

Comparing and Contrasting Buddhism with Christianity

The Founders

Both Buddhism and Christianity began with an individual founder. This gives both a touchstone to which followers can return, a flesh-and-blood example to whom they can look for guidance. That having been said, there are significant differences between these two individuals and how their followers regard them. To begin with, (traditional) Buddhists believe that Gautama, who became the Buddha, was a human being and nothing else. He was fully human without any divinity. Christians, on the other hand, believe that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. The Buddha was born into a life of luxury, living in a palace, whereas Jesus was born into an environment where he enjoyed no such worldly comforts. Through intense personal effort, the Buddha attained enlightenment—spiritual perfection. Jesus' divinity came about by the action of God the Father. Jesus is also revered as unique, one without peers, while Gautama was one in a long series of Buddhas, both past and future.

Self-Liberation or Salvation by the Power of Another

Although the distinction is far from absolute, Buddhism exhibits a reliance on one's own efforts toward enlightenment while Christianity largely gives prominence to the role of God's grace in human lives. Traditional Buddhism is a religion marked by individual effort, while salvation for Christians focuses on God's grace. For Catholics, both faith and one's ongoing works, or actions, are important for salvation.

The Precepts and the Commandments

Both Christianity and Buddhism offer their followers a concise list of moral directives—the Ten Commandments for Christianity and the Five Precepts for Buddhism. A key difference between the two lists, as we might expect, is that several of the Ten Commandments deal with how people should relate to God (including the Commandment to honor the Sabbath). The Precepts include no similar directives because Buddhism is not a monotheistic faith. Another key difference is that the Commandments are understood to have been given by God. The Precepts function more like guidelines for seekers of enlightenment. There is similarity in that four directives are the same in both religions: no killing, no stealing, no lying, no adultery or sexual misconduct. No matter what the religion or the culture, these are actions that so tear at the fabric of human community that they cry out for restraint. The lists diverge again in their very last item. The Commandments forbid the coveting of goods, while the Precepts forbid intoxication.

