

A Comparative Study of the Life and Teachings
of the Buddha and Christ

仏陀とキリストの比較研究——生涯と教え——

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Abstract

Both Buddha and Christ are founders of world's great religions: Buddhism and Christianity. And especially the former has exerted great influence upon the formation of thought, psychology and social order of the Eastern Asia, while the latter did the same to the West. And these two religions as forces of civilization seem to share many common elements. There are, however, gaps and misunderstandings between these two religious communities. Respective religion in its essence and its essence and its religious community have not necessarily been the same; usually the latter has distorted the former. This study is an attempt to identify some of the major similarities between the two religions as well as differences so that we may determine whether these two religions are essentially the same or contradicting.

1. Conception and Birth

1.1. Buddha

For twenty years they [the King Shuddhodana and the Queen maya] had no children. But one night Queen Maya had a strange dream, in which she saw a white elephant entering into her womb through the right side of her chest, and she became pregnant. According to their custom the Queen returned to her parents' home for the birth, and on her way, in the beautiful spring sunshine, she took a rest in the Lumbini Garden. All about her were Ashoka blossoms. In delight she reached her right arm out to pluck a branch and she did so a prince was born. All expressed their heart-felt delight with the glory of the Queen and her princely child. Heaven and Earth rejoiced. This memorable day was the eighth day of April. (TOB, pp. 2-3)

The miraculous conception of Lord Christ (account forthcoming below) is well-known even to the non-Christian world, but how few know this story of the miraculous conception and birth of Lord Buddha. The story is of course a familiar one to those who practice or study Buddhism. But, in general, Christ's greatness is more proclaimed than that of Buddha in this regard.

The literal meaning of this story is quite amazing and unbelievable from a scientific point of view. There can be three interpretations of this:

One is that if Buddha is a Divine Being directly sent by a Creator, then, the Creator being as such is able to make any temporary change in the physical law and order. By definition, this is possible and logical. However, human philosophical faculty refuses by saying, "Then what was the purpose of it? If Creator is All-Knowing and All-Wise, then there must be a reason." We do not know the answer to this question.

Thus a second interpretation comes in: There must be a hidden, inner meaning behind it; for instance, divinity and holiness of Buddha's birth, nay His entire Being, was to be conveyed figuratively through this story.

And of course there is a third one, which is that the story is based upon purely imaginative conception of the later followers of Buddha.

There is no way we can tell which is absolutely right from a historical viewpoint because the event had taken place and there is no way to go back to the past and witness it.

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But His birth based upon the next source has a different story :

The king, her husband, honored her in her holiness, and the spirit of truth, glorious and strong in his wisdom like unto a white elephant, descended upon her.

When she knew that the hour of motherhood was near, she asked the king to send her home to her parents... when she reached the giant Sata tree in the midst of the grove, felt that her hour had come. She took hold of a branch. Her attendants hung a curtain about her and retired. When the pain of travail came upon her, four pure-minded angels of the great Brahma held out a golden net to receive the babe, who came forth from her right side like the rising sun bright and perfect... All the worlds were flooded with light. The blind received their sight by longing to see the coming glory of the Lord; the deaf and dumb spoke with one another of the good omens indicating the birth of the Buddha to be. The crooked became straight; the lame walked. All prisoners were freed from their chains and the fires of all the hells were extinguished. (GOB, p. 8)

This story is more believable scientifically. But the event is too ancient for us to determine the authenticity of these scriptural accounts.

1.2. Christ

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows ; After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus. (Matt.1 : 18—25)

Thus Christ was conceived in a Virgin Mary' s womb. This miraculous conception is one of the proofs of His greatness cited by His followers.

Once again, there is no way we can tell its validity by historical study. Because we do not have means to verify visually. Thus, any story of this kind may need to be interpreted symbolically, and this interpretation does not necessarily deny its physical meaning. Maybe it had happened but it may not have, and yet the symbolic interpretation could still stand.

Then what could be its symbolic meaning?

As mentioned in Buddha' s case, this could also refer to divinity and holiness of Christ' s Being. For instance, Abdu' l-Baha, a successor of the Baha' i Faith after its Founder (Baha' u' llah) says that Christ' s miraculous birth indicates His Divine station. His physical body came from Mary' s womb, but His Reality, which is that of Holy Spirit, came from the Heaven, which is the invisible, spiritual realm. That is, He was conceived spiritually without any physical mediary, but God sent Him.

Baha' u' llah, however, seems to recognize the physical event of this miraculous conception. Baha' u' llah writes: "Reflect, what answer could Mary have given to the people around her? How could she claim that a Babe Whose father was unknown had been conceived of the Holy Ghost?..." (KI, p.56) But Baha' u' llah' s basic teaching is that the true meaning of so-called miracles is spiritual. Stories of miracles are designed to convey spiritual meanings to those who believe. And he says that physical miracles are possible for God to perform but when they are done, there is always a meaning for those who can understand. Otherwise, miracles become a mere child' s play. (see GL,

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pp. 131 — 132) And this view seems to be confirmed by even Christ Himself (see, for instance, John 9 : 35 — 41, which speaks about true vision and true blindness).

2. Childhood

2.1. Buddha

Though various sources state in different ways, most of them agree to report that Buddha, immediately after His delivery, walked seven steps and cried out "I am the foremost Person of the heavens and earth." (Hayashima : GB p.89. trans. by the present author from Japanese)

Another story states that while Buddha was meditating as a child underneath a tree, as the time passed by the sun also reclined naturally, but His shadow did not change, protectig Him from the sun rays during His meditation.

A hermit, called Asita, who lived in the mountains not far away, noticed a radiance about the castle. Interpreting it as a good omen he came down to the palace and was shown the child. He predicted : 'This Prince, if he remains in the palace, when grown up will become a great king and subjugate the whole world.' But if he forsakes the court life to embrace a religious life, he will become a Buddha, the Savior of the world.' (TOB, p. 3)

2.2. Christ

We do not have any detailed accounts of Christ's childhood. He was a son of Joseph, who was a carpenter. But in Matthew, we read the following :

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." When Herod the King heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet : 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah ; for out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'" ... (Matt.2 : 1 — 6)

Christ's birth had been prophesied and He was the Messiah, the Anointed One, the King of Jews, according to the New Testament.

Why are the Prophets and Holy Ones always bright, wise and intelligent? If God endowed them with such capacities at birth, it is possible by definition. But Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha' i Faith (1921 — 1957) says that prophets' souls are pre-existent while souls of ordinary human being are phenomenal at birth (a letter written on his behalf Jan. 5, 1948 qt. LOG # 1699). And Abdu'l-Baha says that their knowledge is innate, given by God, not acquired by human efforts (SAQ pp. 157 — 159).

If this is the case, we can more easily understand their greatness at their early years of life. They have great missions to carry later on.

3. Young Adulthood and Search

3.1. Buddha

According to the traditions, Buddha's young years were filled with questions about life and death and psychological suffering. Of course this period came after His happy and comfortable life at court. After He stepped outside the court and saw illness, old age, and death, He could not go back to His pleasant life back home. He goes out to find an answer to these problems of life. He would go through extremely ascetic life of yogis. As an ascetic yogi He surpassed everyone. He went to the greatest extreme. But He found no answer. After long period of this ascetic life, He renounces it also. Gradually recovering from weakness, He enters meditation under a tree with His legs crossed. Then, Mara, the Evil One, attacked Him :

Before attacking the hero, Mara sought to frighten him. He roused against him the fury of the winds. Fierce gales rushed him from the horizon, uprooting trees, devastating villages, shaking mountains, but the hero never moved: not a single fold of his robe was disturbed.

The Evil One summoned the rains... The Evil One made blazing rocks and hurled them at the hero... Mara then commanded his army to loose their arrows at his enemy, but the arrows, also, turned into flowers... And suddenly, filled with terror at the sight of these prodigies, the soldiers of the Evil One fled...

'What have I done that this man should defeat me? For they are not a few, those whose desires I have granted! I have often been kind and generous! Those cowards who are fleeing could bear witness to that.' The troops that were still within hearing answered: 'Yes, you have been kind and generous. We bear witness to that.' 'And he, what proof has he given of his generosity?' Whereupon a voice came out of the earth, and it said: 'I will bear witness to his generosity!.. Yes, I the Earth, I, the mother of all beings, will bear witness to his generosity... As he excels you in strength, Mara, even so does he surpass you in generosity.' ...

And Mara, the Evil One, wept because he had been defeated. (LOB, pp. 93 -- 95)

Then, Buddha attains Enlightenment. "He was filled with bliss at having perfect knowledge. " (LOB, p. 103)

It is rather a puzzle that Buddha, a Holy One, had had to go through all these questions, troubles, searches and trials before he attained Enlightenment. If He had been a chosen One of God with innate knowledge, His soul being pre-existent, why would He have had to experience these?

Baha' u'llah says that Prophets have two stations: Divine and human. As long as the Divine station goes, they are perfect, almighty, all-knowing and all-wise. But their human stations impose limitations upon them in human aspects: body and mind. He also says that prophets are destined to act in certain ways which God ordains, but their inherent capacity and potentiality are infinite and the same. Only in this world, their specific missions differ. We also have an example of Moses being a stutterer and murderer, and Muhammed being an illiterate. These aspects of prophets may need to be studied with more accurate background knowledge and scriptural and traditional evidences.

But the ancient accounts are not always authentic. The details of the life of Lord Buddha may never be fully revealed. Stories and traditions are simply as such: accounts given by human tongues.

Even if these stories may have elements of truth, we are still confirmed of the Holy Ones' greatness through their life and teachings after their Enlightenment or receiving of Revelation. And that is what counts after all.

3.2 Christ

Interestingly enough, Lord Christ's Enlightenment, so to speak, came before the fight with Satan:

(Jesus talking to John the Baptist in the River Jordan) 'Permit it to be so [i.e., to baptize Jesus] now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' ... Then Jesus, when He had been baptized, came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, 'This My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' (Matt.3: 15 - 17)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, 'If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.' But He answered and said, 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."' (Matt.4: 1 - 4)

The temptation continues:

Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down.' ... Jesus said to him, 'It is written again, "You shall not tempt

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the Lord your God."... Away with you, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve." Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered Him. (Matt.4 : 5—11)

Apparently we do not have accounts which tell Jesus suffered from questions of life in His early years and thus we get an impression that He was from the beginning perfect and free from doubts and worries. If that is the case, it is a marked difference between the life of the two Holy Ones. But the battle with the Satan is quite similar to that of Lord Buddha.

Lord Buddha, on the surface, attained Enlightenment after His battle with the Evil One, while Lord Christ seemed to have received Revelation (i.e. contact with Holy Spirit) before the battle. But Buddha's spiritual strength during the battle seems to indicate that he was already a Buddha then. But even for Christ's case, only after the battle, "angels came and ministered Him." This can be a parallel to Buddha's Enlightenment. And could Buddha's leaving asceticism and entering meditation be a Kind of "baptizing" for Him?

Whatever the meanings, their lives after Enlightenment must be the greatest proofs of their greatness.

4. Teachings

4.1. Theology

4.1. 1. Buddha

Did Buddha claim to be God? Or even to be a Prophet?

Maybe in words, these expressions were not used. But His teachings seem to indicate that He did acknowledge God's existence and His mission as a Prophet.

But first, we must remember that He did not leave any writings and what we call Buddhist scriptures are compilations of traditions of the followers, who had memorized the words of the Buddha or heard from other followers (and passed them on). And there were even councils to determine what traditions should be compiled and how, before they reached the current forms. And different scriptures sometimes report different stories. And the Buddhist scriptures are vast in volume. We can only attempt to relate a small fragment of them to this study.

According to the teachings, Buddha has three aspects, personalities or bodies :

Buddha has a three-fold body. There is an aspect of Essence or Dharma-kaya ; there is an aspect of Potentiality or Sambhoga-kaya ; and there is an aspect of Manifestation or Nirmana-kaya.

Dharma-kaya is the substance of the Dharma ; that is, it is the substance of Truth itself. In the aspect of Essence, Buddha has no shape or color, and since Buddha has no shape or color, He comes from nowhere and there is nowhere for Him to go. Like the blue sky, He arches over everything, and since He is all things, He lacks nothing. (TOB, pp. 26-27)

Sambhoga-kaya signifies that the nature of Buddha, the merging of both Compassion and Wisdom, which is imageless spirit, manifests itself through the symbols of birth and death, through the symbols of vowmaking, training and revealing His sacred name, in order to lead all people to salvation. (TOB, p. 27)

Nirma-kaya signifies that, in order to complete the relief of Buddha of potentiality, Buddha appeared in the world in bodily form and showed the people, according to their natures and capacities, the aspects of the birth, renunciation of this world and attainment of Enlightenment. In order to lead the people, Buddha in this body uses every means such as illness and death. (TOB, p. 28)

Could this concept be a parallel to the Christian trinity? The aspect of Essence can be the station of God Himself ; the aspect of Potentiatiy can be the nature of Holy Spirit, which is an emanation from God, manifesting God's attributes ; the aspect of manifestation is the Person. This might be a somewhat forceful analogy to Trinity, but there is much room for supportive discussions.

If this is a correct view, then, Buddha's Essence is God Himself ; Buddha's attributes are the nature of the Holy

Spirit; and Buddha's Person is a vehicle which carry these attributes.

Buddha is the all-excellent truth, eternal, omnipresent, and immutable. This is the Sambhoga Kaya which is in a state of perfect bliss.
Buddha is the all-loving teacher assuming the shape of the beings whom he teaches. This is the Nirmana Kaya, his apparitional body.

Buddha is the all-blessed dispensation of religion. He is the spirit of the Sangha and the meaning of the commands which he has left us in his sacred word, the Dharma. This is the Dharma Kaya, the body of the most excellent law.
If Buddha had not appeared to us as Gotama Sakyamuni, how could we have the sacred traditions of his doctrine? And if the generations to come did not have the sacred traditions preserved in the Sangha, how could they know anything of the great Sakyamuni? And neither we nor others would know anything about the most excellent truth which is eternal, omnipresent, and immutable. (GOB, p. 254)

Do not seek to know Buddha by His form or attributes; for neither the form nor the attributes are the real Buddha. The true Buddha is Enlightenment itself. The true way to know Buddha is to realize Enlightenment.

Though we speak of His form, the Eternal Buddha has no set form, but can manifest Himself in any form. Though we describe His attributes, yet the Eternal Buddha has no set attributes, but can manifest Himself in any and all excellent attributes. (TOB p. 25)

It is seldom that a Buddha appears in this world. When a Buddha appears, He attains Enlightenment, introduces the Dharma, severs the net of suspicion, removes the lure of desire at its root, plugs the fountain of evil. Completely un hindered He walks at will over the world. There is nothing greater than to revere the Buddha. (TOB p. 29)

All the Buddhas are wonderful and glorious. There is not their equal upon earth. They reveal to us the path of life. And we hail their appearance with pious reverence.

All the Buddhas teach the same truth. they point out the path to those who go astray. The Truth is our hope and comfort. We gratefully accept its illimitable light.

All the Buddhas are one in essence, which is omnipresent in all modes of being, sanctifying the bonds that tie all souls together, and we rest in its bliss as our final refuge. (GOB, pp. 258-259)

4. 1. 2 Christ

Basically Trinity refers to the notion that God the Father, Christ His Son and Holy Ghost are in reality one. As St. John writes:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1 : 1-5)

But Christ occasionally says that the son cannot do anything without Father's help. This indicates that the Son and Father are different.

Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. Then Jesus answered and said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.' (John 5 : 18-19)

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Why callest me good? There is none good but one, that is, God. (Matt 19 : 17)

.....my Father is greater than I. (John 16 : 28)

I do nothing of myself; but as my Father taught me. (John 8 : 28)

I go to the Father. (John 14:16)

I will pray to the Father. (John 16 : 16)

Verily, verily, I say unto you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. (John 5 : 19)

For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. (John 12 : 49)

And Christ is the only path that leads to God, because He is the vehicle of the Holy Spirit: "Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live." (John 11 : 25)

Could this Son-Father relationship, then, be a metaphor to indicate His close relationship and subjugation to God? Maybe it was necessary for Him to use such an analogy to explain this concept to the people at that time. He also used many parables to explain His teachings. Then, why not for His relationship with God? Lord Buddha also used many parables and stories to explain His point. And indeed, symbolism and metaphors are usually the language religion uses. This is a technique to convey and preserve the Message for centuries to come.

We see in other verses in the Bible the expression "son of God": ".....which was the son of Enos, which was the son of Seth, which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God." (Luke 3 : 38) "But as many as received him, to them gave the Power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." (John 1 : 12) Unless this expression "son of God" signifies the spiritual relationship, we would end up having quite a few sons of God, which contradict Christ being the only Son of God. If Christ is the manifestation of God, then, He is as the Holy Spirit the only way to God; thus we may say He is the only begotten Son of God. But in terms of close spiritual relationships, then true believers may be called sons of God. "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him." (John 1 : 17-18)

Otherwise, Christ's statements could be quite contradictory. But if we integrate Buddhist concept and Christian view, might we not reach a new level of understanding? That is, God is unknowable (for "No one has seen God") in Essence, Ruler and Knower of all things, while the Holy Spirit is the First Emanation from God, manifesting God's attributes, and the person such as the historical Buddha or Christ is a human Vehicle Who acts as the Carrier of the Holy Spirit. Thus, that Person is both a human and a Divine Being. Could this not explain many of the perplexing aspects of these Holy Ones?

Jesus answered them, I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me. But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My father are one.' (John 10 : 25-30)

Father and I are One. (New Testament)

Son is in the Father. (New Testament)

Conclusion

Christians often base their belief in Christ's greatness upon His miraculous birth in its physical sense. If such is the case, Buddha's birth is even more remarkable and His greatness may be even placed above the former's.

However, such physical events are only proofs to those who could witness and those who had seen may not necessarily have understood the true meaning which is the Holiness of the Honored One. Thus, it seems that the meaning of these stories about a miraculous birth pertains to some spiritual significance, apart from whether the physical event was actual or not.

We have more accounts of Buddha's childhood than those of Christ; thus the comparison is rather difficult. Stories about Buddha's childhood also report some miraculous events, indicating His greatness, spiritual and intellectual. It seems that Holy Ones like Buddha are endowed with innate knowledge and wisdom, and in this respect, the Baha'i notion that souls of Prophets are pre-existent, is worthy of further investigation.

It is even perplexing that such a great Child (i. e., Buddha) with innate knowledge and wisdom would have to go through turmoils, questioning, search and asceticism to find answers to His quest. We do not have accounts as such in Christ's case. Since the stories have an ancient origin and sometime do differ, we do not know whether such events took place. But the fact that they have been handed down, must mean something. However, our study came to a temporary conclusion that the most important aspect of the life of the Buddha or Christ is after Their attaining Buddhahood or Messiahship, rather than before, because Buddha of post-Buddhahood is obviously a different person and reveals even greater qualities and powers as such. And this is the same for Christ.

The theological studies of Their teachings indicated that Their notions about God are not necessarily variant with each other, as generally believed. Rather, their teachings seem to have common elements. Scholarly verification of this notion, however, requires a much more thorough, in-depth study of the writings. Nevertheless, the possibility of the agreement of the Buddhist and Christian teachings upon God, Holy Spirit and Prophet, indicates that there is much hope not only for reconciliation and unity between these two religious worlds but also for broadening and deepening our understanding of the teachings, in general, of these two Faiths.

Comparison, integration and fusion are the elements which characterize the trends in comparative studies today. Those of religious studies are of great significance in view of the differences and conflicts taking place throughout the world. Thus, comparative studies of Islam, Hinduism, Shintoism and other religions are also of great value.

For the part 2 of this current study, the author is preparing the psychological studies as well as the studies on prophecies of the Buddhist and Christian teachings.

概 要

仏陀とキリストは両者ともそれぞれ仏教、キリスト教という世界宗教の創始者である。前者はアジア特に東アジアの思想・文化・心理・社会に大きな影響を、そして後者は西洋のそれに多大な影響を及ぼしてきた。このふたつの宗教は文明の偉大な推進力という点では共通点があるが、共同体としては互いに相反する要素や誤解を持っている。しかし、宗教の本質と信徒がつくり上げた宗教的共同体とは必ずしも一致しない。本研究は、仏陀とキリストの生涯と教えの類似点および相違点を分析し、本質的な点において両者の宗教が同じものがあるいは異なるものなのか評価する一連の試みの一つである。

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

BMAHA	Buddha-Maitrya-Amitabha Has Appeared
GB	Gotama-Buddha (Japanese)
GL	Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah
GOB	Gospel of Buddha, The
KI	Kitab-i-Iqan : The Book of Certitude
LOB	Life of Buddha, The
LOG	Lights of Guidance, The
SAQ	Some Answered Questions
TOB	Teachings of Buddha, The

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