga, kontroversi selibat dalam Katolik dimulai ketika Petrus Paus yang menikah, serta kasus pelecehan seksual oleh para pendeta. Sedangkan dalam agama Buddha, khususnya Theravada, perdebatannya tidak besar karena merupakan kode moral Patimokkha yang diberikan langsung dari Buddha Siddharta Gautama bagi yang ingin pencapaian Nibbana. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa selibat dalam agama Katolik dan Buddha bersifat dinamis dan kontroversial.*

**Kata Kunci:** Buddha; Katolik; Selibat; Pemimpin Agama.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Religion is a value system that plays an important role in regulating the joints of human life. Rules originating from religious teachings are often controversial and cannot be accepted by all layers of adherents, as with the most basic human needs, namely the need to live together. This is different from Christians and Buddhists in carrying out spiritual actions. Corrigan (2016) mentioned that in the third century, Christians considered abstaining from sexual activity, known as celibacy. Celibacy is considered a white martyrdom for religious leaders that is controversial because it removes people's social orientation. At the same time, sexual orientation is a gift God gives as a biological need that cannot be separated in human life. Freud believed that almost everything people do stems from this sex drive (Freud, 2016). In short, every human being needs to live together through a relationship of desire that arises from natural impulses.

Celibate life is a way of life that is not easy to live in the current world situation. Thousands of cases of abuse by celibate perpetrators, such as priests, have been reported and have become a disgrace to the Catholic Church. Reporting from Tempo.co (2021), Pope Francis expressed his sadness and shame at this incident. Apparently, the case of Celibacy controversy was also experienced by monks in China. Reported bbc.com (2018), a monk in China was reported by his colleagues to have forced women to have sex. The monk was considered to have violated his vows as a monk. Apart from these two cases, of course, there are still many Catholic and Buddhist religious leaders who adhere to the teachings of celibacy. This phenomenon shows differences in understanding the practice of celibacy in Christianity and Buddhism. Therefore, this research is essential to comprehensively explain the differences in celibacy in Abrahamic religions (Christianity) and Asian religions (Buddhism).

Even though celibacy is a condition carried out on spiritual grounds celibacy is not only associated with the role of a religious leader or ascetic. Non-religious leaders also practice celibacy with the aim of social, psychological, and physical-biological solidarity. An example is the practice of therapeutic celibacy in the popular Hindi literature of brahmacharya practiced by Men in North India (Alter, 1994). This shows that the term celibacy can still be viewed outside of a religious context. In this research itself, the term celibacy is focused on those whose unmarried status is a basic spiritual reason. So far, studies on celibacy that have been carried out by previous academics have not discussed many comparative studies in Catholicism and Buddhism.

First, de Weger (2022) celibacy study on unchaste celibates describes the sexual offenses committed by celibate priests in the Roman Catholic Church against adults. It has become a culture of secrecy and disharmony. It differs from the research of Fitriyana (2014) dan Sanderan et al. (2022) who found that celibacy in Paul's teachings practicing celibacy is good. However, married people should not neglect their marital life. Celibacy also affects the level of success and efficiency in providing services (Sanderan et al., 2022). Paul's writings on celibacy are found in 1 Corinthians 7:7-8; 32-35. People who choose celibacy

require special grace from God. This shows that celibacy is encouraged for those called, while those who do not have the gift are discouraged from celibacy.

From Catholic and Buddhist perspectives, celibacy is practiced by men and women (Bittle & Anderson, 2023; Izmy, 2022; Lee, 2023). Igbolekwu wrote about the prevalence and preventive measures of uterine fibroids in celibate women in the Catholic Church of Ibadan, Nigeria. The celibate women only sought treatment from traditional medicine, and health workers ignored their problems (Igbolekwu et al., 2019). Celibacy was also practiced as a means to get an education, as women around them after marriage could not access education (Kumar Sah, 2023). The study of celibacy is also related to theological doctrines and physiological aspects (Brenk, 2023; Potz, 2023; Verhoeven, 2015). Medical celibacy argues that lifelong celibacy disrupts the body's physiological mechanisms. However, in the last decade, through the theory of semen reabsorption into the body, doctors have praised the Catholic practice of celibacy as feasible and also beneficial (Verhoeven, 2015). In Buddhism, celibacy or pabbajita is also interpreted as a means of personal fitness (Alter, 1994; Micheletti et al., 2022; Sari, 2020). Celibacy is interpreted more as a process of keeping fit than theological teaching.

Finally, previous research on celibacy is not only related to theological doctrines but also to physiological aspects. The debate about the physiological effects on clergy began as early as the nineteenth century. Verhoeven describes the debate as a transnational phenomenon in which there are doctors who protest the Church as well as some who maintain largely harmless vows of celibacy (Verhoeven, 2015). Celibacy in medicine argues that lifelong celibacy disrupts the body's physiological mechanisms. However, even in the last decades, through the theory of the reabsorption of semen into the body, doctors have praised the proper and beneficial practice of Catholic celibacy. The weakness of this study is that there is no comparison of Buddhist practices, so researchers will complete the study to make it more comprehensive.

In this research, a comparison of the practice of celibacy in Catholicism and Buddhism is essential because it has roots in rich historical and cultural contexts. Research on these practices helps in a deeper understanding of the development and evolution of these religions and the role of celibacy practices in social, political, and cultural contexts. In the context of gender studies, such research could also involve analyzing the responses of individual men and women who practice celibacy to its rules, following the prevailing social norms in their environment. Moreover, the practice of celibacy in the religious traditions of Catholicism and Buddhism has often been controversial and debated in modern contexts. Academic research on these practices can contribute diverse perspectives on social change, gender, sexual identity, and religious transformation in today's society.

Glancing at the description above, we can see the concept of celibacy in Catholicism and Buddhism, which has its own uniqueness. Both have the same meaning. Also each has its own response from its adherents. This paper aims to complement the shortcomings of previous studies that have not discussed much

regarding the comparison of celibacy between Catholicism and Buddhism. To achieve this goal, there are several formulations of questions that are trying to be answered, including, First, what is the meaning and basis of celibacy in Catholicism and Buddhism? Second, what are the goals and benefits of celibacy in Catholicism and Buddhism? Third, how is the debate over celibacy in Catholicism and Buddhism? Fourth, what are the similarities and differences in undergoing celibacy in the two religions? This study will examine the practices of the concept of celibacy in more depth through comparative analysis.

This research is library research. In collecting research data, researchers collected data through books, journals, and other literature related to the topic of celibacy (Creswell, 2014; Ishtiaq, 2019). A qualitative approach allows researchers to investigate and understand the content of the literature in depth, identifying patterns, themes, and variability in the relevant literature. Because this research is literature, the primary source is religious texts from Catholicism and Buddhism. In comparison, others were obtained by searching relevant journals and scientific articles. Then it was analyzed using a discursive analysis technique by describing the data obtained as an object of celibacy by looking at the similarities and differences.

## **2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **2.1. Celibacy in Catholicism**

Celibacy comes from the Latin word "*caelibatus*," which means single or unmarried life. Meanwhile, in English, it is known as "*celibacy*," which means single life (Heuken, 2005). Celibacy can also be defined as abstinence from marriage and sexual relations (O'Brien, 2009). According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religion, Celibacy is the state of living without marriage, which is done for religious or spiritual reasons (Bowker, 2003). Most common in religion, celibacy is the gateway to a sacred role in Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. In a religious context, people who lead celibate lives sometimes make vows. In the Latin Catholic Church, all ordained officials, including priests, are men of faith who have the will and willingness to express and carry out a personal commitment, namely not to marry for the rest of their lives for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven (Wibowo, 2016).

The teaching of celibacy is not known in the Old Testament, and it is even commanded to multiply offspring. So, where is the legal basis for celibacy so that it develops into teaching in the Roman Catholic Church? The legal basis can be found in the New Testament such as: "There are people who cannot marry because they are born like that from their mother's womb, and people who are made like that by other people, and there is a man who makes himself so of his own accord because of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew: 19:12). Jesus stated that there are three groups who cannot marry with the following groups: First, there are people who are born from a castration condition (congenital), so they cannot marry. Second, a person who receives the consequence of being castrated by another person because his genitals are cut off is known as a eunuch/eunuch. Third, someone who, because of his will, chooses not to marry because of the kingdom of Heaven or because of religious duty. It is this third group that is later

known as "unmarried" celibate. Choosing not to marry is not because of physical problems but because of spiritual problems. Celibacy is a condition of life without engaging in marriage and sex based on one's own choice to dedicate oneself completely to God's service for the sake of God's Kingdom.

Living a celibate life apart from originating from the Bible also originates from Jesus Christ. Undergoing celibacy is the same as imitating Jesus Christ because Christ was never married (in a single state) in his life, as stated in the Bible: "You must be holy throughout your life, just like He who is holy, who has called you, be holy because I am holy. " (Pet 1:15-16). Saint Paul, in his first letter to the people in Corinth, also taught about celibacy. Paul recommends that men not marry (1 Cor 7:1). The context of Paul's talk is closely related to the talk about the dangers of fornication which was a developing reality at that time. So Paul invites men not to marry to avoid this and focus on serving God.

One of the arguments in favor of celibacy is the view that mandated celibacy can make priests more spiritual than married priests. Likewise, it is also explained in several biblical texts and traditional statements that celibacy is a better choice and allows one's faith to be more devoted to God. Because he freed himself from marriage and worldly problems and made him more spiritually mature (Ballano, 2019). Sipe mentioned that there was no clear operational definition of celibacy; one said masturbation was a violation of celibacy, and the other said it was not (Richard Sipe, 2003). Based on the definition above, it is emphasized that celibacy is a "choice," placing priestly celibacy not as an imposition but as a conscious decision, and that choice has consequences that must be lived. Choosing celibacy shows the path of love and service so that it will let go of personal desires that arise from within. Therefore, living life as a celibate priest is a free decision that must be lived as a consequence.

Furthermore, one's decision to practice celibacy is a conscious adoption of spiritual power, not only the power necessary for celibacy but also as a manifestation of social independence and religious purity. Celibacy is not only practiced by men. In social independence, especially for women, they are not identified in a relationship more valued because of their independent decision to maintain their virginity intact (Holland, 2007). Celibacy by women in Catholicism is usually practiced by nuns in the Church. Their virginity is an important part of their identity and independence and becomes an integral part of their spiritual authority as a role model and advisor (Richard Sipe, 2003).

The debate about celibacy has been around for a long time and is causing tension (Claire Cage, 2015). The rule of celibacy also evolved as the Church grew. Claire Cage (2015) mentions that clerical celibacy proved to be a source of tension and division within Christianity, first between the Eastern and Western Churches and then between Catholics and Protestants during the Reformation. The controversy that is present in the discussion about celibacy in Catholicism is related to Saint Peter as the first Pope to have performed a marriage. In the Gospels, it is stated that Jesus healed Peter's "mother-in-law" (Matthew 8:14). But the name of the wife of the Apostle Peter, or even her whereabouts, is not mentioned in the Gospels. It is recorded in the Bible that Peter's mother-in-law

was sick, but it was not mentioned that the Apostle Peter's wife was there accompanying her mother. The reason is that Saint Peter, as the first Pope, was chosen to be an apostle when he was married. Peter himself said, "We have left everything and followed you; so what will we get?" Jesus said to them: "I say to you, ... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will have eternal life" (Mt 19:27, 29, DRB/ Vulgate translation; cf. Lk 18:29-30). According to St. John Chrysostom, "leaving his wife" here "does not mean breaking the marriage bond, but that we must hold that the bond of faith is more important than any other bond."

Family life (married) and celibate life are two forms of testimony to God's love. The two forms need and support each other. Married people need to be made aware that love for God exceeds love between family members, and those who choose to be celibate need to be made aware that God's love becomes concrete in the love of a faithful husband and wife. Both are forms of attitude expressed in different ways. Verses that allude to celibate life are found in several of Paul's writings, namely in the Letter of 1 Corinthians: *However, it would be nice if everyone was like me; but each person receives from God his own special gift, one this gift, another that gift. But to those who are not married and to widows, I urge them to live as I am.*" (Letter 1 Corinthians.)

Paul was of the opinion that while celibacy is good, married people should not neglect their marriage. In Matthew Henry's Commentary, The Navarre Bible Commentary: The Letters of St. Paul, St. John Chrysostom wrote, "Whoever criticizes marriage also deprives himself of the glory that is in the celibate life; while whoever glorifies marriage, he also makes the life of the Celibate attractive and shining. Something that looks good only when compared to something bad is not really worth it; but when it is greater than the things appreciated by all, then indeed it is good at a very high level." (St. John Chrysostom, De virginitate, 10, 1). In short, celibacy is a choice given to those who want to live it for good consideration because they have sworn an oath in the name of religion.

## 2.2. Celibacy in Buddhism

In terms of understanding, celibacy in Buddhism is no different from Catholic understanding. Celibacy is a way to reach a point of peace in life that comes from an ancient Indian tradition following Sidharta Gautama, who was born in 563 BC. The monastic life was taught directly by the Buddha (Hadiwijono, 2003). To understand celibacy in Buddhism, it is necessary to understand that there are two major influential schools in Buddhism, namely Theravada and Mahayana, then from Mahayana Tantrayana emerged. The second fundamental difference is in the book held. The Theravada school adheres to the Vinaya book, which is part of the Tripitaka, while the Mahayana school no longer uses the book (Taram & Jimo, 2021). Celibacy itself is regulated in the Vinaya, so Theravada schools practice celibacy.

In Theravada Buddhism, there are two concepts of life, namely, *Pabbijata* and *Gharasava*. Celibacy is part of *Pabbajita*, namely the concept of leaving the world and household life and living a holy life (Rashid, 1997). Meanwhile,

*Gharasava* is living as a householder by choosing to live in a family. The aim of going forth from the household life is to leave the world by keeping *the precepts* and the *Vinaya*. *Sila* means controlling oneself from all unwholesome thought formations or the effort to free oneself from greed, hatred, and delusion. Meanwhile, the *Vinaya* is the basic guideline for sustaining life (Esli et al., 2020). The desire to get married, according to the teachings of the Buddha, means that a person has not yet been freed from the physical life and human emotions (Sasanadhaja, 2002). That way, only brave and serious can carry out the teachings of celibacy.

Significant cultural differences in different areas with the spread of Buddhism influence local attitudes towards celibacy. His attitude is adapted to the conditions of each local adherent. Tibetan Buddhism in practicing celibacy was practiced before the fourteenth century. However, it was found later that married leaders refused celibacy and lived luxurious life with their wives and children. In the same century, there was a reformation, and celibacy was restored (Hopfe et al., 2014). Meanwhile, celibacy is also known in Chinese Buddhism, which is marked by the arrival of Buddhism in China. Long before Buddhism developed in China, some knowledge about objections to sex and warnings about the dangers of uncontrollable desire existed (Holland, 2007). The foundation of knowledge about the necessity of celibacy in Buddhism is about the prohibition of monks from (1) releasing semen on purpose; (2) making bodily contact with a woman, holding hands, or touching a woman's hair or parts of her body; (3) invites a woman to have sexual intercourse or speak obscenely to him; (4) talk to women about "serving their sexuality"; (5) act as intermediaries to bring men and women together, regardless of whether their relationship is an affair or leads to marriage (Pacittiya rules 31, 32, 90, 91, 92, 93 in (Holland, 2007).

Celibacy also had an effect on Taoists. By the sixth century C.E., the Taoists had embraced the pattern of Buddhist monasticism. Their priests could now live in convents and, in some cases, be ordered celibate. Women's monasteries (Nuns) were founded for Taoist women who wished to be celibate (Hopfe et al., 2014). The question that often arises when looking at monks and nuns is whether their hair is completely shaved. Edmund A. Leach (1958) in (Izmy, 2022) tells the story of Obeyeskere, who made observations of Buddhists in Sri Lanka. The result is that the understanding of long hair for them is a representation of free sexuality. Half long hair, short hair, and half bald are limited symbols. Meanwhile, a head with no hair (bald) represents a celibate life as a commitment to let go of everything related to the world. Therefore, all monks and nuns are required to obey *the precepts* by shaving off all the hair on their heads.

A Buddhist, to attain happiness in life and *Dhamma*, one way to burn off more karma than create karma is to devote oneself to asceticism and meditation. Karma will burn naturally, which can be helped through fasting, celibacy, and ascetic practices (Fieser & Powers, 2018). To meet the daily needs of the Buddhists who practice celibacy, they receive offerings from the faithful.

### **2.3. Comparison of Catholic and Buddhist Concepts of Celibacy**

Celibacy in Catholicism is dynamic because it continues to develop and become a debate. However, in the Roman Catholic Church, priests are required to comply with a Letter from the Pope as the leader of the Church. The meaning of celibacy is more specific for those serious about achieving the Kingdom of God by not being married and focusing solely on serving the people. Meanwhile, in the teachings of Buddhism, the Buddha did not forbid those who wished to live married or choose to live a celibate life, both women and men. However, to prevent people from falling into a promiscuous lifestyle and promiscuous sex, it is recommended to be celibate. In Buddhism, marriage will be praised when it leads a person to the path of truth or Dhamma and happiness. So it is not entirely that marriage and sexual relations are forbidden in Buddhism. Celibacy is the path taken to reach the Dhamma.

The main difference between Catholic and Buddhist celibacy is the legal basis for practicing it. Celibacy-related laws are also one of the causes of the separation of Christians and Catholics, who have different interpretations. In Buddhism, it is relatively static because it is the moral code of *Patthimokha*, from Siddhartha Gautama, for those who wish to attain Nibbana. Apart from that, all the practices of celibacy in Catholicism and Buddhism are still maintained by those who have made up their minds to dedicate themselves to a spiritual path. In its implementation, men and women are free to choose, as in Catholicism, it is run by priests and nuns, while in Buddhism by monks and nuns.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Celibacy is a vow or spiritual practice that not can be found in every religious tradition. The similarities between Catholics and Buddhists in the practice of celibacy lie in purpose and function. Both are practiced based on spiritual spirit and do not differentiate between gender in their interpretation. At the same time, the difference is in the perspective, legal basis, and method. In Catholicism, celibacy always experiences dynamics of application every time it passes, whereas, in Theravada Buddhism, it is a moral code that Siddhartha Gautama has mandated. Thus, each of these religions has its uniqueness in practicing celibacy. The author realizes that this article still needs to be improved, especially in data sources and analysis. It is hoped that the next writer can examine more deeply related to celibacy in the practice of religious leader.



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