FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO BUDDHISM

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In this paper I want to evaluate Buddhism and give a Christian response. To do this I will first elucidate the basics of the Buddhist religion, then I will consider it in terms of worldview analysis—to see how Buddhism answers the big questions of life. Particularly, we want to consider what it says about cosmic origins, humanity’s problem, the solution to the problem, and issues of morality. Although I am sure much could be written on the gems of insight Buddhism has to offer at each of these junctures, this paper will be concerned with a broader approach to considering this religion. Rather than focusing in on the nuggets of agreement Christianity and Buddhism may share, we will zoom out a bit and examine which religion, Buddhism or Christianity, is more likely to be true as an all-encompassing worldview. What we will find is that at each point Buddhism demonstrates a weakness, there Christianity is strong.

Introduction to Buddhism

Siddharta Gotama Buddha is heralded as the enlightened one who has revealed the true situation of the world and pointed the way to release from suffering. “Buddha” means “one who has awakened.” What Siddharta has awakened to see is that all of life is suffering, and this suffering is caused by desire—this paradigm constituted Buddha’s diagnosis of the world’s problem. Our desires for existence, comfort, happiness, fulfillment, and even death all create a painful yearning within us. His medicine, therefore, was cessation of desires; if desire is the sickness, then cessation of desire is the cure.

What Siddharta discovered is that desire can be conquered by what is known as the Eightfold Path. These statements—all of life is suffering, suffering is caused by desire, cessation of desire is the cure, and the eightfold path leads to the cure—make up the Four Noble Truths. The Eightfold Path is Buddhism’s modus operandi for ending one’s desire and escaping the end-
less cycle of birth and reincarnation (which Siddharta assumed from his Hindu background).

This path consists of:

1. right views,
2. right intentions,
3. right speech,
4. right bodily action,
5. right livelihood,
6. right moral effort,
7. right mindfulness, and
8. right contemplation.

By following this path, Buddha taught one could earn Nirvana—blissful ultimate reality and release from birth and death. To be clear, Nirvana is not thought to be like the Christian heaven, but rather is the impersonal primal existence, a place where death and birth, desire, duality, and consciousness all cease to exist.

Lastly, to properly introduce Buddhism we must mention the Tenfold Morality and the Five Aggregates. The former, together with the Eightfold Path, comprises Buddhist morality. This Tenfold Morality is a list of things Buddhist should abstain from—all Buddhists must abstain from the first five, while only monks and nuns must abstain from the last five:

1. from harming anything,
2. from stealing,
3. from sexual immorality,
4. from falsehood,
5. from alcohol and drugs,
6. from food after mid-day,
7. from dancing, singing, and amusements,
8. from garlands, cosmetics, personal adornments,
9. from soft beds, and
10. from dealing with gold and silver.

These good deeds earn merit and lead to attaining Nirvana. The Five Aggregates, on the other hand, are hindrances that cause desire, bringing one back to ignorance and illusion and away from attaining Nirvana. These include matter/body, sensations, perceptions, mental formulations, and consciousness. Buddhism as a religion (as well as a philosophy and way of life) imbibes of these basic elements we have just surveyed: the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Ten-
fold Morality, and the Five Aggregates. These elements, taken together with the concept of reincarnation and Nirvana, formulate mere-Buddhism, if you will, the basics of Buddhism as a comprehensive worldview.

**Worldview Analysis**

I would now like to proceed in evaluating this formulation of mere-Buddhism, and provide a Christian response to it by means of worldview analysis. In other words I want to treat Buddhism as a worldview and provide a response from the standpoint of the Christian worldview. I think we will discover key weaknesses in Buddhism as a description of reality, and further, I think we will see that Christianity shines strong at exactly these points. But before we do that, allow me to say a few words of how I am treating the study of religion in this paper, and how Buddhism generally is sympathetic to this view, as seen in its understanding of logic and reason.

**Religions as Competitors for Universal Truth**

My view of world religions is much like Wolfhart Pannenburg’s, in that I see religions as making competing truth claims. I do not see there being any kind of distinct “religious truth,” but rather just plain-old *truth*—where “truth” is that which corresponds to the way things actually are. Every religious teaching, therefore, can be seen as a claim that either correspond to reality (is “true”) or does not correspond to reality (is “false”). Buddhism and Christianity make (at least some) mutually exclusive claims to the way reality actually is, and I believe we can test these claims against each other to see which worldview is right and which is wrong. In this sense I am like Pannenburg, who

> comes to the dialogue table with the adherents of other religions with a set of commitments, the most important of which is that there is one, unified, coherent truth to be searched for. He also contends that the

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Christian view of God is superior to the views not only of ancient religions but also of contemporary living faiths...2

And historically Buddhism has largely agreed with this view of religious truth claims, particularly the strand of Vibhajjavada Buddhism present at the Third Council.3 Vibhajjavada (Pali for “Teaching of Analysis”) eschews blind faith and emphasizes insight and critical reason when it comes to analyzing doctrines. Indeed, most Buddhists view themselves as rational and their position as logical (except Zen Buddhism, which negates the importance of reason). Christians and Buddhists seem to have something in common in this high regard for reason. This can be seen in the lives of 18th-century converts to Buddhism Henry Steel Olcott and H.P. Blavatsky. These two men came to Sri Lanka and there argued for a rational Buddhism, criticizing the practice of worship of local deities and insisting on more modern thought. Their work “continues to have enormous influence in contemporary accounts of the Buddha’s teaching.”4

So in forming my Christian response to Buddhism I will give place to reason and philosophy as an arbiter between the two religions’ claim to have the truth. I will give my analysis in terms of the basics of any worldview: how we got here, what is the problem, what is the solution, and what is moral (axiology). I will also comment on the question of God and man’s place in the universe. In what emerges I think we will see the Christian worldview walks away triumphant from the table of religious dialogue.

**Origins—Buddhist Cosmology**

Every worldview must have an answer to the basic question, “How did we get here?” The Bible’s answer is, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Gen 1:1). There is

2 Ibid, 243.
no God in Buddhism, however, to be the answer to this question, and Buddha himself did not speak on the problem of creation. Nevertheless, Buddhism as a religion has had much to say on cosmology and origins. The earliest Buddhists viewed the world as one eternal closed system, made up of only four islands which encircle a sacred mountain called “Meru” (which was thought to be Mount Kailash in western Tibet). But this view evolved when Mahayana teachings “were greatly affected by views that envisioned the universe as whole galaxies of world systems, extending endlessly throughout all the directions of space.” The universe was thus greatly expanded, indeed, even infinitely so. This accords with what Amos Yong referred to as Buddhists’ “general aversion to cosmological uniqueness.” They do not like to think of the universe as one closed system anymore, “intuiting instead cosmological multiplicity—multiple universes—that in turn depend much less on the idea of a theistic creator.”

But this is when science comes in on the side of the theistic worldview. Science has now shown the universe is in fact finite in time—that there really was an “in the beginning.” And further, that even multiverse models go back to an ultimate beginning point. This beginning point implies the creator Buddhism was seeking to avoid. Buddhism cannot sidestep the findings of

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6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Stephen Hawking remarked, for instance, “Almost everyone now believes that the universe, and time itself, had a beginning at the Big Bang.” Stephen W. Hawking and Roger Penrose, *The Nature of Space and Time* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 20. Christian philosopher of science William Lane Craig writes of the consensus arrived at “in 2003, when three leading scientists, Arvind Borde, Alan Guth, and Alexander Vilenkin, were able to prove that any universe that has, on average, been expanding throughout its history cannot be infinite in the past but must have a past space-time boundary… Their theorem implies that even if our universe is just a tiny part of a so-called multiverse composed of many universes, the multiverse must have an absolute beginning. William Lane Craig, *On Guard*, Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010.
modern science, because it claims to respect science. As Pinit Ratanakul has written, “for the Buddhist, science reinforces the Buddhist belief in the importance of critical investigation and personal experience in morality and religion. The Buddhist also commends science for its ability to expand our knowledge of physical reality.”\(^\text{10}\) And science has done just that. It has expanded our knowledge of physical reality to show that the universe (or multiverse if such a thing exists) is not eternal, and has not always existed—there was a \textit{beginning}. The cosmologist Alexander Vilinkin is blunt at this point:

> It is said that an argument is what convinces reasonable men and a proof is what it takes to convince even an unreasonable man. With the proof now in place, cosmologists can no longer hide behind the possibility of a past-eternal universe. There is no escape, they have to face the problem of a cosmic beginning.\(^\text{11}\)

This cosmic beginning is a “problem” because it leads us to the belief in a creator God, something fundamentally contradictory to the Buddhist worldview. To see this, consider the following syllogism, known as the Kalam Cosmological Argument:\(^\text{12}\)

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause for its existence.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore the universe has a cause for its existence.

Buddhism agrees with the first premise, for it concurs with such a notion of causality in its doctrine of \textit{paticcāsamuppāda}. According to Ratanakul, “This natural order is understood as the law of cause and effect, which states the conditionality of all phenomena (\textit{paticcāsamuppāda})—that all phenomena are mutually conditioned as cause and effect of one another.”\(^\text{13}\) And Buddhism must also accept the second premise, since it claims to be a rational, modern religion. But then the conclusion follows logically and inescapably that the universe has a cause—which leads us to ask, “who caused it?” We know that the cause cannot have been a physical, material,

\(^{10}\) Pinit Ratanakul, “Buddhism and Science: Allies or Enemies?” (Zygon 37 no. 1, 2002): 119.
spatial, or temporal cause (since none of these existed prior to the universe, that is what we are trying to explain!). So the cause must have been a non-physical, immaterial cause outside of space and time, powerful enough to create the entire universe and wise enough to design its physics. This is what we call “God.”

To conclude this section, Buddhism as a worldview must deal with the problem that all of physical reality came into existence a finite time ago, but its worldview offers nothing able to explain this. We know from considering what must be true of the first cause, that its characteristics fit perfectly with the description of the Christian God: a powerful, wise, personal, a-temporal, immaterial being who created the universe at the beginning of time.

*What is the Problem, What is the Solution?*

After answering how the world got here, the second thing every worldview does is answer what is the world’s problem, and what is the solution to the problem. As we have seen, Buddha diagnosed the world’s problem as *desire*, which leads to suffering, and the solution is to rid one’s self from desire and the illusion of self. The Christian worldview says, on the other hand, that the problem is sin and Christ Jesus is the solution because he saves us from sin. In Buddhism one is never really “saved.” This is because there simply is not anyone to save—the self is thought to be an illusion (*anatta* = “not self”). Everything is said to be impermanent in Buddhism, but “this means that there can be no permanent soul or self: there is therefore no entity there in liberation.” The solution to the problem of suffering, then, is said to be the elimination of misconceptions regarding personal identity that lead to ignorance—and “one does so by

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14 The cause of the universe must have been a personal being like God, and not a non-personal reality like Nirvana. The “Ultimate Reality” of Nirvana could not have caused the universe because there is no duality in Nirvana. To have one thing cause a distinct effect there would have to be two things, which would fundamentally contradict the notion of Nirvana’s unity.

demonstrating that their object, an essentially real and immutable ‘self’ or *atman*, does not exist.”

At this point we begin to see there is a fundamental incoherence built into the Buddhist soteriology. The solution Buddha offered is self-referentially incoherent, or self-refuting, and therefore cannot possibly be true. For one has to first exist in order to demonstrate one’s own non-existence. Such self-contradiction arises in Buddhist thought experiments meant to lead one to see the self is an illusion. One is invited to search through the mental and bodily faculties (and each of the Five Aggregates), considering one-by-one whether any one of them, or a combination thereof, is the “self.” One is supposed to come to the realization that none of these could possibly be the self, so the self is thought not to exist. But surely this exercise has committed a grave oversight: who is the “one” who is doing the searching? The self, of course! In order for this thought experiment to work, it assumes the very thing it attempts to disprove.

I think this demonstrates a fatal flaw in the Buddhist conception of soteriology. As a world religion Buddhism has offered a solution to the world’s problem, and an essential part of its solution is self-refuting: *I* have to realize that I do not really exist, but since *I* realized this Buddhism’s teaching must be incorrect, because then there really is an “I.”

**Axiology—How Should We Live?**

Lastly, every worldview has an element of morality: how we should live. As we saw in the introduction, Buddhism is fundamentally a moral religion. The Eightfold Path, the Ten Fold Morality, and the 227 rules for monks (311 for female monks), are all concerned with ethical living. It has been said that the “framework of [Buddha’s] worldview was moral.”

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17 Ibid, 1205-06.

18 Smart, “A Survey of Buddhist Thought,” 79.
also has a great concern for moral behavior. But there is an important distinction between the two religions: Christianity has a ground for morality in God’s essentially good nature, while Buddhism’s moral commands have no grounding. They are just floating out there, indistinguishable from mere suggestions or personal preferences. Think of it this way. Say your younger sister brings home a new friend from school, and this young friend, previously unknown to you, tells you to clean your room. You are not morally obliged to obey her because she has no grounds to make such a command. But if your mother comes home and tells you to clean your room, you are morally obliged to do so. This is because moral duties have to come from proper authorities—moral junctures must be grounded. But Buddhism as a worldview just does not have any such grounding because there is no God on their view. As Donald Nord has said, “It supports a good moral life while at the same time it denies the Great Creator of moral life.”

It will not do to attempt to ground Buddhist morality in impersonal forces like karma, or even Nirvana. For one can only have obligations to persons. Because karma is an impersonal force, one would do no worse by attempting to ground morality in something like the law of gravity. Gravity may indeed be stronger than I and punish me if I break it, by my getting hurt in a fall, for instance. But as such my fall was not immoral; it was not evil of me to fall. Yet we do experience certain acts as really evil, which is just what a religion’s axiology is attempting to explain. When I close my eyes and consider hurting an innocent woman, I see that such an act is really evil. Buddhism does not have the tools to explain why that is the case, and in this regard it is a defective view of the world when compared to Christianity. For Christianity does not simply tell us to “live rightly,” it also provides the metaphysical grounding for why there can be any

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right or wrong in the first place—because morality finds its grounding in the morally perfect nature of God.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have laid out a formulation of mere-Buddhism, the basics of the Buddhist worldview: including its thoughts on cosmology, on Buddha’s diagnosis and prognosis for humanity’s problem, as well as Buddhism’s morality. I have attempted to formulate a response from the standpoint of Christianity, while also paying attention to science and philosophy, which Buddhists claim to heed as well. What we have found is that at each juncture Buddhism has had a fundamental flaw in its framework, and at each of these points Christianity is very strong.

Buddhism must account for the creation of the universe from nothing a finite time ago, but it cannot because it has no God to be its Creator; Christianity does have a creator. In fact, Genesis 1:1, written hundreds of years before Buddha lived, fits perfectly with findings of modern science.

Buddha’s teaching on the illusion of the self (*anatta*) is essential to his solution to suffering. But this notion has been shown to be logically incoherent, and thus impossible to be true. Christianity, on the other hand affirms the notion of selfhood, thus offering at least the possibility of salvation of such selves.

Lastly, Buddhism’s many moral commands and high standard of living, though admirable, are shown to be ultimately baseless apart from the existence of a personal, holy God to be the Ultimate Reality. This is because morality must be properly grounded in order to truly be binding in any way—and Christianity provides such grounding in the existence of God.
Bibliography


