




# A MORAL COMPARISON BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM

HOW DO THE PERCEPTIONS OF GOOD AND EVIL COMPARE AND CONTRAST IN TWO  
DIFFERENT RELIGIONS, CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM, AND WHAT GREATER  
CONCLUSIONS CAN BE MADE FROM THIS?

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## Abstract

The research question being investigated in my Extended Essay is: How do the perceptions of good and evil compare and contrast in two different religions, Christianity and Buddhism, and what greater conclusions can be made from this? The scope of the investigation that I conducted upon trying to analyze data to answer this question, included eight sources. I gathered information pertaining to the Christian and Buddhist religions that pertained to their ideas and perceptions of ethics and what is good and evil or right and wrong. The information that I researched showed many differences between the two, such as each religion has a different way of interpreting good and evil and had alternate paths to follow. However, I found many similarities, such as the role of behavioral conduct on the outcome of each follower's spiritual goal in each religion. This led me to believe that there is a greater meaning and truth behind the two religions and their correlation. I concluded that we should all pay attention to the differences but most importantly the similarities between religions because it reveals great lessons about morality that can be universally applicable.

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## Introduction

Religion has been a prevalent topic from the time when the first people roamed the Earth. The roots of this subject are derived from essential questions that concern ideas such as our origin, our surroundings, how things came to be, and what might happen after our deaths. Many people all across the world and throughout time have come up with their own answers to these questions and several of them look to various religions to answer these questions for them. A religious group can be comprised of thousands upon thousands of individuals or at times, even just one. Regardless of size, it is an organization of people that, together, focus on their beliefs and perceptions about life. Two of the largest and most popular religious groups of our current time are called Christianity and Buddhism. Each religion teaches its followers to focus on its own way of thinking and has different ideas about spiritual and other-worldly forces.

Since religion is such an abstract topic, it is important to explore it further so that we, as a society, can have a broadened understanding of how the world works and be knowledgeable about what our experiences of life really are. One key concept is that the basic constructs of each religion can correlate with others in many ways. Two completely different world religions, Christianity and Buddhism, for example, intertwine as much as they separate. Ethically speaking, they each provide their own set of values to their followers and amazingly enough some of these moral ways of thinking are, in fact, the same.

## What is Religion?

Time has yielded a variety of different perspectives about religion. One man named J.M. Yinger says that religion is “a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life,” while another, Arnold Toynbee, says that it is

“the presence in the world of something spiritually greater than man himself.” (Crawford, 2) This eight-letter word is commonly used to refer to both.

Religion describes one’s beliefs and practices concerning the world around us and, most importantly, the world beyond us. It focuses on defining the most common and yet most difficult questions about life. “Systems” have been created to provide clarity to these questions. (Eliade) These systems refer to individual religions and they encompass the intricacies of human behavior and the social institutions which have been developed to give understanding and organization to the world around us.

Belief structures can be classified by their celebrations, degradations, and theories which each have a direct link to the culture from which they originated. (Partridge, 32) They can also be known “to bind a worshipper to the deity by the observance of cultic ceremonies and acts of devotion.” (Crawford, 8) This spawns the idea that a significant relationship occurs between the culture of the people involved and the principal pieces and leaders of each religion. This connection can be seen through how the massive variety of the religions found in modern society have derivations from the same root foundations and also, how these traditional ways influence the moral standards of today's belief systems. Morality typically serves as a guide to a religion’s followers to show them how they should live their lives. The mindsets of individual participants are normally altered or developed based off of the principal concepts that their religion supports. A common theme in every religion that is especially influential on its followers is the distinction between good and evil and what human behaviors deem a person to be fundamentally “right” or “wrong.”

## Christian Perception of Good and Evil

A predominantly popular religion in today's world is called Christianity. This system is comprised of an acceptance, belief, and worship of the Holy Bible, which is a book of collected written accounts. It describes the history of God, a divine and omnipresent being, His people's lives, and Jesus Christ, who was the Son of God. The story of how Jesus revealed God to the human race by sacrificing himself on a cross to relieve His people of their sins is also in this book. The Bible is viewed as a testament from God that comes through spiritual channels, whom were its physical authors. It is split into two major pieces, those being the Old Testament, which focuses on revealing God's acts, mind, and will, and the New Testament, which hones in on Jesus Christ and his life and teachings.

The concepts of "good and evil" are strewn throughout the entire Bible but a main reference of definition is witnessed in the Old Testament where the Ten Commandments are held. These phrases were messages from God that were inscribed into stone and given to Moses, a prophet. They gave instructions to his people to deem what the moral views of a diligent, obedient Christian should be. God tells his followers to honor their parents and outlines the boundaries that one "shall not" cross. These include killing another, committing adultery, stealing, bearing false witness against another, or coveting. God punishes his followers that go against these rules that he has set. An example of this occurs in the Bible when Cain killed Able. God chastised Cain and said, "Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth." (New International Version, Genesis 4:11,12)

Other recordings of God's wishes and expectations of his followers, are presented throughout Scripture especially in the form of Jesus' teachings and through today's leaders of the

religion, such as the Pope, a priest, or a pastor. Pope Paul VI reiterates God's command to not kill by saying, "The life of man is sacred; no one may dare offend it." (Schultz, 103) If one follows the moral standards that God has declared, they are viewed as being "good" and in turn, closer to the Lord. God rewards those who do what he says. When Job's belongings, hard work, and family were destroyed, God was testing him. Finally, when God saw that Job would not sin He, "restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before." (New International Version, Job 42:10)

In addition, there are concepts of an entity named Satan, who was a "fallen angel" and became opposed to God and His teachings. He rules the realm of Hell which is the place that is said that people will descend to if they have sinned or if they go against God's law or these rules. To have sinned is to have committed an act of evil in the eyes of God or to go against his word. Christian followers know this to be true from the verse from Romans 3:20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

Christianity revolves around pleasing God and acting in whatever way that He believes is commendable. When a Christian does "good" by following God's wishes, they believe they will receive salvation from Jesus Christ and go to Heaven. However, when a Christian goes against what God wants, they are doing "bad" by Him and are committing sins. Even a non-Christian who does not believe in His word is deemed be sinning as well. Those who have sinned and have not confessed their sins, have been deemed to go to Hell. Essentially, the Christian view of morality is set up around salvation and God's word.

## Buddhist Perception of Good and Evil

Another popular and quite unique religion that has a historical presence in our world is called Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautama was a human who lived in North India during a scholarly

estimated fifth century BCE. He was known as the “Buddha” or the awakened one. This refers to what he discovered in his lifetime, which was the Dharma, or the “way things are”, and how he proceeded to teach it. Buddhism focuses on teaching its followers how to recognize “the truth” of life so that they are able to overcome “*dukkha*”, or pain and suffering. The primary goal of a Buddhist is to become enlightened and to follow the path necessary to reach this spiritual level.

In his lifetime, Buddha came upon and then preached the Four Noble Truths which essentially discuss how existence comes with dissatisfaction and pain due to one’s selfish cravings or thirsts and how *dukkha* cannot be eradicated without the elimination of these cravings. He created the Eightfold Path which serves as a sort of guide and moral doctrine to Buddhist followers. The words “right” and “wrong” or “good and evil” have very broad meanings in this context. Instead of using these terms, Buddhists use the terms *kusala* or *akusala* to describe what is morally correct. *Kusala* roughly translates to skillful and *akusala* roughly translates to unskillful, but what these words refer to is the law of karma. (Payutto) The law of karma is fundamentally an idea of moral causation that believes that when a person does good and lives righteously, they will receive good and live in a higher state. Alternatively, if one brings about pain and turmoil into their lives, it is due to their own ignorance and evil behaviors. The Buddha said, “All living beings have actions as their own, their inheritance, their congenital cause, their kinsman, their refuge. It is Karma that differentiates beings into low and high states.” (Strong)

*Kusala* describes a state of being that is in alignment with positive and nirvana-seeking behavior. Nirvana is a state in which all Buddhists hope to one day reach and is the state that the Buddha finally entered. It is the place of “no-self” or when one has extinguished their individual idea of themselves or their ego. (Cosby) It signifies when one has truly reached Enlightenment which is the ultimate goal of every Buddhist and what they base their actions around. When a



person is in alignment with the path to reach Nirvana they are said to be in a state of kusala. The four connotations of kusala are derived from the Commentaries and they include “arogya,” or having a healthy mind, “anavajja,” or having a clean, unstained mind, “kosalasambhuta,” or being a state of wisdom and intelligence, and “sukhavipaka,” or being in a state of well-being. (Payutto) One can know they are in kusala if they have these other four connotations.

Examples of behaviors that are in line with kusala and eventually nirvana include having mindfulness, goodwill, mental clarity, an absence of greed, and zeal. The opposite is true with akusala. Having sexual desire, ill will, sloth, anxiety, anger, or jealousy are behaviors that lead to this negative state, or an unskilled place that is not conducive to a Buddhist’s goal of reaching nirvana. Both of these ideas relate significantly with the teachings of the Buddha.

The elements that construct the concept of being in alignment with the Buddhist path include having the “right” view, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration or meditation. These principles can be summarized by a quote from the Dhammapada, V. 183, *“The avoidance of evil, the undertaking of good, the cleansing of one’s mind; this is the teaching of the awakened ones.”* (Partridge, 201)

In order to incorporate this core mindset into their lives and to, therefore, avoid what the Dharma recognizes as evil, most Buddhists deem a certain five rules to be the centerpieces of their daily living. Abstinence from “harming any living thing”, from “taking what is not given”, from “sexual misconduct”, from “false speech”, and from “anything that clouds or intoxicates the mind”, are these five precepts. (Partridge) However, even with diligent practice of the Eightfold Path and perseverance towards the goal of Enlightenment, one typically does not reach this stage in one lifetime. Buddhists believe in reincarnation of a being into five different realms. These include “the hells”, “the animal world”, “the realm of the hungry ghosts”, “the realm of humans”,

and “the realm of the gods.” (Partridge, 202) Constant reincarnation occurs until, finally, a being surpasses all of these realms and attains nirvana, or a state free of all *dukkha*. This place of liberation can only be reached by being “right” and following a specific moral path of consciously choosing good over evil or kusala over akusala.

## Key Differences

Christianity and Buddhism; two popular religions with followers all across the world. The teachings of both belief systems are complex and intricate, but each has unique characteristics that allow for some obvious differentiation. In the Christian religion, its followers believe in a form of creator, God, who has made all that is and has the divine power to form and uphold Laws that his followers should follow. His word is final and perfect and so a disobedient person is justifiably viewed as “bad” and as a sinner. They believe in a soul and that one’s self needs to reach a state of salvation so that they will not go to Hell in the afterlife.

Buddhists believe in something significantly different from this concept. These followers of the Dharma see the teachings of Buddha as being the most divine form of understanding. The way of life he discovered and preached, along with the most desirable goal of gaining Enlightenment and eradicating suffering from one's life, is what Buddhists hold as being righteous. Their perception of good and evil comes from a complex system of “the way things are” and from ideas of kasula, akasula, and the law of karma rather than from other entities whom deem what exactly is right or wrong. They do not believe in a soul and in fact a Buddhist’s goal is to find Nirvana, or a state of non-self.

## Similarities and Greater Meaning

Despite the differences in the origins of these religions' moral standards, there is significant evidence that supports a relationship of similarity between the two belief systems. Primarily, many ethical behaviors of a dedicated religious person in either of these two religions will seem to be the same. Each religion teaches the principles of honesty, abstinence from many evil-inviting behaviors such as having greed or jealousy, and non-violence. When practitioners of these systems follow the path of morality paved for them, each religion deems that person to be closer to some divine state. In the case of a Christian, this would be being closer to the Lord or Jesus Christ. For a Buddhist, this would look like one obtaining a state of Enlightenment or Nirvana, or even perhaps a reincarnation into a "heavenly" realm after their current lifetime. These end goals cause followers of these religions to want to incorporate and embody the ideals of the moral standards of each and to become "good" and "right" by their beliefs' definitions. This in turn would lead to similar behaviors being present between those in each religion who are motivated from and fully engulfed with the pathways that lead to their divinities.

Another similarity between these two religions' concepts of "good" and "bad" include beyond-Earth realms. Beings in each can either transcend to a more "evil" place, such as Hell in the Christian religion or "the hells" after reincarnation in Buddhism, or a more "holy" dimension, such as Heaven or "the realm of the gods." The determination in both systems of where a being will go to is based on that being's' behavior and spiritual, moral performance during his or her life, such as following Christ or being in a state of kusala.

The complexities of Christianity and Buddhism can reveal a deeper truth concerning the connection that these two religions share. While having very different cultural roots and foundations, the pair also have fundamentally similar views on morality. There is a subjecting of

and a heavy emphasis on the same basic values in both systems of faith even when the form of which the practitioners in each are receiving their guides of right and wrong are significantly different. Specifically, the ideas that murder is wrong, that sexual misconduct is wrong, that stealing is wrong, that speaking falsely is wrong, that the avoidance of evil is right, and that divinity cannot be reached without a follower's commitment to the religion, all uncover how there is a significant link across humanity. Looking at the nature of both of these influential and distinct ways of life that millions of people are submerged in, general truths can be extracted from these beliefs and moral expectations of a religious person can be placed into a universal or “objective” system that yields the moral code of all.

## Conclusion

In the analysis of Christian ethics, it is found that the basis upon their moral evaluation stems from an exterior entity or being named God and the teachings of his Son, Jesus Christ. One is looked upon as being a good person and holding good morals if their actions and behaviors are in line with the desires of God. The opposite is also true in that if one does not believe in God or does not do as he wants, then they will be punished and looked down upon. Each person's life, if spent doing “good” things, will result in their entrance to Heaven whereas a person doing “bad” things, or sinning, without repenting, will go to Hell, according to God and the Bible.

Buddhists on the other hand, do not believe in a soul and therefore have no system set up for one to be punished for their wrongdoings in such a concrete way. When one is in alignment with “good” and kusala and the Four Noble Truths, that is the distinction in being an ethical Buddhist. In opposition, if one is committing acts of evil, such as murder, they will be sent to a realm that mirrors their life choices and will not progress on the path to reaching Nirvana. The

Buddha's teachings reveal what morals and ways of life are most "skillful" and helpful to get someone to the place of Enlightenment that they wish to reach.

In both of these wildly prominent religions, there are key similarities. First and foremost, some of the rules that each religion has is very alike. Each religion condemns murder, ill will, sloth, anger, disrespect, sexual misconduct, stealing, and many other behaviors. In Christianity, to do one of these actions would result in one being a sinner and without repenting for these sins, a line towards hell, which separates one from God which is the ultimate goal. In Buddhism, committing one of these acts would make one a much less enlightened person and cause significant distress in one's spiritual life. This, in turn, would lead them farther away from their goal of reaching a place of no-self, or Nirvana. Each religion has significant and severe setbacks, or punishments, if a person were to not follow their ethical rules and guidelines.

It is important to recognize the similarities and differences for each religion because society's perception of good versus evil should have the perspectives of many religious structures. The way in which people function and the ideas in which they hold about the world are important for anyone to understand if they would want a higher knowledge of the world. The relationship between Christianity and Buddhism is one of importance because they are two vastly unique systems that stretch throughout the world. Two large organizations of people hold significant ethical similarities between what is "right" and "wrong" and this is important because it reveals a deeper truth that our societal moral norms are more directly related than we think and that they are valuable.

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