

Buddhist and christian ethics theology



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Buddhism and Christianity are religions with comprehensive and contrasting ethical laws and customs. Throughout this essay the ethical practices of both religions will be described in detail, with an exploration of their similarities and differences presented.

Description of Buddhist Ethical Practices

Seven weeks after Prince Siddhartha Gautama had attained enlightenment whilst meditating under a bodhi tree, he delivered his First Sermon to his five former ascetical companions under that same tree. The contents of that initial sermon are known as the Four Noble Truths, which are essentially the foundation of the religion. They are as follows: (Gwynne 2011, p. 93)

“ 1. Suffering: Now this, monks, is the noble truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.

2. The Source of Suffering: Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: It is the craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.

3. The Cessation of Suffering: Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: It is the remainder-less fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, and non-reliance on it.

4. The Way to the Cessation of Suffering: Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: It is this Noble Eightfold Path: that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.”

Like its parent religion Hinduism, Buddhism teaches that the ultimate goal of the lives of adherents is to break free from the wheel of reincarnation and attain nirvana. Where it differs from Hinduism is instead of stressing the importance of obligations related to caste, gender and age (varna ashrama dharma), it stresses the embodiment of the sublime truth that was rediscovered by Prince Siddhartha on his night of enlightenment, which was imparted to his early followers in his First Sermon. The essence of Buddhist dharma (as opposed to Hindu dharma) is the Four Noble Truths which, along with the Buddha himself and the community of adherents (Sangha), make up the Three Jewels of Buddhism.

The last of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, is often divided into three categories:

1. Wisdom (panna) – right view and right intention
2. Meditation (samdhi) – right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration
3. Virtue (sila) – right speech, right action and right livelihood. This category specifically provides ethical instruction for Buddhists, insisting that adherents must refrain from abusive, deceitful or divisive words through right speech; calling buddhists to be generally righteous in their actions; and implying that

certain occupations may be immoral and hence unsuitable. (Gwynne 2011, pg. 92)

Buddhism lacks a clear belief in a supreme being, resulting in Buddhist morality being based upon the degree as to which thoughts and actions will advance or impede one's quest for final liberation. It is not based upon commandments issued by a transcendent God which are to be unquestionably followed by adherents, as is the case in the Abrahamic religions. Without a God to dictate what is good and evil, Buddhists refer to certain actions as "skillful" (kausalya) or "unskillful" (akausalya) rather than right or wrong. Buddhist morality is based upon considerations of individual progress on the road to liberation from the wheel of reincarnation rather than practicing the will of a divine God.

The cornerstone of Buddhist ethical teaching is the Pancasila, the five precepts. They are as follows:

" I refrain from destroying living creatures

I refrain from taking that which is not given

I refrain from sexual misconduct

I refrain from false speech

I refrain from intoxicants which lead to carelessness." (Gwynne 2011, p. 94)

These precepts provide a basic moral code for Buddhists, so integral that they are often recited on a daily basis by the laity, chanted by monks at

crucial moments such as birth, marriage and death, and are a popular sermon topic.

The Pancasila can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In one sense it provides a basic definition of goodness or skilfulness in Buddhist faith, reflecting the virtues of a spiritually advanced person. In another sense it is understood as the “ five training rules” (pancasikkha) as they were sometimes referred to as by the Buddha. In this view the Pancasila can be seen as a list of practical guidelines to ethically guide the individual Buddhist toward a more liberated state of being, rather than a set of moral commandments cast down from the heavens by almighty God.

The Pancasila is mostly negatively phrased, focusing on what actions should be avoided rather than encouraging virtuous actions. However, upon closer inspection one notices that with every negative, “ I refrain from” phrase, there is a positive phrase to compel the adherent to strive for higher spiritual advancement, getting closer and closer to enlightenment. Thus the first precept is to refrain from killing living beings, not just humans but also animal and even plant life. This idea fits perfectly with the wheel of reincarnation as within the Buddhist world view one may be reincarnated as other life forms. (Gwynne 2011, pg. 95)

The second precept forbids theft, stemming into the obsessive desire of material objects which leads to stealing. This positively encourages adherents to be generous in all aspects of life, not just financially but in their time and energy. The third precept discourages sexual misconduct, making it known that sexual desire is such a strong human instinct that it poses a

considerable threat to one's spiritual path. It is not considered unskillful for adherents to have sexual relations, but it is known that celibacy is a higher form of spiritual existence. The fourth precept forbids any lying or form of deceit, forging a reverence for truth which is a crucial component of individual enlightenment. Finally, the fifth precept prevents the consumption of any intoxicant, instilling on adherents the importance of clarity of mind, an essential quality for Buddhists who are serious about their spirituality.

(Gwynne 2011, pg. 96)

Description of Christian Ethical Practices

Jesus, when approached by a teacher of religious law and asked which of the commandments is most important, answered “ The most important commandment is this: ‘ Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength’. The second is equally important: ‘ Love your neighbour as yourself’. No other commandment is greater than these.”

(Mark 12: 29-31, NLT)

The commandment for Jews to love the one and only God with all their being is found in Deuteronomy, with Leviticus stressing the importance of loving one's neighbour. What Jesus said was not revolutionary, he merely reinstated the ethical values that are symbolized in the Jewish Decalogue. A comparative table of the Decalogue in its various forms is provided below

(Gwynne 2011, p. 102):

Jewish

Catholic and Lutheran

Orthodox and Protestant

1. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery.

I am the Lord your God and you shall have no other gods before me.

I am the Lord your God and you shall have no other gods before me.

2. You shall have no other gods besides me.

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.

You shall not make for yourself any graven image.

3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.

Remember to keep holy the Lord's day.

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.

4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

Honor your father and mother.

Remember to keep holy the Lord's day.

5. Honor your father and your mother.

You shall not kill.

Honor your father and mother.

6. You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not kill.

7. You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not commit adultery.

8. You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not steal.

9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's wife.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

10. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's goods.

You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Jesus himself demystifies any misunderstandings that may occur regarding the Christian perspective of the Jewish ethical teachings in Matthew 5: 17

with “ Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to fulfil them.” (NLT)

Like its parent religion Judaism, the Christian mindset involves an intelligently designed world in which humans have the opportunity to live out God’s divine plan for them, to have eternal communion with him. Moral behaviour is an integral component of this divine plan, being part of the final judgement each person must face. However, as can be seen in other religions, Christianity acknowledges that all human beings have an instinctive moral code regardless of their faith or lack of faith (Gwynne 2011, pg. 101). This inner morality is mentioned by St Paul in Romans 2: 14-16 – “ When outsiders who have never heard of God’s law follow it more or less by instinct, they confirm its truth by their obedience. They show that God’s law is not something alien, imposed on us from without, but woven into the very fabric of our creation. There is something deep within them that echoes God’s yes and no, right and wrong. Their response to God’s yes and no will become public knowledge on the day God makes his final decision about every man and woman. The message from God that I proclaim through Jesus Christ takes into account all these differences.” (The Message Bible)

Although the existence of this instinctive moral code is confirmed throughout Christian denominations, there is debate over the extent as to which it can be distorted by human sinfulness. The Catholic church takes a rather accepting stance on the issue, acknowledging the existence of “ natural law” within its moral teachings, while Protestant and Orthodox churches tend to be more suspicious of non-religious sources of ethics. All the denominations are however united in their belief that Christian ethical teaching are a more

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comprehensive guide to moral living. The Old Testament, as aforementioned, is the essential first step towards Christian moral living, whilst Jewish customs and practices such as kosher, Sabbath laws and circumstances were abandoned by the early church as they were deemed unnecessary in the development of ethical living practices within the religion.

As important as the Jewish tradition is in providing a moral base for Christians, they are often deemed insufficient in the eyes of Christians. Evidenced in the writings in St Paul, the law of Moses is respected as good and holy yet somehow incomplete, lacking the motivation that drives Christian ethics. Christians believe in the importance of a “ new law” which provides the motivation behind embodying the type of ethical practices expressed in the Decalogue, faith that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God and Saviour of humankind. (Gwynne 2011, pg. 93)

The ethical practices of Christianity are unsurprisingly christocentric. Christians view Jesus as sinless and perfect, making him the ultimate model for Christian living. The Christian understanding of the “ next stage” of pre-established Jewish ethics were unveiled through Jesus, and a standout instance of his moral instruction is contained within his Sermon on the Mount. The comprehensive sermon notably contains moral instruction on the topics of anger, adultery, divorce and, strikingly, love for one’s enemies. A selection of verses particularly relevant to Christian ethical practices is presented below:

“ You have heard that the law of Moses says, ‘ Do not murder. If you commit murder, your are subject to judgement.’ But I say, if you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgement!”

– Matthew 5: 21-22 (NLT)

“ You have heard that the law of Moses says, ‘ Do not commit adultery.’ But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust in his eye has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

– Matthew 5: 27-28 (NLT)

“ You have heard that the law of Moses says, ‘ A man can divorce his wife merely by giving her a letter of divorce.’ But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

– Matthew 5: 31-32 (NLT)

“ Again, you have heard that the law of Moses says, ‘ Do not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ... Just say a simple, ‘ Yes, I will,’ or ‘ No, I won’t.’ Your word is enough.”

– Matthew 5: 33-37 (NLT)

“ If you are slapped on the right cheek, turn the other, too.” – Matthew 5: 39 (NLT)

” You have heard that the law of Moses says, ‘ Love you neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!” – Matthew 5: 43-44 (NLT)

Similarities and Differences

Although Buddhism and Christianity may outwardly seem very different, it may come as a surprise to some to learn that at the heart of their morality, as is the case with all the major religions, they are very similar. This is largely due to what the Catholic church refers to as “ natural law”, the inner sense of morality which is shared throughout humanity. Perhaps the most important piece of evidence for this concept is the fact that the “ Golden Rule” of ethics in both religions (and the other major religions) is essentially the same: (Gwynne 2011, pg. 111)

“ Comparing yourself to others in terms such as ‘ Just as I am so are they, just as they are so am I,’ he should neither kill nor cause others to kill.”
(Sutta Pitaka)

“ In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Gospel of Matthew)

Although the ethical practices taught in both religions are similar, perhaps the most striking difference between the two religions is the role that God plays in their ethical practice. Christian ethics are viewed as the result of divine intervention through the prophets and the human incarnation of God himself. Obedience to the will of a omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent divine being is undoubtedly a crucial component of Christian morality. This is

a stark contrast with Buddhism as it is the only major religion which does not acknowledge the existence of a God at all. Buddhist ethics are not handed down by almighty God, they are teachings designed to guide the individual on their path towards attaining enlightenment in accordance with the eternal dharma. It is also worth noting that Buddhist teachings are generally understood to be less strict than their Christian counterparts, more like suggestions of how to live a spiritually advanced life than divine commandments.

While Christianity and Buddhism differ considerably in regards to the contrasting ideas of living a single life then facing judgement versus the wheel of reincarnation (Samsara), both religions are concerned about the repercussions that an individual's morality will have on their spiritual status. Christian ethics are understood by adherents to be a set of guidelines put in place to achieve and maintain eternal communion with God in heaven (Gwynne 2011, pg. 110), and are a crucial aspect of the criteria used in their final judgement, while the aim of Buddhist ethics are to guide the Buddhist throughout their journey towards nirvana. Although the practicalities and world views of the two religions are contrastingly different, the concern for the individual's spiritual progress and future is a common theme.

Perhaps the strongest similarity in the ethical laws and customs of Christianity and Buddhism is the total emphasis Jesus Christ and Sakyamuni are given. Both are infallible models for adherents to base their morality upon, and in both cases they single-handedly (along with their early followers) provide the "next stage" of religious ethics of their parent religions, as well as abolishing former practices that were deemed

unnecessary, inadequate, or even counter-productive. Much of the New Testament is devoted to narrating the life of Jesus and the lessons to be learnt from it, and Buddhists are even able to study the previous lives of the Buddha through the Jataka Tales in addition to the close study of his final incarnation before reaching nirvana.

In conclusion, through the exploration of the two contrasting religions, Christianity and Buddhism, an immense ray of apparent similarities appear among what one would expect from a clash of western and eastern philosophies. One can argue that their differences can be set aside to make way for the common ethical laws and customs they both share, with their pivotal figures, Jesus Christ and The Buddha, providing examples of morality which are very similar in nature. The end result of this is Christians and Buddhists leading ethical lives which both have their own merits and most importantly a common love for humanity.