

# ***Where Do I Go When I Die?: Christian and Buddhist Views***

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A major concern of religious people everywhere is the question: Where do I go when I die? When I taught religion, this was one of the first questions that I often received from students. People everywhere are anxious about the afterlife because it is totally unknown. However, they may go to great lengths to secure a good afterlife. Though there are descriptions of the realms of reward or punishment, heaven or hell, in many religions, no one has ever clearly confirmed their existence. Nevertheless, promises or threats of one or the other abound in popular preaching. Preachers use promises of pleasure or threats of painful retribution to manipulate the feelings of listeners. Based in fear, they declare that their particular religion can guarantee a blessed afterlife of bliss and happiness.

In this essay we will compare the Christian approach to the afterlife with the Buddhist. While there are some similarities in basic belief, there are important differences which should be understood.

Christian tradition believes in both the Old and New Testament. In the Old Testament, originally the Hebrew or Jewish Bible, there is no clear cut view of the afterlife. Generally it is said that one goes to Sheol-the grave- or that one sleeps with one's fathers or ancestors. People are not distinguished as believers or non-believers, but the texts envision the people of ancient Israel as a whole.

Later Judaism, based in the Hebrew Bible, was not a world religion offering salvation for all humanity. It was the faith of a particular people committed to their God as his people and keeping his commandments. Though Jews were to represent God in the context of their lives, they did not have a primary goal to convert non-Jews.

The New Testament (Covenant), created within Christianity, teaches that, depending on a person's belief in Jesus as the Savior of humanity, one would be consigned to heaven or hell. These concepts provided the basis for Christian evangelism to this day. The Catholic tradition added the concept of purgatory which moderated the intensity of the concepts of heaven and hell. There was a way to heaven through purification in purgatory with assistance provided by indulgences or merits created by family and friends through masses for the dead.

The origin of the western idea of the dualism of heaven and hell appears to have originated in Persia with the teaching of the prophet Zoroaster. He taught the struggle between Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Light, and Ahriman, the principle of evil. Depending on one's deeds, one would fall into hell or go to paradise. This concept was absorbed together with the concept of a Last Judgment by the Jewish exiles in Babylonia and Persia (ca. 6th C. BCE).

In the later development of Judaism, the distinction of heaven and hell helped to resolve the question of the fate of Israel's ancient enemies and bring justice to the Jews who had suffered exile and displacement from their own land. There was to be a Last Judgment, after a general resurrection, where all their ancient enemies would get their just deserts. This later came to be an important feature of the Christian view, though correlated with belief or rejection of Jesus. Where the focus of Jewish belief was more on the people as a whole, the Christian view centered on individual belief or unbelief. Islamic belief was influenced by Christian teaching and focused on the individual.

An aspect of Christian belief was that after bodily Resurrection and the Last Judgment, the evil people would be cast into a lake of fire for eternity. Believers would be brought to heaven where they would dwell with God eternally.

However, Christian permeation of the Mediterranean Hellenistic-Graeco-Roman world led to changes in the conception of the afterlife. The Judaic view supported a Resurrection and Judgment. Those who had passed away waited in their graves till the call of God aroused them from their sleep to face Judgment. Early Christianity lived in the expectation of the second coming of Jesus and a general Resurrection and Final Judgment.

However the Greek view maintained belief in an eternal soul which, when the body was discarded, would live for eternity in an Elysian paradise. This understanding was absorbed gradually into Christianity with belief in Immortality following death dominating over the idea of Resurrection. It is presently quite common belief that when people die, they immediately go to heaven to be with Jesus and their loved ones. However, the belief in the second coming of Jesus and a final judgment, which presuppose Resurrection, persists.

A problem in the Christian belief in Afterlife is the issue of the punishment fitting the crime. There are no gradations or levels in the concept of hell. Despite the fact that the evils or sins which disbelieving people commit vary in their degree and kind, the punishment is uniform for unbelievers and all receive the same retribution. Consignment to hell is eternal without let-up.

In recent times, the negative aspect of Afterlife has been downplayed and the more positive feature of eternal life in the presence of God emphasized. Rather than burning in a literal hell, the idea of separation from God and ultimate loneliness is often emphasized.

Buddhism arose within the context of Indian religion about the sixth century B.C.E. The mythology of heavens and hells was already present. Initially the Buddha taught the principle of karma and transmigration, but unlike Indian religion, he rejected the concept of an eternal soul or essence in beings and things. There is no eternal soul as in Hinduism or Christianity. Sentient beings are composed of a group of elements which disperse upon death and take a new form of life, correlated to one's karma. This view is karma-driven and continues until one becomes enlightened or achieves Nirvana.

Through our good deeds and practice of Buddhism sentient beings go through several ascending stages until they are capable of attaining Nirvana. Nirvana is not a place but, perhaps, an inconceivable, indescribable condition of bliss, peace or joy. The fires of passion are "blown out" and the world of discrimination is transcended. It is free of karma. No words suffice to define it.

Such an elevated view of afterlife does not easily assure the masses. Buddhism also has a mythology of afterlife. The universe is in three levels, the world of desire, the world of form and the formless world. In the world of desire there are six levels from the level of gods down to the realms of hell. One may be born into a heaven of a god, or as a human being, an angry spirit, an animal, hungry ghost, or a hell. In the myth there is a judgment by the deity Yama, the god of the dead, who determines one's next birth during a period of forty-nine days.

The level of birth depends on the prevalence of good over evil karma or vice versa. In the uppermost world of desire there are thirty-three heavens of various gods of the Indian pantheon. Though one is born into one of these lands through the strength of good karma, life there is not eternal. When one's karma is exhausted for the residents and even the god, transmigration takes place to yet another world depending on the nature of one's previous

karma which has ripened. One can attain Nirvana only from the human level where Buddhist discipline can be practiced.

The Mahayana Buddhist tradition of North and East Asia added further considerations. The goal of Nirvana was replaced by attaining Buddhahood. Prior to Buddhahood is the stage of bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be). The bodhisattva initially refuses Nirvana in order to save all beings out of compassion. When he finally reaches Buddhahood, he continues his saving work. The essence of Mahayana is universal compassion.

In the Pure Land tradition that developed within Mahayana, faith in Amida Buddha's name enables even an ordinary person to be reborn in the Pure Land. Here in an optimum environment he can achieve Buddhahood and continue the effort to save beings.

The counterpart to the realm of compassion in the heavens or Pure Land, are the hells where the evil persons arrive through their karma. However, these hells also are not eternal but depend on the duration of one's karma. There is always the potential to reach Buddhahood. It is the Buddhist perspective that ultimately all beings will become Buddha and perfect compassion and wisdom will be fulfilled. Such a condition is also Nirvana, complete release from the bondage of karma.

Buddhism differs from Christian views in that the state of Afterlife depends on karma. When karma ripens like a seed and unfolds like a plant, there are new possibilities. Further, the goal of Afterlife is not merely to rescue oneself from the world of suffering, but working to bring all others to the peace of Buddhahood and Nirvana.

In later Mahayana in East Asia the idea of an eternal soul became more widespread. At Obon time the souls of the beloved are believed to return from the other shore of enlightenment or the Pure Land to help in the labor of growing crops and harvesting by bringing rain and fertility. The ancestors are also believed to watch over their loved ones in this life and help in times of trouble.

In Buddhist teaching, the myths of reward and punishment are not taken literally. They are called Upaya, a Sanskrit term which means a tactful device to inspire religious concern and growth. However, it is possible to find people who interpret the mythic images literally as actual existing conditions. They spend considerable resources on services to liberate the dead. Mainly, however, these images are likened to psychological states. For instance the Hungry Ghost who figures largely at Obon time possesses a large stomach and small mouth, reflecting the spiritual condition of greed which we all experience. The depictions are instructive of our spiritual condition in this life and the suffering they can produce.

Through these beliefs Buddhism enables people to endure the struggles of life and to hold positive views for the destiny of all. They contrast with some presentations of Christianity in stressing the ultimate salvation of all beings no matter how evil. Whatever evil one has committed, the punishment fits the crime. There is ultimate justice for all. Though there are fearful images in both Christianity and Buddhism, Buddhist images are not literal representations but have educative value in encouraging self-reflection and sensitivity to one's present spiritual condition.