Buddhism and Christianity: Comparing Peace Traditions

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Deep within us there is a Buddhist and a Christian engaged in a profound encounter

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_Buddhism and Christianity. East and West. Worldviews developed worlds apart. Delve deeper to discover ways they overlap, complement and unite in their common goal: Peace._

This theological discourse compares peace traditions within Buddhist and Christian Religions, two prominent influences on values and attitudes of people all over the world. I begin with an outline of historical contexts and then move on to more philosophical, ethical and mythological elements. My particular focus is on how these faiths define peace and perceive the means of attaining it. This paper highlights the potential of the two faiths to expand each other’s understanding of the universe and the place of humanity in it.

**Origin**

Buddhism and Christianity came into existence within six hundred years of each other, rising from within an older religion, Hinduism and Judaism, and as a response to social conditions of the day. They were each inspired by a single enlightened leader, Siddhartha Gautama (aka Buddha) and Yeshua bar Yahosef (Joshua son of Joseph, aka Jesus Christ,) (S 2004) who sought to bring hope to their communities, proclaiming a peace that transcended the material desires of the day.

**Salvation**

Buddha and Jesus lead divergent lives, one of withdrawal and serenity and the other of turbulence and horror. Buddha was born 560B.C.E., into an upper class ruling family in northern India, where at 30 years old, he renounced his inherited military and political powers and set out in search of enlightenment. Meditating under a fig tree Buddha experienced revelations of ‘truth’, that out of compassion he spent the next 45 years sharing this with others. (Ferguson 1978) At this time to the west, in Israel, the Jews found themselves under foreign rule. Desiring independence they dreamt of a Messiah, the Anointed, who would liberate them and restore their kingdom. (Ferguson 1978)

Jesus was born around 4 B.C.E. and also began his ministry at age 30. A short time later, somewhere between 29 and 36 C.E., he was condemned and executed by Roman soldiers under the rule of Tiberius as a “nationalistic freedom-fighter”, who threatened Rome.
(Davis 1999 p.409) Christians believe Jesus was the *Christ*, the prophesized Messiah liberating them in meta-physical terms rather than the military salvation Jews expected. In effect, from the lives of Buddha and Jesus comes a crucial difference between Buddhism and Christianity, their logic of *salvation*. “Jesus saved humanity through his deeds and death – he was a sacrifice which restored the breach between human beings and the Divine, and the way of the Cross” whilst “the Buddha saves through his teaching above all… the heart of liberation lies in the Eightfold Path which he laid down.” (Smart 1993 p13)

**Early Pacifism**

*Ahimsa*, non-violence, is the central principle in Buddhism, with *sila*, morality, the first essential step toward enlightenment to which “at the heart of *sila* is the undertaking not to harm any living beings.” (Harris 2003: p94) Early Christians were pacifist, and for the first 150 years would not touch military service. Many Christians were persecuted, and even died as martyrs, for their message of peace.

> "Christians were charged with undermining the Roman Empire by refusing military service and public office: they answered that human life was sacred to them, that they were the race given over to peace, that God prohibits killing even in a just cause, without exception, that the weapons of the Christian were prayer, justice and suffering." (Ferguson 1978 p103)

Martyrdom in its nature nourishes sects, along with the nature of Pacifism being entirely opposite to the Roman way, Christianity spread rapidly across the land.

**Political Development**

After Constantine’s victory under the Christian symbol ‘Chi-Ro,’ he stopped Christian persecution and assisted in its adoption of the religion throughout the empire. Councils selected and refined scriptures and doctrines, and the faiths split into *Catholic* and *Orthodox* Christianity. As the religions evolved, so too did their peace traditions.

> "The historic association of the Christian faith with nations of commercial enterprise, imperialistic expansion and technological advancement has meant that Christian peoples, although their faith is one of the most pacifistic in its origins, have a record of military activity second to none." (Ferguson 1978 p122)

Christianity’s Pacifism and peaceful theologies morphed into Holy War and Just War theories, resulting with the atrocities of the Crusades and the Inquisition. Likewise, Buddhism incurred a doctrinal split, into *Theravada* and *Mahayana* Buddhism, and leaders, such as Ceylon King Duttha-Gamani, marched into war under the banner of Buddha. Monks enrolled in armies and fought against the Jutcher, the Mongols, the Japanese and the Manchus. War was justified in the name of protecting the Doctrine, and saving more lives than would be sacrificed. (Ferguson 1978: p52-56)
Ultimate Goal

The object of both Buddhism and Christianity is peace. Peace of mind, body and spirit, in a personal sense, a social sense and a universal sense. Although they share the same goal, adherents of the faiths have different conceptions of what a 'state of peace' encompasses, and the path to which it may be attained. For Christians, the ultimate peace is in the afterlife, in heaven, where believers will find their salvation. In heaven there is no sin, Christians can see God, and live in his presence, whilst anyone who does not choose to believe within their lifetime on earth, will go to hell, a place of eternal pain and suffering.

For Buddhists, peace is found in nirvana, through enlightenment, whereby one experiences perpetual rebirth until this ultimate harmony is achieved. The world of nature and humanity is perceived as all part of the Oneness that is everything and nothing – a concept that is grasped in its entirety in a state of nirvana where one merges with the Void Potential or Great No-Thing. (Crangle 2008)

Buddhism and Christianity both care about the Self and the Other, but the order is reversed. Buddhists believe that in serving yourself you serve others, focusing on your own path to enlightenment, and practicing lovingkindness, will lead to social transformation and world peace. Christians on the other hand serve others in order to serve self, believing that by following Jesus’ instructions and entering relationship with God (of prayer and worship), the kingdom of God will come, and the world will be at peace. (Eller 1992)

Scriptural Guidelines

Buddhist and Christian Scriptures contain guidelines intended to cultivate a peaceful society. Buddha taught a path to enlightenment and peace involving Four Noble Truths: that all life is suffering; suffering comes from tanha, desire/attachment to this world, destruction of suffering comes from the extirpation of desire; and the way to this is through an Eightfold Path. Christians draw their guidelines from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Many of these teachings mirror one another, for example as Jesus instructed, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22:40 (NIV), the Buddhists scripture Samyutta Nikaya reads, “a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?” (v. 353)
Wisdom

The first three stages of the Eightfold Path focus on wisdom.

1 Right Understanding – we can only live rightly if we grasp what life is really like
2 Right Thought – it should be pure and compassionate
3 Right Speech – wise, kind, reconciling, peaceable, open, free from lying and gossip and backbiting
(Ferguson 1978)

Christians also believe wisdom is a source of peace.

“The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge”
Isaiah 11:2 (NIV)

Action

The fourth stage on the Eightfold Path is Right Action. Right action refers to Five Precepts:

1 Not to kill, or do harm to any. Nonviolent action
2 Not to take what is not given
3 Not to commit sexual misconduct - be faithful, avoid fornication, adultery
4 Not to speak falsehood
5 Not to consume intoxicants or drugs but be alert to self-discipline

These five precepts guiding Buddhist action closely resemble four of the Old Testament Commandments:

You shall not murder.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
Exodus 20:13-16 (NIV)

The precept to not consume intoxicants is common also to Christianity, justified by Paul’s instruction to “honor God with your body.” 1 Corinthians 6:20 (NIV)

Profession

The fifth stage is to choose the Right Vocation, selecting a profession that is not harmful to others “such as the arms trade, the slave trade, butchering, the liquor trade, dealing in poison, nor… deceit, magic or usury. “ and “should not be determined by monetary profit.” (Ferguson 1978 p43) Christian civilization has a history littered with slavery, arms trade, and a capitalistic structure where monetary profit is put before people. One might wonder if Western society could benefit with adoption of this concept.
Love

The sixth stage, Right Effort, places importance on Ten Perfections which include generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, honesty, determination, lovingkindness and equanimity. (Ferguson 1978 p44) These Ten Perfections liken Paul’s description of Christian Love in his letter to the Corinthians

"Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (Emphasis added) (1 Cor 13.4-7) (NIV)

To live a life with the Right Effort or a life in Christian Love, means to live a life of peace.

Mindfulness

The seventh stage, Right Mindfulness means living in “constant alertness about the body, its feelings, the mind, its ideas,” and follows Seven Factors of Enlightenment: mindfulness, study of doctrine, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration and equanimity. The final stage of the Eightfold Path is Right Concentration, “a single-minded devotion to a wholesome object.” (Ferguson 1978 p44) Meditation practice cultivates Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, helping us see our “interbeing” - that there is no separation between you and me - we all “inter-are.” Similarly, the Christian devotion of time to God, in prayer, reading His Word, sometimes referred to as a Quiet Time with God, cultivates a similar tranquility and peace.

Meditation and prayer

A lovingkindness meditation sends forth energy of love, from the mediator into the world. Christian prayer for others’ wellbeing fosters similar feelings, emotions and energies. The distinction between the two is the perception of how each gain their effect. The Christian prayer is seen to be ‘answered’ by a personified and separate God, who responds by sending the third party of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit, to influence attitude and behavior of humans. In contrast, the Buddhist conception of oneness and interconnectedness, to which the physical energy created through meditation itself, is the means of effect. Could the Holy Spirit and the Oneness be the same thing? Both meditation and prayer provide time for deep contemplation and reflection, something whether or not divinely related, cultivates peace inside the believer, which in turn positively impacts people around them.
Enemies
Buddhism and Christianity promote similar response to enemies. Hahn (2003) quotes Buddhist leader Gandhi saying, "An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind." Similarly Jesus says in Matthew 5:43-45, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (NIV) Both faiths recommend a non-violent response to those that hurt you, as this is better for your self and the world.

Worship
Most Christian denominations ritually worship Christ through hymns, prayer, adoration, celebrating his birth at Christmas, his death and resurrection at Easter, and sharing ‘Communion’, tradition of wine (Christ’s blood) and bread (Christ’s body). The Theravada on the other hand, indicates Buddha is not there to be worshiped or communicated with, but “after his final decease it is not correct to say that he exists, or that he does not, nor that he both does and does not, nor that he neither does and does not… the question of where the Buddha is after his decease is wrongly put, meaningless.” (Smart 1993 p14) Jesus’ resurrection indicates that he is still a living presence. This impacts on the nature of peace each faith brings. In Christianity, the most important thing in life is Jesus, yet in Buddhism most important is the Self: Sati, self-awareness, and Samadhi, deep meditation.

Peace Today
Buddha teaches of Three Unwholesome Roots: dosa, hatred, lobha, greed and moha, illusion (Harris 2003) The strength to overcome this comes from selflessness, wisdom, and compassion. Buddha’s Four Noble Truths encourages us to explore suffering in our lives and to question whether or not it is necessary. Many of today’s societal problems are associated with globalization, economic and political power. (Bhikku 2001 p239) What is driving this? Greed? Hatred toward Other? Illusion of fear? Can globalization be transformed into a power for liberation? I believe it can, but only if there is a genuine interest in this shift; if religions are willing to learn from each other, to open their hearts and minds, develop wisdom, compassion and above all things, love one another as oursleves.
REFERENCES


