

Buddhism- a religion or a philosophy?

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



Albert Einstein believed that, “ the religion of the future will be a cosmic religion that should transcend a personal god and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both natural and spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual and a meaningful unity” (Jammer, 1999). Buddhism qualifies as a religion depending on one’s point of view. If religion is defined as a system of worship or devotion to a higher deity then Buddhism does not fall under the religious category (Buddha Dharma Education Association, 2012).

However, if religion is defined as a system of beliefs and rituals and morals then Buddhism classifies as a religious practice (Harshorne, 1996). The aspects of religion that include rituals and devotions are the very key aspects of the human experience. Although occupying the same socio-psychological space as other religions, they do not all necessarily share similar characteristics (Molloy, p5, 2010). Western scholars and religious thinkers often refer to Buddhism as an atheist or nontheistic religious practice (Florida, 1990).

Despite apparent contradictions between Buddhism and theistic religions there are many elements of commonality. This paper supports Albert Einstein’s claim on religion through exploring Buddhism as a contemporary religion relevant to reality in relation to science, while considering the similarities shared by Buddhism and traditional religions such as Christianity. Why does it matter if we consider something a religion or not? There are Buddhists who speak confidently on “ Panel discussions” stating that if using the word religion becomes a problem then they will not use it (Los Angeles Interreligious Group, 1991).

Buddhism shows no concern over whether or not it qualifies as a religion, as it is a matter of belief from within and not what people think of it. Smith, a religion historian states in his works that “ beliefs are not primary to religion; faith is” (Florida, 1990) which reflects Buddhism’s emphasis on the importance of karma and leading a morally-based life. Smith also strongly believes that theistic religions invented the idea of god based on humanities “ ignorance, weakness, fear, and desire”(Florida, 1990).

Michael Stone is a psychotherapist and a Buddhist teacher who shares Albert Einstein’s view on religion. Michael attempts to incorporate traditional Buddhist teachings with today’s psychological and philosophical understanding (Stone, 2012). Science has created an abundance of contradictory views in traditional religious teachings that Buddhism stands out as a religion which accommodates scientific evidence (The Dalai Lama centre, 2012). Religion’s importance today has come into question when analyzed through the eyes of society’s logical mind.

The Dalai Lama claims that “ if modern science presents good evidence that a Buddhist idea is wrong, I will accept the modern science, (he gives the example of the Earth moving around the sun, which runs counter to Buddhist scripture)” (The Dalai Lama Centre, 2012). Science has therefore made many questionable beliefs come to reality through trial and error research that many base their beliefs on evidence (Molloy, p179, 2010). Buddhism: The Buddhist religion entails a sense of sacredness with one’s self in relation to the environment and the universe. All religions are concerned with the deepest level of reality and for most religions the core or origin of everything is sacred and mysterious” (Molloy, p7, 2010). The “ Three Marks of Reality”

encompasses the embedded truth in Buddhist theology which reinforces the belief in having no god but rather finding the god within (Molloy, p132, 2010). Sacredness in religion refers to a dedicated practice to a religious purpose not the belief in a mystical figure who controls life as we know it.

Sacredness is an interesting place of experience, and since there is a common misconception about Buddhism, the Dharma equips one to make a conciliatory meeting with whomever. The Dharma is part of the Three Jewels of Buddhism since it covers Buddhist teachings in “ how to view the world and how to live properly” (Molloy, p131, 2010). The Dharma accommodates a variety of other views and appreciates those views for what they are. The emergence of Buddhism was based on the spread of Siddhartha’s teachings who was the oblivious son of a powerful king.

The main components of Buddhist belief are: “ karma, compassion and reincarnation”, which were conceptualized as a result of Siddhartha’s sudden exposure to reality’s misfortunes (Molloy, p128, 2010). These features influenced followers to adopt a peaceful and moral journey through life if they seek a blissful reincarnated-self (Molloy, 2010). Having experienced the “ four passing sights” which involves living with nothing but oneself, Siddhartha began his journey towards becoming a world teacher (Molloy, p128, 2010).

He practiced “ The Four Noble Truths” which are the “ truths about life, that suffering exists, it has a cause, it has an end and there is a way to attain release from suffering” (Molloy, p143, 2010). In Buddhist literature it is believed that worshipping a higher deity disregards the notion of “ karmic results of action” which they strongly believe in (Thera, 2012). Similarities of <https://assignbuster.com/buddhism-a-religion-or-a-philosophy/>

traditional religions (Christianity): Religion “ suggests the joining of our natural, human world to the sacred world” (Molloy, p5, 2010).

Buddhism revolves around the life and lessons of Buddha, and Christianity revolves around the life and lessons of Jesus Christ, who are the two prophets present in both fields of practice (Los Angeles Interreligious Group, 1991). Both prophets followed the same strategy to uncover the worldly truths as they “ stayed in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights’ facing evil, “ Jesus by Satan and Buddha by the demon Mara and his daughters” (Los Angeles Interreligious Group, 1991). As the holiness’ representatives, both religions have a centralized authority figure such as the Pope and the Dalai Lama to carry on the teachings of God and Buddha on a global scale (Molloy, p391, 2010). Similarities in both Christians and Buddhists theological practice reflect the fact that despite the difference in beliefs in a deity the foundations share some common ethics. Buddhism’s conception of reality refers to the basics of “ The Four Noble Truths and The Noble Eightfold Path” that can be applied to the Ten Christian Commandments (Molloy, p136, 2010).

The Ten Commandments represent God’s rules of behavior Christians are expected to follow (Betty, 2008). The early stage of Buddhism was initially rejected as a religion by westerners. However later on, western scholars considered “ Buddhist concepts of nirvana and dharma as parallels to the Western notion of divinity or God” and they refuted it (Florida, 1990). The manifestation of Buddhist characteristics attributed to God’s existence in theistic religions is partly based on Buddhism’s perspective on reality and needing no god to control their way of life (Betty, 2008).

Yet religious symbolism has been an important feature of all religions, including Buddhism and Christianity. The Christians pray to Jesus in churches while Buddhists pray to Buddha in monasteries. According to Molloy, “religious symbols, myths, and terminology at times suggest a universal language that all religions speak” (Molloy, p9, 2010). The differences: While both are classified as a religion, a prominent difference and focus of many arguments surrounds the notion of Buddhism’s lack of deity to worship.

Any forms of God-like elements in Buddhism are seen as manifestations of a specific physical form (Betty, 2008). Gods in Buddhism are essentially considered manifestations of distinct physical elements and mediums from which Buddhists can contribute their physical energies toward enlightenment, which is a state of spiritual understanding (Hartshorne, 1996). Buddhism does not place great importance on having a higher divinity because they don’t think it will have an impact or even make a difference when practicing their values (Hartshorne, 1996).

According to Stafford, “Buddhism and Christianity have much to teach each other about Ultimate Reality—God or Buddha Nature” (Stafford, 2008). Buddhism is considered a “psychological religion” as it provides the tools within a person to attain full-fledged happiness internally rather than externally (Thera, 2012). Whereas Christianity is a religion of doctrines where the institution of the church controls Christian practices on life (Molloy, p391, 2010). Therefore the ideas of ultimate reality differ greatly as both religions expect different outcomes from their practices.

One focuses on what God expects while the other does not place any expectations other than attempting to reach personal happiness. The

difference in guidance received by both Buddhist and Christian followers provides an understanding as to why Buddhism may not be considered a religion by some theist believers. Christianity stresses on the importance of human action based on God's cosmic plan to impose good morals into society to fight between the good and evils life bestows (Molloy, p15, 2010). Buddhism on the other hand focuses on personal karma to justify the good reasons behind following a morally-based lifestyle.

Pope John Paul II upset Buddhists when he stated that " Buddhism is an " atheistic" system and that " the doctrines of salvation in Buddhism and Christianity are opposed" (Stafford, 2008). The Pope's words made it clear that he believes the rejection of a dogma in Buddhism raises a lot of questions in the sphere of religion when it comes to the nature of Buddha. Agreeably, " Christians have faith in God while Buddhists have faith in something other than God- emptiness, perhaps" (Florida, 1990).

Since Buddhism and Christianity address " the relationship of ultimate- God or emptiness" as major opposing elements (Florida, 1990), Florida poses an interesting question regarding Christianity that " if ultimate reality is Emptiness, is the Christian forced to choose between identifying God with Emptiness and denying God altogether? ' (Florida, 1990). This statement supports Christianity's set requirements for fulfilling one's " obligations" with no room for personal opinion to God whereas Buddhism allows a progressive growth from within, with the world around in tune with one's personal opinion (Silva, 2011).

The progressiveness of Buddhism suggests that there are no implications on what one should and can believe in, in pursuit of sacredness. Sacredness can

either be defined as the emptiness attained in Buddhism when enlightened or “ speak of the sacred as what people hold to be sacred” in Christianity (Florida, 1990) (Molloy, p 14, 2010). The holy books are another way to identify the difference in what is considered as guidelines or expected practices for both religions as they are not used for the same reasons.

In Buddhism, there are many kinds of holy books known as the Sutras. Buddhists Sanskrit, serve as a guideline to a deep reality beyond “ the reach of ordinary cognition and senses” (Thera, 2012). Buddhism believes in personal reason while Christians follow religious authority (Molloy, p19, 2010). Therefore, the Bible reveals the words of God that “ cannot be questioned and are a compilation of claims about the physical or spiritual worlds to be accepted on faith” (Birnbaum, 2009). Can a religion both be atheistic and a religion?

While attempting to understand what the topic of religion consists of, one must consider the fact that the term ‘ religion’ was developed in the western culture thus representing their traditional idea of what is meant by religion. The western perception of religion “ may not be entirely appropriate when applied across cultures or spiritual paths” (Molloy, p5, 2010). In " Going Beyond God," Armstrong argues that many Westerners define " religion" much too narrowly because they use the Abrahamic religions -- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam -- and belief in the God of monotheism as the " standard" of what defines religion (Vincent, 2012).

In a book called “ One of Faith and Belief” Smith notes that " the world's religious systems . . . are not all variations on a theme; they do not give differing answers to the same questions, they do not operate in a common

mode" (Smith, 1979). Therefore it is needless to say that contemporary ideologies about religion are no longer strictly based on teachings that cannot be challenged. " Whether we should go on or not to call it faith in God, depends directly on what we think of the universe not on what be thought of it" (Florida, 1990).

New scientific interrelations with religions such as Buddhism, will formulate a new branch that is " both spiritual and scientific" which would be suited for contemporary society logicity (O'Brien, 2009). Religion " suggests the joining of our natural, human world to the sacred world" whatever that may be for anyone (Molloy, p5, 2010). Therefore, why should believing in a divinity improve the humanity-focused problems experienced in religion? Conclusion: If Dharma was assimilated into our culture as a daily practice and was not represented by the word " Buddhism" the world would be a happier place.

If children had to focus on their attention in early childhood education to learn to look at their mind, to regulate their emotions, to be trained in that way then having the name " Buddhism" to represent the practice would not matter (Los Angeles Interreligious Group, 1991). If you try to categorize Dharma or Buddhist teachings it is really challenging, because it is a combination of a science, a religion, a philosophy or psychology. Buddhism can be seen as a religion which focuses on a way of life that allows the adoption of teachings in any other religion appropriate to one's life journey (Molloy, 2010).

Having drawn attention to the distinct similarities and differences both Christianity and Buddhism share this helps us develop an understanding of <https://assignbuster.com/buddhism-a-religion-or-a-philosophy/>

the dynamics present in both religions. Based on these comparisons it is clear to say that despite the differences, “ Buddhist thinkers are less intent on systematizing” Buddhist thought into theories of ethical action, and “ are more interested in examining particular Buddhist views on what it means to be a moral subject” (Heim, 2011). Based on my personal observations, if you go to any Asian country where Buddhism is practiced it is clear to say that the followers have very religious behaviors.

All in all, Buddhists practice with one goal in mind, to end suffering. Therefore the idea of a higher deity seems senseless if it does not have a direct impact as to aid moralistically. “ Answering a question such as, do you believe in a god, a Buddhist may answer “ is answering that question either way, going to make me less or more sad”” (Los Angeles Interreligious Group, 1991). Bibliography: Betty, L. (2008). What Buddhists and Christians are teaching each other about God. *Cross Currents*. 58(1), 108-116. Buddha Dharma Education Association (2012). *Morality. Fundamentals Of Buddhism*. A BuddhaNet Production.

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