Comparative Analysis of Christianity and Buddhism Worldviews

The purpose of this essay is to briefly compare some key elements of the Christian and Buddhist worldview as pertaining to the concept of God, the soul, suffering, and their view of religious concepts.

**Concept of God**

First let’s look the idea of God. According to the Christian religion God is divine and is Omnipresent, Omnipotent, Omniscience and that man was made in his image. Christianity’s approach is that man was created by an external God in which the goal of the Christian’s life is to be one with God. This oneness with God is considered to be attainable by following the teaching of Jesus Christ whom was considered to be God’s physical embodiment here on earth. Jesus was considered as one with God, the son of God and yet God himself too. His teachings were those that came from God’s commands. Thus the way to God was through Jesus and his teachings, the Bible.

The Buddhist believes that there is not an external concept of a God. “All that exists is spontaneous arising, in the same way that a flower grows organically from seed, given the right causes and conditions.” (“Is There a Difference”, Alan Pope, ¶ 5). Some non-Buddhist often misunderstand the nature of Buddha was that of the same concept of Jesus, the personification of God on earth; this is far from the truth. Buddha was once asked what he was; a conversation between him and another can best describe how Buddha rejects this concept. He was asked a
series of questions: “What are you?” “Are you a god?” “No.” “An angel?” “No.” “A saint?” “No.” “Then what are you?” Buddha answered “I am awake.” (The Illustrated World’s Religions, Huston Smith, pg. 60 ¶ 1-2). Buddha was referring to being awake that he was enlightened to the fact that there is no “I”, no- self, which was the truth. This awakening was what he called nirvana the extinguishing of the self or individual.

The Soul or The Concept of Self

The doctrine of the Christian core teachings is from the Judæa Christian bible which is the Old Testament, New Testament which is a collection of the writings from the disciples of Jesus and his teachings. By following these teachings each Christian individual soul will be redeemed by the second coming of Jesus, the Messiah, who will save the all Christian Souls providing everlasting life. This relationship between the external God and the existence of an eternal, individual soul, the self, which will go to either Heaven or Hell, is what drives the Christian faith.

The best way to look at the Buddhist conception of the individual being is to examine what he observed as the three signs of existence. The first of the three signs is that of dukkha, the universality of suffering” (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 256 ¶ 4). As an example of this concept of universal suffering is that of the death of a friend or loved one, it is fair to say that all human beings have suffered this sorrow hence the universality of suffering.

The second sign of existence is that of Anicca this meaning the impermanence of the self. This the reality that nothing is permanent in life that it is constantly changing and this goes without
exception for all things. For example we are constantly going through different challenges in life and when one is overcome another one will arise. We go through the aging process. We die. This is the concept that the only constant in life is change.

The final third and final sign of existence is that of Anatman which literally means no-self or no-soul. This concept is quite different than Christianity view of the individual whom is defined as a permanent being that will ascend to heaven as a distinct immortal soul that identifies our self. Where Buddhism says “there is no empirical evidence to support the idea of an individual, private, independent soul or self” (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 257 ¶ 4). The Buddhist self is a changing physical and mental forces. These forces being the physical form, feeling or sensations, perceptions, intellectual activities such as volition, and consciousness; these five components are what make up the self. And since these five components go through constant change then there is no logical ground for the assumption of the permanent self.

It is important to point out here that Christianity refers to the connection to the soul and God is unique it is an independent personal experience between the individual and God. This leads to the belief that all things (on earth) are second to this and are to be used as a goal of achieving the ascension of the individual soul to God. Whereas Buddhist see that all things are interconnected and that there is a cause and effect of all things. This stance explains the Buddhist mind-set of duty and commitment to all things in nature both animate and non-animate objects; as opposed to those of the Christian mind-set of the individuality concept of the self and the attainment of personal connection to God’s grace.
Suffering

The issue of suffering is quite different between the two belief systems and is different in their conceptual view but they both concede the realism of suffering. Christianity puts forward that mankind began to experience suffering when they rejected God. They further believe if one continues to reject God that they would experience temporary suffering on earth and yet an eternal suffering in hell. Christians further believe that God sent his only son to die on the cross so that mankind can receive redemption through Christ. This can best be explained by the famously quoted reading from the Bible; “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Once a person gives themselves to Christ they can then end their suffering, this can only be done in the presence of God. For Christians there is no other way to heaven but through Christ. One of ways to help Christians ascend to heaven is to follow Christ’s teachings and the Ten Commandments given to them by God through Moses, the deliverer of freedom from the Egyptian Pharos. The Ten Commandments are the Christian’s core moral principles in which all Christian practices are compared against. The most important thing to realize is that in the Christian faith suffering can only be alleviated by an external God as opposed to the Buddhist view that the alleviated by the internal self.

The Buddhist concept of suffering is quite an intricate structure of beliefs. The Buddhist sees that the end of suffering is achieved by the Four Noble Truths. There is a reflection by Buddha that best describes suffering by the passage, “There is a path to the end of suffering. Tread it.” Thus the paths are the Four Noble Truths. The first being life is dukkha. Buddha describes that the First Noble Truth with the flowing passage:
...this is the Noble Truth of Sorrow. Birth is Sorrow, age is sorrow, disease is sorrow, death is sorrow; contact with the unpleasant is sorrow, separation of pleasure is sorrow, every wish unfulfilled is sorrow --- in short all components of individuality are sorrow (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 260 ¶ 3).

The five components of individuality of those are described by the third sign of existence. As Buddha explains there are different measures suffering there are also optimistic experiences in life that human beings distinguish as the converse of suffering, such as earthly pleasures, love, calmness and contentment, although life itself and the world as a whole is imperfect since it is subordinate to impermanence. By impermanence it is meant that we are never able to permanent the experiences of happiness they are just fleeting moments of time. We are never able to keep permanently what we strive for, and just as happy moments pass by; we ourselves, our friends and loved ones will pass away one day, too.

Second Noble Truth is that suffering is caused by tanha which is the best described as the desires of man. A passage attributed to the Buddha explains this concept:

This is the Noble Truth of the Arising of Sorrow. It arises from craving, which leads to rebirth, which brings delight and passion, and seeks pleasure now here, now there --- the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving of continued life, the craving for power (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 260 ¶ 7).
Since these objects of attachment are impermanent it is inevitable suffering will follow due to the un-fulfillment of our desires (tanha). We attach ourselves to these desires which include the idea of a self, which is a delusion since the concept of self is ever changing; it is an imaginary being which is part of the perpetual becoming of the universe.

The Third Noble Truth is the overcoming of the Second Noble Truth. If the cause of the Second Noble Truth is that of tanha the cure is overcoming this desire of selfish cravings. If the causes of suffering were external as in the Christian philosophy then suffering is dependent on not only the individual but that of another being of religious entity. Since the Buddhist believes of the concept of the external would inhibit the process of overcoming of suffering it takes the position that there is no external God and this offers the hope that suffering can be alleviated by the mind’s external ability to control the tanha, or desires of man. So, in a sense it is the mind’s ability can be used to overcome the mind’s desires. Using this ability of the mind’s control of the tanha it is possible for the self to overcome the illusion of the “I” (self); the awakening of the truth, anatman. The process of awakening of the anatman is described by following of The Fourth Noble Truths.

The Fourth Noble Truth is The Eightfold Path which is the core of the Buddhist moral principles. These are the following the Eightfold Path principles:

1. Right view.
2. Right resolve.
3. Right speech.
4. Right conduct.
5. Right Livelihood.
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness.
8. Right Concentration.

The right view insists “that we embrace the Three Signs and The Four Noble Truths” (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 262 ¶ 2). We need to have an understanding where we are and what direction to continue. So the first noble path is the understanding The Eightfold Path and how they are all interconnected.

“Right resolve means having the disposition needed to pursue the path therefore underscores attitude and purity of intentions” (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 262 ¶ 3). It is the right thought is that which allows the vital inquiry of the self, its thought and its origins, and what one thinks about. It is the understanding of the mind’s thought process so one can be free of the notion of the independent self, or the “I”.

“Right speech indicates character. Right speech that is harmonious. It avoids any negativity such as deceit, cursing, gossiping, and spreading rumors (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 262 ¶ 1). It ultimately leads to the alleviation of suffering by practicing the concept of right speech.
“Right conduct helps to alleviate the suffering of all sentient creatures” (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 263 ¶ 3), this includes any behavior that brings about unnecessary harm. Buddha describes the right conduct as the Five Precepts. Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not be unchaste, and do not take drugs and drink intoxicants.

“Right livelihood pertains to the life choices we guarding our careers (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 264 ¶ 1). One must not chose a career that promotes suffering such as that of a combatant, and careers that promote unearthy attachments and spending our efforts to bring about enhancements of our materialistic and ignoring the suffering of others that can be helped by the compassionate deeds of others.

Right effort, “The mind can be a wild beast that enslaves us, or it can be our vehicle to attain our goal” (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 264 ¶ 2). This basically is that to obtain our goal it is dependant on our will or our volition. Right effort allows one to use their will as a safe guard against that which is working to pull one away from the goal of liberation of the self or “I”.

Right mindfulness, “In the course of day-to-day activities, we generally take for granted our bodies and our minds” (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 264 ¶ 3). This is the effort of one to understand and be fully conscious of the body and the mind and to keep them in equilibrium. To achieve this it requires due diligence,
persistence, and the use of raja meditation. With the efforts of these principles it is possible to achieve this balance.

Right concentration, “It is through the mind that we can be free from the mind” (“Ethics across Cultures”, Michael C. Brannigan, pg. 264 ¶ 4). This is what Buddhist refers to as the state of Samadhi, free from the mind. The first seven of the Eightfold Path are needed to support the eighth step. A state of deep absorption of the object of meditation, it refers to any state of one-pointed concentration. In its highest form it is the state of pure consciousness, pure awareness devoid of all external sensations; it is the elimination of the dualism of the object and the subject; the elimination of any sense of the self or “I”.

**Religious Concepts**

- Buddha speaks of a religion devoid of authority and that the individual should take responsibility for their lives. The Christian concept is based on the authority of God, Jesus Christ. It is through the praise of them is salvation possible.

- Buddha speaks of a religion devoid of rituals where Christianity is heavily marked by traditions, such as communion and baptism.

- Buddha rejected the use of speculation in matters of such elements as whether the world was eternal or not, and if is infinite or finite, or for that matter is there life after death. The Christian faith’s identity is heavily wrapped up in the concept of an external God which answers the question of death, and the eternal and infinite aspect of the world.
Buddha spoke of a religion devoid of traditions. The traditions of religion just get in the way of internal aspect of removing suffering. The Christian faith is based on many traditions which reaffirm the Christian views and bind the members of the group.

Buddha practiced and preaches a religion of intense self-effort, working within to release the binds of suffering. This is quite different compared to the Christian faith where it practices mainly the external relationship between the individual and God.

Buddha preached a religion devoid of the supernatural. There is no sense of miracles performed by oneself or that of another external force. The Christianity contains the view that miracles, and saints do exists and are the realization of God ability. They look toward the external God as the creator full of mystery.

In closing Buddhism and Christianity are basically different on suffering and the concept of the divine. The Buddhist see the individual as the redeemer of suffering as opposed to the Christian view of an external God, Christ, as the redeemer of man’s suffering. Christianity takes the approach that all things are the creation of an external God. Buddhism does not acknowledge the presence of an external God as I stated earlier the Buddhist view is, “All that exists is spontaneous arising, in the same way that a flower grows organically from seed, given the right causes and conditions.” (“Is There a Difference”, Alan Pope, ¶ 5).
Works Cited:

- “Is There a Difference”, Iconic Images of Suffering in Buddhism and Christianity, by Alan Pope, University of West Georgia.