

Buddhism vs. Christianity

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In an era pregnant with tolerance for everything, some Christians have embraced Buddhism while numerous attempts have been made to “unify” Buddhism and Christianity by ecumenically minded members of both faiths. Friendly Buddhist and Christian encounters are the vogue on some university campuses. Through no fault of its own, however, “Christianity” is frequently the loser in such encounters. Thus, mainline Christians, who have no real comprehension of biblical Christianity but are fascinated by the alluring or mystical nature of Buddhist metaphysics, may leave their “faith” and become Buddhists. Or, they may maintain a rather odd mixture of both religions, one that is ultimately unfaithful to both. On the other hand, Buddhists who “accept” Christianity merely redefine it into their own Buddhism. Professor of Buddhism and Japanese Studies at Tokyo and Harvard Universities respectively, Masaharu Anesaki illustrates this by his assimilation of Jesus with the Buddha:

In short, we Buddhists are ready to accept Christianity; nay, more, our faith in Buddha is faith in Christ. *We see Christ because we see Buddha.... We can hope not in vain for the second advent of Christ [that is] the appearance of the [prophesied] future Buddha Metteya.* ¹⁶ (italics in original)

Nevertheless, rather than seeking a “unity” among these religions, the truth is much closer to the gut feeling of Zen Buddhist D.T. Suzuki, who states, as he undoubtedly reflects upon the Buddhist concept of suffering: “Whenever I see a crucified figure of Christ, I cannot help thinking of the gap that lies deep between Christianity and Buddhism.” ¹⁷

The truth is that purported similarities between Buddhism and Christianity are only apparent or surface. For example, many have claimed a similarity between Jesus Christ’s saving role in Christianity and the Bodhisattva’s savior role as given in later Buddhism. But these roles are entirely contradictory. In Christianity, “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3). This means He saves us from the penalty of our sins by taking God’s judgment of sin in His own Person. Jesus paid the penalty of sin (death) for sinners by dying in their place. Thus, He offers a free gift of salvation to anyone simply for believing and accepting what He has done on their behalf (Jn. 3:16). The central ideas involved in Christ’s saving role—God’s holiness, propitiatory atonement, forgiveness of sin, salvation as a free gift of God’s grace through faith in Christ, etc., are all foreign to Buddhism.

The Bodhisattva’s role of savior is thus entirely different than that of Christ’s. The Bodhisattva has no concern with sin in an ultimate sense, only with the end of suffering. He has no concept of God’s wrath against sin or the need for a propitiatory atonement. He has no belief in an infinite personal God who created men and women in His image. He has no belief in a loving God who freely forgives sinners. His only sacrifice is his postponement of entering nirvana so that he can help others find Buddhist enlightenment. Having achieved self-perfection, the Bodhisattva could *freely* enter nirvana at death. Instead, he chooses to reincarnate again to help others attain their own self-perfection and nirvana more quickly.

Thus, those who argue there is an essential similarity between Buddhist and Christian concepts of savior are wrong. In fact, at their core, Buddhism and Christianity are irreconcilable, as far removed as the East and West. Indeed, virtually every major Christian doctrine is denied in Buddhism and vice versa. We would therefore suggest that a merging of the

two traditions results in a disservice to both.

For their part, Buddhists have long recognized the differences between the two faiths. The knowledgeable Buddhist is aware that the doctrines and teachings of biblical Christianity are an enemy rather than a friend, for Christian faith openly *teaches* those things which Buddhists reject as mere ignorance and/or as spiritual hindrances; further Christianity openly *opposes* those things which Buddhism endorses as essential for genuine enlightenment.

For example, Christianity is interwoven with the monotheistic grandeur of an infinite, personal God (Jn. 17:3; Isa. 43:10-11, 44:6); Buddhism is agnostic and practically speaking, atheistic (or in later form, polytheistic).

In Christianity, its central teaching involves the absolute necessity for belief in Jesus Christ as personal Savior from sin (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12; I Tim. 2:5-6); Buddhism has no Savior from sin and even in the Mahayana tradition, as we have seen, the savior concepts are quite dissimilar.

Christianity stresses salvation by grace through faith alone (Jn. 3:16; Eph. 2:8-9); Buddhism stresses enlightenment by works through meditative practices that seek the alleviation of “ignorance” and desire.

Christianity promises forgiveness of *all* sin now (Col. 2:13; Eph. 1:7) and the eventual elimination of sin and suffering for all eternity (Rev. 21:3-4). On the other hand, Buddhism, since it holds there is no God to offend, promises not the forgiveness and eradication of sin, but rather the elimination of suffering (eventually) and the ultimate eradication of the individual.

Wherever we look philosophically, we see the contrasts between these faiths. Christianity stresses salvation from sin, not from life itself (1 Jn. 2:2). Christianity exalts personal existence as innately good, since man was created in God’s image, and promises eternal life and fellowship with a personal God (Gen. 1:26, 31; Rev. 21:3-4). Christianity has a distinctly defined teaching in the afterlife (heaven or hell, e.g., Mt. 25:46; Rev. 20:10-15). It promises eternal immortality for man as man—but perfected in every way (Rev. 21:3-4).

On the other hand, Buddhism teaches reincarnation, and has only a mercurial nirvana wherein man no longer remains man or, where, in Mahayana, there exists temporary heavens or hells and the final “deification” of “man” through a merging with the ultimate pantheistic-cosmic Buddha nature. But Christianity denies that reincarnation is a valid belief, based on the fact of Christ’s propitiatory atonement for sin. In other words, if Christ died to forgive all sin, there is no reason for a person to pay the penalty for their own sin (“karma”) over many lifetimes (Col. 2:13; Heb. 9:27; 10:10, 14; Eph. 1:7).

Consider further contrasts. Biblical Christianity rejects pagan mysticism and all occultism (e.g., Deut. 18:9-12); Buddhism accepts or actively endorses them.

In Christianity life itself is good and given honor and meaning; in Buddhism one finds it difficult to deny that life is ultimately not worth living—for life and suffering are inseparable. Thus, in Christianity, Jesus Christ came that men “might have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10); in Buddhism, Buddha came that men might simply rid themselves of personal existence.

In Christianity, God will either glorify or punish the spirit of man (Jn. 5:28-29); in Buddhism no spirit exists to be glorified or punished. In Christianity, absolute morality is a central theme (Eph. 1:4), in Buddhism it is secondary or peripheral.

Buddhism is essentially humanistic, stressing man’s self-achievement. Christianity is

essentially theistic, stressing God's self-revelation and gracious initiative on behalf of man's helpless moral and spiritual condition. Thus, in Buddhism man alone is the author of salvation; Christianity sees this as an absolute impossibility because innately, man has no power to save himself (Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

We could go on, but suffice it to say the form of romantic humanism that inspires liberal religionists to see *basic* similarities in the two faiths is no more than wishful thinking. It is not utterly surprising, however, that Western religious humanists would promote Buddhism, for in both systems man is the measure of all things (a god of sorts), even if in the latter the end result is a form of personal self-annihilation. But to the extent both are humanistic, they compass the antithesis of Christianity, whose goal is to glorify God and not man (Jer. 17:5; Jude 24-25).

As far as knowing and glorifying God is concerned, this is unimportant and irrelevant to Buddhists. But biblically, to the extent God is ignored or opposed, to that extent man must correspondingly suffer. Here we see the ultimate irony of Buddhism: in ignoring God, Buddhists feel they can escape suffering; in fact this will only perpetuate it forever. This is the real tragedy of Buddhism, especially of so-called Christian Buddhism. The very means to escape suffering (true faith in the biblical Christ) is rejected in favor of a self-salvation which can only result in eternal suffering (Mt. 25:46; Rev. 20:10-15).

Footnotes:

16. Masaharu Anesaki, "How Christianity Appeals to a Japanese Buddhist," in David W. McKain (ed.), *Christianity: Some Non-Christian Appraisals*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), pp. 102-103.
17. D.T. Suzuki, "Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist," in McKain (ed.), p. 111.