

Chapter 3

A Comparison between Buddhism and Other Religions

The fundamental difference between Buddhism and Christianity is that the latter believes in God, who is immutable, beginningless and endless. God created the Universe and everything within it. In contrast, there is no 'God' in Buddhism; the myriad things of the Universe evolve from purely and perfectly wholesome 'intrinsic nature', which is also called *Thusness*, *Self-nature* or *Reality-nature*. It is eternal without beginning or end.

When discussing the sacred power to create an immaculate system that dictates the evolution of myriad things, Chapter 1 already touched upon the central difference between Buddhism and Christianity. This chapter will expound further on this point.

For the convenience of the current discussion, 'Christianity' is used as a general reference to all Western religions, which is collectively called monotheism. All of the observations made around Christianity are also applicable to Judaism, and Islam.

The goal of human life is to pursue perfection. Christianity seeks this perfection through God. Although Buddhism does not promote belief in God, Buddhist followers believe in an underlying unchanging condition and that seeking ultimate truth eventually leads to liberation from life and death.

Buddhist followers deem that everyone possesses an 'intrinsic nature' that is restorable and ideal, because this nature is pure and clean. The Buddha teaches us to revive our intrinsic nature. In sum, Christians and Buddhists differ in their articulation and attainment of perfection.

The Creative Process of the Myriad Things

According to Christian doctrines, God created Heaven, Earth and everything in the world. If we accept this theory, we must see the process of creation in sequential steps:

1. a system that dictates the operation of myriad things
2. planets in the Universe
3. biological creatures on Earth
4. human beings

The Creator must have designed a "system" prior to the creation of myriad things, because the phenomena that planets travel around the sun attests to the existence of certain laws, including the Law of Motion and the Law of Gravity. These laws were in effect before God created the planets, which would have lost their orbits around the sun otherwise. Because of the existence of these laws and many other natural laws, such as the famous Mass-energy equivalence ($E=mc^2$), we have sufficient reasons to argue that step 1 is prior to step 2.

Christian doctrine also claims that humans and other creatures were created by God. Since these creatures live on Earth, the latter must have been created before the former. Hence, it is said that step 2 occurred prior to steps 3 and 4.

Scientists have discovered other biological creatures were already living on earth 350 million years before humans first appeared, so we can see that step 3 is prior to step 4.

As the aforementioned reasons demonstrate, every person whether a Christian, a Buddhist, or an atheist, can accept the above order of creation.

In Christianity, God governs the operation of the Universe.

But from the perspective of Buddhism, 'intrinsic nature' has been responsible for the evolution of the entire system. As the Buddhist saying goes, "intrinsic nature is capable of creating myriad things". Through the 'chain of causation' (Skt: *nidāna*), the system enables the myriad things to run. As a result, all the things automatically evolve and receive responses according to circumstances. Humans and other creatures on Earth are not emotionally attached or subservient to God.

When exploring the reception of Buddhist laws, we ought to adopt a modern perspective. We are discussing a philosophy that is concerned with life, death, and all the encounters we experience. Such a serious project must be tested in relation to its logical reception, as modern citizens have a complete right and responsibility to exercise their judgment and reject what is not reasonable.

The Buddha once said, "Don't believe a teaching just because you've heard it from a man who's supposed to be holy, or because it's contained in a book supposed to be holy, or because all your friends and neighbours believe it. But

whatever you've observed and analyzed for yourself and found to be reasonable and good, then accept that and put it into practice".¹

Buddhist discourses must be able to afford the critiques and tests from science. So are other religions. Those who are hoping to seek the truth would ask: "Realistically, when were the universe and the first lives created, regardless of whether they were created by God or by the evolution of intrinsic nature?"

Since Charles Darwin formulated the theory of evolution, there have been endless debates between scientists and theologians about who created the world. Christians believe that the myriad things in the universe were deliberately designed, whereas scientists regard that "it is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change". These two sides are not compatible at all.

Buddhism gets the best of both worlds and offers a perfect solution. On the one hand, the evolution of 'intrinsic nature' that possesses all and generates everything leads to the creation of the myriad things; it resonates with the idea that the Universe is perfectly fine-tuned by God. On the other hand, the chain of causation (*nidāna*) in Buddhism is compatible with the scientific theory of evolution.

¹ Gary Gach, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Buddhism* (2nd edition) (New York: Alpha Books, 2004), 54.

Morality and Rebirth

Despite the fact that Christianity and Buddhism markedly differ in their respective theories of the creation of the Universe, both consider that there should be necessary means to guide human behaviors.

In Christianity, God is the judge of us all.

In Buddhism, there is no such figure to take on this judgmental responsibility. Justice exists in the system. The irresistible law of 'cause and consequence' ensures that what goes around comes around. Just as the Daoist scripture *Lao Tse's Treatise on the Response of the Tao* reads, "Curses and blessings do not come through gates, but man himself invites their arrival. The reward of good and evil is like the shadow accompanying a body".²

The ultimate goal of Buddhist followers is to seek perfection and become a buddha. Even without attaining Buddhahood, Buddhist followers at least expect to permanently escape from life, death, and the three realms (desire realm, form realm and formless realm). Christians receive the teaching that God is almighty; their ultimate goal is to ascend to Heaven, the very dwelling place of God. Both religious practices pursue perfection, but Christianity never makes reference to the law of cause and effect.

In Christianity, at death, every person faces judgment based on his or her deeds in life. God judges whether each person goes to Heaven or Hell or, according to Catholicism, to Purgatory.

² 太上感應篇: "禍福無門, 惟人自招: 善惡之報, 如影隨形."

According to Buddhism, one's deeds determine one's destiny:

1. One is reborn in the Western Paradise and eventually becomes a Buddha, attains nirvana, and restores one's 'intrinsic nature'.³
2. One is reborn in one of the six realms - god realm, demi-god realm, human realm, animal realm, hungry ghost realm, hell realm - through cyclical rebirth.

The inevitable relationship between cause and consequence governs where the 'soul' or 'divine consciousness' goes after death. The afterlives portrayed in both religions are strikingly similar. There is, however, a sharp distinction between the hells of the two religions; the soul sent to the Christian Hell will never have the opportunity to leave; in contrast, the individual in the hell of incessant suffering (the last and deepest of the eight hot hells in Buddhism) could still cultivate his or herself and eventually become a Buddha after going through painful punishments and other realms of life.

The world is constantly evolving without a stop. Let us imagine what it might look like in a thousand, a hundred thousand and even a million years. Lives on Earth will unavoidably mutate along with environmental changes. Maybe Earth will no longer be habitable due to dramatic changes in climate and weather. Some species would be replaced by new species.

³ In the Western Paradise, the four identities of sagehood are buddha, bodhisattva, solitary realizer, hearers of the word of the Buddha. One is able to escape from the cyclic rebirth through the six realms once one is granted one of the identities.

Human intelligence may not be able to resist the anthropogenic extinction in future. By then, human species would have been extinguished on Earth, where the cyclic system of rebirth would still function as usual.

Eventually, planet Earth might succumb to unimaginable catastrophes, such as atmospheric loss and the extinction of life as we know it. When life forms disappear from Earth, all miserable beings experiencing the hell of incessant suffering would also attain salvation. The *Flower Adornment Sutra* states that “both sentient and insentient beings achieve perfect enlightenment”⁴ The great perfection in Buddhism must be the escape from all the sufferings, a notion that is different from Christianity, which believes that all afflicted persons in Hell are doomed and will never reach salvation.

⁴ 華嚴經: “情與無情, 同成正覺.”

Comparisons between Christianity and Buddhism

	Christianity	Buddhism
The origin of myriad things	<p>God</p> <p>What is God?</p> <p>Christians believe that God is the creator of Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things.</p> <p>He supervises all the lives and things he created in the Universe.</p> <p>He judges humans, and gives rewards and punishments to humans according to their behaviours.</p> <p>People pray to God, while God responds to their prayers and offers them guidance.</p>	<p>Intrinsic Nature (Self-nature)</p> <p>What is 'intrinsic nature'?</p> <p>Buddhism uses different languages to articulate 'intrinsic nature', including mind-nature, thusness, original nature, self-nature, Buddha-nature, nature of emptiness, mark of emptiness of all dharmas, and mind of the tathāgatagarbha. It is almost impossible to precisely define the term of 'intrinsic nature', which can be described as follows:</p> <p>'Intrinsic nature' is perfect. 'Intrinsic nature' is not derived from conditions, but is neither created nor destroyed, neither defiled nor pure, and it neither increases nor diminishes. It evolves into all phenomena. Our 'intrinsic nature' is blocked by craving, aversion, and ignorance.</p> <p>'Intrinsic nature' has created a system for the Universe, in which everything evolves. It is called the chain of causation in Buddhism.</p> <p>'Intrinsic nature' is formless. It does not judge our behaviours. It does not express love and hatred. It is not the object of worship.</p>

	Christianity	Buddhism
The creation	<p>1. God created a flawless system that incorporates the laws of gravity, motion, and so on.</p> <p>2. God created the Universe and everything within.</p> <p>According to the scientifically corroborated Big Bang Theory, a giant explosion produced stars and galaxies. Christianity, however, is not compatible with the Big Bang, and the Bible makes no reference to the latter.</p>	<p>1. All phenomena are generated from causes and conditions. 'Intrinsic nature' evolves into a system that consists of the laws of gravity and motion as well as the laws of conditioned genesis and causation.</p> <p>2. The myriad things including planets and lives are subject to the law of conditioned genesis.</p> <p>The law of conditioned genesis can be applied also to embrace the Big Bang Theory.</p>

	Christianity	Buddhism
Current life 1. Morality	<p>Humans have the discretion to live their own lives. They are free to choose good deeds or bad deeds. They need to be admonished by God.</p>	<p>Every person is initially endowed with a perfect nature, namely, intrinsic nature. This nature becomes hindered and concealed by each person's craving, aversion, and ignorance during his or her cyclic existence. Every person needs to find the correct path in order to restore that intrinsic nature, which is perfect and identical to the nature of Buddha.</p>
2. View on current conditions	<p>Misfortunes and fortunes have all been pre-arranged by God and cannot be explained by human intelligence. When plagued by misfortune, the only option is to pray for salvific action.</p>	<p>An effect in the present must be related to a cause in the past. As a result, a Buddhist does not covet or loathe, and deems that all worldly affairs are fair.</p>

	Christianity	Buddhism
Afterlife	Upon death, every person faces a trial before God. After judging the record of a person's conduct during his or her lifetime, each person is rewarded with a place in Heaven or punished to descend to Hell for eternity.	<p>There exists an inevitable chain of causation. One is rewarded or punished not only at the end of life but at all times.</p> <p>In accordance with one's deeds. These deeds include good and evil deeds not only the present but also over the course of past lives. The running of causes and effects is spontaneous without any trial. Based on one's behavior, one may be reborn in a Pure Land or in one of several underworld hells, or one may be reborn again as human or as some other form of life. Although persons who are destined for hell suffer all kinds of pains, these persons still have the chance to join the cyclic rebirth and finally obtain liberation.</p>
Belief	Belief is of fundamental importance for Christianity and for all monotheistic religions. Believers must ritually express their confirmation of the existence and authority of God. They believe that everyone in the world has the opportunity to ascend to Heaven or descend to Earth.	Buddhists followers also hold beliefs. They believe in the inevitable relationship between cause and consequence that are related to acts of good and evil. They also believe that every person can become a Buddha.

From “Conditioned Phenomena” to “Unconditioned Phenomena”: How Buddhist thinking differs from other types of religious thinking

I found that there is one perspective in Buddhist sutras that is capable of explaining the logical thinking of all the mainstream religions in the world.

Everything seen through Buddhism bifurcates into “conditioned phenomena” and “unconditioned phenomena”.

According to Buddhism, people should certainly remember that nothing that arises, ceases, and transforms would last forever. These things and affairs are called “conditioned phenomena” in Buddhism. There is a beginning and an end to human life; therefore, human life belongs to “conditioned phenomena”.

Section 32 of the *Diamond Sutra* reads: “All conditioned phenomena are just illusions - like bubbles, like shadows, like dew, and lightning. This is the way one should see the conditioned”⁵. It teaches that we ought to treat conditioned phenomena including human life in this manner, and hence not cling to fame and wealth.

Aside from “conditioned phenomena”, there exists “unconditioned phenomena” in myriad things.

Unconditioned phenomena, without birth and death, refer to the permanent aspects of eternity. Is it possible to enumerate examples in order to describe the realm of “unconditioned

⁵ 金剛經第 32 分: “一切有為法, 如夢幻泡影. 如露亦如電, 應作如是觀.”

phenomena?” The answer is yes. If the Christian God does exist, and never changes, then he belongs to “unconditioned phenomena”. So is Heaven and Hell. The Trinity in Protestantism can also be described as “unconditioned phenomena”.

The saying in Section 7 of the *Diamond Sutra* that “all sages and highly respected scholars are different in one aspect, and that is the way they understand or appreciate the permanent nature of eternity” attests to the differences regarding the understanding of unconditioned phenomena among men of insight. Consequently, it illustrates that sages and highly respected scholars of various religions differ in their view of eternal things, such as the True God.

Here I would like to particularly emphasize that the theory of “conditioned phenomena” and “unconditioned phenomena” is my personal opinion derived and developed from reading the *Diamond Sutra*. For instance, “all sages and highly respected scholars” does not mean the hierarchy of worldlings, scholars, and sages among disciples of the Buddha. In my mind, it refers to every cultivated and intelligent practitioner. Pardon me, if readers disagree. In addition, I describe unconditioned phenomena as the opposite of conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena are a sphere of cognition. So are unconditioned phenomena.

Everyone understands and agrees that human life belongs to “conditioned phenomena”. I contend that all the creations and actions are part of “conditioned phenomena”. I also consider that human intelligence cannot figure out what “unconditioned

phenomena” says after all. Not only does Buddha not expound, but he points out that there is nothing to say.

So how should we deal with personal conduct? According to Christianity, its disciples attain the supreme achievement by following the instruction of God. “Everyone who believes may have eternal life in him”, says the *Bible*.⁶ Nothing is more important than adhering to the instruction of the Lord. Believers have Jesus in their heart; his presence neither arises nor ceases; in other words, Jesus is eternal and therefore unconditioned phenomena. According to Buddhist theory, there is no dharma to be explained in unconditioned phenomena (see Section 21 of the *Diamond Sutra*). After attaining enlightenment, Buddha preached sutras and scriptures for forty-nine years, and yet he still had nothing to say about unconditioned phenomena. It is very wise to describe the eternal condition as “nothing to explain”, since there is indeed no evidence to attest whether eternal things and conditions exist or not.

What should Chinese people properly address, if someone in China proposes to its compatriots that they ought to believe in some religion? Below are three suggested steps:

- 1) Comprehend what “religion” is.
- 2) Check what religions have been sanctioned by the State Administration for Religious Affairs.
- 3) Acquire some basic knowledge about the sanctioned religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islamism) and consider which religion to believe.

⁶ “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.”

In reality, no one is able to prove or negate the existence of a creator. Even if there is one, is the creator the Christian Trinity or the One or the Unique Allah believed in Islam? Under the circumstances, the Chinese feel unable to wholeheartedly accept the theory of the existence of a creator; a logical response is to neither accept nor reject but to govern one's conducts with a pure mind.

Regarding the so-called eternal creator, scientists are not able to comment. This is because scientists do not study unconditioned phenomena and have no ideas about the either the arising condition or ceasing condition, namely, unconditioned phenomena.

The highest accomplishment in Buddhism is the “supreme correct enlightenment”⁷, or *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi* in Sanskrit. The advanced level of Buddhist cultivation articulates that “there is no Dharma whatsoever that the Realized One has fully awakened to”⁸, (Section 7 of the *Diamond Sutra*), or “there is no Dharma on the supreme correct enlightenment attained by Buddha”⁹ (Section 17 of the *Diamond Sutra*). This scriptural text is exceptionally enlightening. While Christian conduct is dictated in the Old Testament and New Testament, Buddhist learning does not have any set doctrine to follow for attaining the supreme achievement. Section 21 of the *Diamond Sutra* even says: “Anybody who would say such things as ‘the Tathāgata has taught the Dharma’ would misrepresent me, on

⁷ 無上正等正覺.

⁸ 金剛經第 7 分: “無有定法, 名阿耨多羅三藐三菩提.”

⁹ 金剛經第 17 分: “實無有法, 佛得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提.”

account of wrong learning”¹⁰. Here, “on account of wrong learning” means that people do not understand that Buddha never teaches anything concerning permanent and immutable realms, i.e., unconditioned phenomena.

In other words, Buddhism never sets any particular standard to ask its followers to follow blindly, which in this context indicates “fanatical faith”. The peril of “fanatical faith” is self-evident. If some devout religious believer takes the killing of pagans from another religious or ethnic group to be god’s will, he or she could even risk everything to bring about unbearable calamity. People today are entrapped in just such an abysmal world.

Following the above text, if no set doctrine could obtain supremely correct enlightenment, then how can it be realized? We ought to know that because humans have a conscience, we make decisions following our conscience. For example, we ought to be “free from all distinctive characteristics, and offer all good deeds”. But this is simply wishful thinking, as our craving, aversion, and ignorance might cloud our conscience. If we had the capacity to attain enlightenment, illuminate our minds, and see our own intrinsic nature, there would be no danger of anything going wrong.

Even though it does not dictate a particular list of commandments to follow, Buddhist teaching prompts humans to understand ways of thinking in order to find the correct direction. Thus, several observations can be made in here:

¹⁰ 金剛經第 21 分更: “若人言如來有所說法, 即為謗佛, 不能解我所說故.”

- 1) The distinction between conditioned phenomena and unconditioned phenomena exists in the myriad things of the universe.
- 2) Human intelligence of 'conditioned phenomena' is measurable, and knowledge generated from that intelligence is consistent.
- 3) Human understanding of 'unconditioned phenomena' is not measurable.
- 4) Buddha has no Dharma to teach about 'unconditioned phenomena'; this is attested in Buddhist sutras.

Humans are not capable of discerning the realm of "unconditioned phenomena". Since ancient times, none of the creators discussed in any religion can be attested or negated. Through observing the online debates between religious scenes, including Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims, I get the impression that religious people are constantly hoping to prove the existence of a creator.

My concluding remark is that every religion is actively seeking proof of the Truth; this aim is shared among different religions. No matter what religion one belongs to, he and other religious believers are comrades on the road of searching for the Truth. In that way, people shall not treat believers of other religions with a discriminating mind, the elimination of which will be the first step to attaining a harmonious world.