# Are all Religions the Same? Position/Comparison Paper

## Introduction

Religion elicits strong emotions whenever it comes up as a subject of discussion. Virtually every religious individual upholds the belief that theirs is the ‘right’ faith. It is perhaps for this reason that Karl Max once infamously stated that religion is “opium of the people”; associating it with oppressed persons. Debate has raged over time concerning the similarity or disparity of religions, with some asserting that all religions are the same and are mere expressions of the common divine reality, whereas others contend that religions are largely varied given their different dogma and principles. This essay seeks to draw comparison between Christianity, a Western religion, and Buddhism, an Eastern one, in regard to elements like the concept of the divine, suffering, and self-concept or human soul, with the primary aim of showing that religions are completely different.

## Concept of the Divine

The belief about God and his nature is perhaps one of the primary distinguishing factors of various religions. In Buddhism, adherents do not believe in the existence of an external God. Rather, Buddhists believe that all things exist through spontaneous emergence, similar to the growth of a plant from seed. This unplanned existence, according to Buddhism takes place as long as the conditions and causes for existence are favorable (Fisher and Rinehart, pg. 137). On the contrary, Christians uphold the concept of a supreme being responsible for all creation on earth. In accordance with Christianity, God is not only divine, but also all-knowing (omniscient), all-powerful (omnipotent), and maintains constant presence everywhere (omnipresent). As a result of this divinity, the primary objective of a Christian is to achieve oneness with God, through complete devotion to Christ’s teachings (Fisher and Rinehart, pg. 495).

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## Suffering

Even though both Christianity and Buddhism recognize the realistic nature of suffering, the belief systems concerning this religious concept are significantly different. For example, Christianity puts forth the notion that humans started experiencing suffering due to their rejection of God. This suggests that, according to Christians suffering is an inherent part of mankind’s livelihood. Christians also uphold the belief that God offered his only son to be crucified for them to gain redemption (Fisher and Rinehart, pg. 497). Given this idea, adherents of Christianity further assert that it is only through acknowledging and accepting Jesus Christ that they can gain eternal access to God. This means that accepting Christ brings an end to suffering in eternity, even though problems might persist temporarily when one is on earth. On the contrary, if one fails to accept Christ, they will suffer eternally in hell.

Unlike Christians, who believe that suffering only ceases through belief in and acceptance of an external and divine God, Buddhists believe that suffering is a personal process and therefore, individuals can alleviate suffering themselves. As a result, in Buddhism, the concept of suffering is an elaborate framework of beliefs. Buddhists believe that they can reach the end of suffering on the basis of the “noble truths”. The latter are four in number, with the first truth being that of sorrow. This noble truth suggests that all elements that characterize individuality including birth, age, disease, death, and unfulfilled wishes, among others all bring about sorrow. The second truth proposes that human desires also instigate suffering, by elevating craving for some things that may not necessarily be achievable. The third truth is that suffering is shaped by attempts to overcome human desires, whereas the final truth highlights the awakening, hence use of one’s control of the mind to overcome sorrow and unworthy desires

(Fisher and Rinehart, pg.138-139) Overall, the Buddhist belief in the ability of the human mind to counter desires and sorrows offers hope of alleviating suffering from a personal level, unlike in Christianity, where lessening of suffering is dependent on an external God.

## Self-Concept or Human Soul

According to Christian teachings, there is life after death, whereby the souls of believers will ascend to heaven, whereas those of non-believers will descend to hell. This suggests that Christians believe in the concept of “self” or existence of an individual soul capable of living eternally, and whose eventual residence depends on whether one believes in and accepts Christ’s redemption or not. On the other hand, the Buddhist concept of self is best understood from three existence signs. The first of these signs is the universal nature of suffering. For instance, all individuals have experienced loss in the course of their lives, whether that of a family member or ally. The second existence indicator characteristic of Buddhism is the impermanent nature of a person. This stems from the belief held by Buddhists that, there is nothing permanent in the human life, since it is continually evolving, bringing about various problems and challenges whereby a person overcomes one and another emerges. For example, people suffer diseases, get healed, age progressively, and eventually die. The primary supposition is that change is the only constant aspect of human life. The third sign is that there is no-soul or no-self (Fisher and Rinehart, pg.146). This belief that there is no eternal individual differs significantly from the Christian conception of a soul that has to remain right with God, in order to enjoy eternity in heaven.

It is also important to note that, Christianity holds the connection between an individual’s soul and God, in exceptional reverence. By viewing this relationship as distinctive, Christians relegate other things to lower ranks in relation to God suggesting that the relationship between God and humans take precedence over others. Instead, other beings and things are meant to serve the role of supporting Christian believers in their quest for ascension to heaven for eternity. Contrastingly, Buddhists uphold the belief that all things, animate or otherwise are linked to each other and that there is a reason and impact for and of everything. This position provides insight into the Buddhist practice of commitment to and responsibility for everything that occurs in nature; unlike the Christian conception of individuality and sole focus on achievement of personal linkage to God.

## General Differences

Buddhism does not recognize an external supreme being, like Christianity. As a result, Buddhism does not have any governing authority and individuals are required to be accountable for their lives. Christianity is founded upon belief in the authority of God, his son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Besides the lack of authority, Buddhism is free of symbolic rituals and traditions, whereas Christianity is laden with them including baptism and communion. Further, whereas Buddhism rejects speculations in concerns like the incidence of souls, and their infinite existence after deaths. In contrast Christianity revolves around these concepts. Judging from the analysis, Christianity and Buddhism are essentially different in terms of conceptualizing the divine, understanding the concept of suffering, and the belief about self or human soul.

In addition, the two religions differ in terms of rituals, traditions, and recognition of a higher authority or lack thereof. Regarding practices, Buddhists are known for meditation, keenly thought out mindfulness, concentration, livelihood, effort, and aspirations. On the other hand, key Christian practices include sacraments like Holy Communion and baptism, bible reading, worshipping in church, and carrying out charitable acts.

In regard to suffering, Buddhists believe in self-alleviation of sorrows and desires. It is also through the path of self-discovery using the mentioned noble truths that Buddhists are able to reach Nirvana or a state of ultimate enlightenment. This is unlike Christians who perceive a divine God as the one responsible for redeeming humans from their suffering. Christianity perpetuates the message that it is through God’s love for mankind that he sent Jesus Christ to die for their salvation, and thereafter ascend to heaven, where believers will meet if they adhere to his teachings.

The two religions also differ on the basis of the sacred scriptures used to guide devotees. For example, Buddhists use the Tripitaka, which is a broad catalog comprising of three sections, that is, the discourses, the discipline, and commentaries. Buddhists also make use of some ancient writings like the Gandhara scriptures. In contrast, Christians rely on the Holy Bible to guide their beliefs and actions. Buddhism upholds the belief in reincarnation, hence a birth followed by rebirth cycle that is virtually endless, whereas according to Christianity individuals have one physical life followed by transference of the soul to heaven or hell after death.

Closely related to the aspect of suffering is that of human nature. According to Buddhism, human nature is defined by ignorance, whereby all intellectual beings in Buddhist writings suffer implications of being ignorant, only to triumph after awakening or getting enlightened. Conversely, in Christianity, human nature features inheritance of original sin from the originally created man, Adam. This emphasizes the notion that mankind is innately evil and needs to be forgiven of extant sins, in order to be put right with God. The other factor stressed in this case is the need for Christians to distinguish right from wrong and to seek salvation from God, in order to be worthy of an eternal life in heaven.

## Conclusion

Throughout the world, humans have embraced the moral and spiritual teachings imparted by religions and their respective spokesmen. For example Christianity idolizes Christ, Islam Muhammad, Buddhism Buddha, and Hinduism Krishna, amongst others. However, adherents of the various religions perceive the faiths, their revered leaders, and even themselves as significantly different from each other. This has led to acute polarization of the religions, to the extent of practitioners appearing to be arch rivals, contending for domination. This should not be the case, since religion is supposed to unite mankind and counter provoked hostility by providing comprehensive understanding of humans and their workings. Rather than pitching one religion against the other, due to their obvious differences in doctrine, it would be a significant development if people embraced a unified approach to spirituality as opposed to religiosity. This would infuse enlightenment and life into each person, irrespective of their faith. Through a spiritual instead of religion-based outlook on socio-cultural matters, humans will have attained significant peace and serenity promised in majority of religious scriptures.

Works Cited

Fisher, Mary Pat Living Religions 10h Edition, Pearson Publishing, 2016 (pp. 136-148; pp.494-516).