

# Comparative Studies on the Concept of Environment in Buddhism and Christianity

Boonmee Poungpet

College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University,

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## ABSTRACT

Buddhism and Christianity are two major world religions with unique views on the concept of environment. In this paper, a comparative analysis of the two religions' views on the environment was undertaken. First, the Buddhist view from the Pāli canon was examined, which views the environment as an integral part of the interconnected web of life in which all living things are interrelated and interdependent. Buddhism emphasizes the importance of compassion, nonviolence, and ethical behavior toward all living beings, and encourages the practice of mindfulness and meditation to foster a deeper connection with the natural world. In contrast, Christianity views the environment in the Bible as a creation of God and emphasizes the role of humans as stewards of the earth. Christians believe that God created the world and gave humans the responsibility to care for it. This belief has led to the development of an environmental ethic and efforts to protect the environment in Christian communities. Despite these differences, both religions share some commonalities in their approach to the environment. Both Buddhism and Christianity recognize the interconnectedness of all living beings and emphasize the importance of responsible and ethical behavior toward the natural world. Both religions also emphasize the importance of

individual responsibility and personal action in caring for the environment. In summary, while there are significant differences in the way Buddhism and Christianity approach the concept of the environment, there are also some similarities. By understanding the similarities and differences between the two religions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the importance of environmental protection and develop a more holistic approach to environmental issues.

**Keywords:** Environment; Stewardship; Interconnected; Spirituality; Sustainability.

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## Introduction

Buddhism and Christianity are two major religions that have large followings worldwide, each with their own beliefs and practices. Buddhism originated in India around the 5th century BCE, and emphasizes the importance of meditation and mindfulness to achieve enlightenment and liberation from suffering.<sup>1</sup> Christianity, on the other hand, is based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and emphasizes belief in the one true God and the redemption of mankind through faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Despite their differences, both religions recognize the moral obligation to care for and protect the environment and advocate a responsible and sustainable approach to it.

The environment is an important part of the natural world, including all living and non-living things that make up the Earth's ecosystem. Environmental issues such as climate change, deforestation, pollution, and the loss of biodiversity have become more important in recent years because of their impact on the environment and human health.<sup>3</sup> Many philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions view the environment as sacred and valuable and emphasize the moral and ethical obligation of humans to protect and preserve it for future generations.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this comparative study is to examine the concept of the environment in Buddhism and Christianity and to identify similarities and differences in their environmental ethics and the implications for contemporary environmental issues. By examining the beliefs and practices of these two traditions, the study will contribute to a better understanding of how religious and cultural traditions influence attitudes and behaviors toward the environment and how they can contribute to environmental sustainability and protection.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Demieville and Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Motilal Banarsi Dass, 2017), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Ghislaine Fleury-Bahi, Enric Pol, and Oscar Navarro, *Handbook of Environmental Psychology and Quality of Life Research* (Springer, 2016), 232.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 91.

## Exploring the Notions of Environment in Buddhism and Christianity

### 1. Buddhist beliefs and practices related to the environment

Central to Buddhist beliefs and practices is the principle of interconnectedness and interdependence of all life, which underpins their approach to environmental issues. According to this principle, actions that harm the environment ultimately harm ourselves, since all living things are part of an interdependent web of existence.<sup>5</sup> Buddhists advocate a mindful and compassionate approach to the environment, such as the Monastic Code or Vinaya. In the Vinaya, the Buddha advises that monks not cut down trees, leaves, and flowers and not disturb the forest. He laid down guidelines not to pollute grasses and rivers.<sup>6</sup> They emphasize the importance of causing less harm to all living things, preserving natural resources, promoting sustainability, and cultivating a deep reverence for the natural world.<sup>7</sup>

Buddhism emphasizes the interdependent relationship between humans and the natural world and stresses the concept of the interconnectedness of all things. This means that everything in the natural world is interconnected and interdependent (Paticcasamuppāda)<sup>8</sup>, and that our actions can have profound effects on the environment and all living things.<sup>9</sup> Buddhism encourages us to recognize our interconnectedness with the

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<sup>5</sup> Egerton C. Baptist, *Paticca Samuppāda: Or, the Buddhist Law of Dependent Origination* (Buddhist Cultural Foundation, 1978), 72.

<sup>6</sup> David L. Gosling, *Religion and Ecology in India and Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2013), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Padmasiri De Silva, *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 41.

<sup>8</sup> *Patīcasamuppāda*, also known as dependent origination, is a fundamental concept in Buddhist philosophy that describes the interdependence of all phenomena, including the self. According to this concept, all phenomena arise in dependence on other phenomena, and there is no independent or permanent self. The twelve links of dependent origination illustrate the causal chain of samsaric existence, in which each link is dependent on the previous link and contributes to the origination of the next link. Understanding the dependent nature of all phenomena and the absence of a permanent self is essential to working toward the cessation of suffering and the attainment of enlightenment.

<sup>9</sup> SN 12.1

environment, to cultivate a deep respect for the natural world, and to take responsibility for the impact of our actions on the environment and all living beings.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of karma, which plays a crucial role in Buddhist teachings, extends to our relationship with the environment.<sup>11</sup> Negative actions toward the environment can create negative karma that leads to harmful consequences both in this life and in future lives, continuing the cycle of rebirth (MN 38).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Buddhist ethics and the teachings of compassion provide a framework for positive environmental behavior that can generate positive karma and reduce the negative effects of our actions.<sup>13</sup>

Buddhism also emphasizes the idea of impermanence (Anicca: SN 22.45)<sup>14</sup> and change, meaning that the natural world is constantly evolving and in flux.<sup>15</sup> Recognizing the impermanence of the natural world can help us develop a more sustainable relationship with the environment by taking action to reduce our impact on it and preserve its health and well-being for future generations. By cultivating mindfulness and compassion toward the environment and recognizing the interconnectedness of all living things, we can protect the environment and safeguard its health and well-being for future generations.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Than Daing (U.), *Doctrine of Paticcasamuppāda* (The Law of Dependent Origination): Exposition and Practical Application to Emancipate from the Round of Rebirths (Samsāra) (Society of Propagation of Vipassana, 1967), 49.

<sup>11</sup> Thich Duc Thien and Thich Nhat Tu, *Buddhist Approach to Responsible Consumption and Sustainable Development* (Vietnam Buddhist University Publications, 2019), 133.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Reynolds, Christine Blackmore, and Mark J. Smith, *The Environmental Responsibility Reader* (Zed Books Ltd., 2009), 314.

<sup>13</sup> M. G. Chitkara, *Buddhism and Environment* (A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 2000), 324.

<sup>14</sup> Impermanence, known in Buddhist philosophy as anicca, is the concept that all things are constantly changing and subject to arising and passing away. It is one of the three characteristics of existence and is considered the root of all suffering. However, understanding the nature of impermanence can also lead to liberation, as letting go of attachment and aversion can lead to peace and equanimity. Mindfulness of impermanence is cultivated through meditation and contemplation to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of reality and come closer to enlightenment.

<sup>15</sup> De Silva, *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism*, 122.

<sup>16</sup> Rayson K. Alex et al., *Ecocultural Ethics: Critical Essays* (Lexington Books, 2017), 47.

## 2. Christian beliefs and practices related to the environment

Christian beliefs and practices regarding the environment focus on the concept of stewardship, which involves responsible and sustainable use of the natural world. Christians believe that God created the earth and that it is our duty to protect and care for it, since all living things are part of God's creation and we are obligated to act as stewards,<sup>17</sup> as stated in Genesis 2:15: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." The creation story in the Bible, particularly in the Book of Genesis (Genesis 1:25-28), serves as the basis for many of these beliefs and practices, the core of which is that God created everything and created man in the image of God. God also gave man the power to rule the world.<sup>18</sup> It emphasizes the intrinsic value and beauty of the natural world and the responsibility of humans to preserve and protect it as part of God's creation. In addition, the creation story emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living things, leading many Christians to advocate for ecological sustainability and environmental protection.

Stewardship is an important concept in Christianity, especially in relation to the environment. In Christian theology, stewardship refers to the responsibility God has given humans to care for the natural world and all its living things, and has its roots in the Bible's creation story.<sup>19</sup> Stewardship means managing and conserving natural resources, promoting

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<sup>17</sup> E. M. Conradie, Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research (AFRICAN SUN MeDIA, 2006), 77.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 1:25-28 stated: "God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'"

<sup>19</sup> Alexander J. B. Hampton and Douglas Hedley, *The Cambridge Companion to Christianity and the Environment* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 231.

biodiversity, and protecting the environment from pollution and other forms of degradation.<sup>20</sup> Christians recognize that the environment is a gift from God and that it is their responsibility to manage it responsibly and sustainably.<sup>21</sup> This includes taking action to reduce their impact on the environment and supporting efforts to protect it.<sup>22</sup>

In Christianity, humans are often referred to as stewards or custodians of the earth, entrusted with the task of caring for the natural world and all its living creatures.<sup>23</sup> However, the concept of human dominion over the earth is often misinterpreted. Responsible stewardship requires caring for the natural world, using natural resources wisely, and advocating policies that address environmental concerns, while recognizing that all living things are interconnected and that human actions can have an impact on the environment and other living things.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, Christian beliefs and practices emphasize the need for responsible stewardship of the earth and its resources, including the development of policies and practices that promote environmental sustainability and conservation.<sup>25</sup>

### **Comparative Analysis of the Concept of Environment in Buddhism and Christianity**

The concept of the environment plays an important role in both Buddhism and Christianity, as both religions emphasize the importance of responsible stewardship of the natural world. Although these two religions differ in their beliefs and practices, they share a concern for the environment and its well-being. The similarities and differences between the Buddhist and Christian views of the environment are as follows:

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<sup>20</sup> David R. Kinsley, *Ecology and Religion : Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice Hall, 1995), 103, <http://archive.org/details/ecologyreligione0000kins>.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel K. Lagat, *Christian Faith and Environmental Stewardship: Theological Foundations for Creation Care* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019), 43.

<sup>22</sup> Robert S. White, *Creation in Crisis: Christian Perspectives on Sustainability* (SPCK, 2009), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Lagat, *Christian Faith and Environmental Stewardship*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Sandra L. Richter, *Stewards of Eden: What Scripture Says About the Environment and Why It Matters* (InterVarsity Press, 2020), 29.

<sup>25</sup> Willis J. Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Routledge, 2016), 70.

### 1. Similarities between the traditions of Buddhism and Christianity

Buddhism and Christianity may differ in their beliefs and practices, but they share some important commonalities when it comes to the environment. Both religions recognize the importance of the environment as a vital aspect of human existence. In Buddhism, the environment is seen as an integral part of the interconnected web of existence in which all living beings and natural phenomena are interdependent and interrelated.<sup>26</sup> Buddha himself is said to have spent much of his life in nature, seeking enlightenment under a tree.<sup>27</sup> Buddhist teachings emphasize the importance of protecting the natural environment to promote human well-being and reduce suffering. Similarly, Christianity views the environment as a gift from God entrusted to humans as stewards or custodians. Christian teachings emphasize the value of the environment and the need for humans to protect and preserve it for future generations.

The idea of interconnectedness is central to both Buddhism and Christianity and is closely linked to their respective views of the environment. In Buddhism, the concept of dependent origination underscores the idea that all living things and natural phenomena are interconnected and interdependent, each influencing and being influenced by the others.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in Christianity, the natural world is seen as a gift from God entrusted to humans as stewards, and the well-being of all living things is seen as intimately connected to the well-being of the environment. The idea of interconnectedness in both religions has important implications for environmental stewardship. It underscores the need for humans to recognize their place in the larger natural world and to act with responsibility and care toward all living things and the environment as a whole. It also underscores the importance of promoting sustainability and reducing harm to ensure the long-term well-being of people and the natural world.

Both Buddhism and Christianity emphasize the importance of compassion and respect for all living beings as a fundamental aspect of environmental protection. In Buddhism, the concept of harmlessness or nonviolence toward all living beings (ahimsa) is central to the

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<sup>26</sup> David E. Cooper and Simon P. James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment* (Taylor & Francis, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Hans Wolfgang Schumann, *The Historical Buddha: The Times, Life, and Teachings of the Founder of Buddhism* (Motilal Banarsi Dass Publ., 2004), 58.

<sup>28</sup> SN 12.1, SN 12.2

idea of responsible environmental behavior.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in Christianity, the concept of compassion toward all living beings is reflected in the belief in the inherent value of all life as God's creation. The need for compassion and respect for all living things in both religions reflects a shared recognition of the inherent value and interconnectedness of all life.<sup>30</sup> It underpins their shared commitment to promoting environmental sustainability and reducing damage to the natural world, and highlights the importance of mindfulness and responsibility in human interaction with the environment.

## 2. Differences between the traditions of Buddhism and Christianity

Buddhism and Christianity have some similarities in their approaches to environmental protection, but they also have notable differences in their concepts of the environment. One of the main differences is the role of humans in the environment. Buddhism sees humans as one of many living beings in the natural world and emphasizes living in harmony with nature and preventing harm to other living beings, including the natural world. Christianity, on the other hand, sees human beings as God's unique creation with a special responsibility to care for and interact with the natural world and calls for responsible stewardship of nature and sustainable use of natural resources. These different views reflect the different theological and philosophical perspectives of the two traditions and have important implications for how they approach environmental issues.

Another significant difference between the two traditions is their concept of a creator deity. Christianity assumes the existence of an omnipotent God who created the universe and everything in it, including human beings, whereas Buddhism has no concept of a creator deity or a single omnipotent God who created the universe. Instead, Buddhism holds that the natural world, including human beings, arose from complex, interdependent processes and causes. Christianity often emphasizes responsible stewardship of God's creation, while Buddhism focuses on compassionate and respectful coexistence with the natural world.

Another major difference between Buddhism and Christianity is their concept of rebirth. In Buddhism, rebirth refers to the continuation of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, and the ultimate goal is liberation from this cycle through the attainment of enlightenment.

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<sup>29</sup> Bodo Balsys, *Ahimsā: Buddhism and the Vegetarian Ideal* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2004), 14.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher P. Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 4.

Christianity, on the other hand, has no concept of rebirth in the same sense as Buddhism, but teaches that man has only one life on earth and will be judged by God after death. These different views of rebirth reflect the different theological and philosophical perspectives of the two traditions and have implications for how they approach environmental issues. Buddhism often emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the need for compassionate and respectful treatment of the natural world as part of the cycle of rebirth, while Christianity often emphasizes responsible stewardship of God's creation in preparation for life after death.

### **Implications and Applications of the Comparative Study**

Comparing Buddhism's and Christianity's views on the environment is crucial because it offers insights into their attitudes toward nature and human responsibility. By identifying similarities and differences in beliefs and practices, we can develop better strategies for dealing with environmental issues in areas such as ethics, politics, and education. This knowledge can also foster interfaith dialog and collaboration to work toward a more sustainable and just future.

#### **1. Implications for environmental ethics**

Environmental ethics is a branch of philosophy that seeks to understand the moral and ethical implications of human interactions with the natural world. It raises questions about our obligations to the environment, the treatment of non-human beings, and the value of nature.<sup>31</sup> Environmental ethics affects how we live our lives, how we make decisions about resource use and conservation, and influences policy, law, and governance at all levels. A shift in worldview is needed that recognizes the intrinsic value of nature and the interconnectedness of all living things. This change in perspective has implications for how we deal with climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, as we must consider the long-term consequences of our actions.

The concept of interconnectedness is crucial in environmental ethics because it recognizes the interdependence of all living things and the environment they inhabit. Recognizing that all living things and the environment are interconnected has important implications for how we treat the natural world. We must consider the impact of our actions on the entire ecosystem and strive to minimize harm to other species and the environment.

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Boylan, *Environmental Ethics* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 1.

The concept of interconnectedness challenges us to take a holistic approach to environmental issues and to recognize that environmental problems cannot be solved in isolation from one another.

Both Buddhism and Christianity emphasize compassion and respect for all living beings. For Buddhists, compassion is the key to overcoming suffering and achieving enlightenment. Respect for all living beings is also emphasized in Buddhism through the principle of ahimsa, non-harming. Similarly, Christianity teaches that all living beings are valued and loved by God, and respect for all living beings is emphasized through the concept of stewardship. Humans are called to be stewards of God's creation and to care for the environment. Both religions emphasize the importance of recognizing our interconnectedness with the environment and acting with compassion and responsibility toward the earth.

Both Buddhism and Christianity recognize the important role humans play in environmental conservation and sustainability. Buddhists recognize that human actions can have significant impacts on the environment and that it is our responsibility to act in ways that minimize harm and promote sustainability. Christians are called to use the earth's resources wisely, to avoid overconsumption and waste, and to care for all living things as part of God's creation. Both religions emphasize the importance of living in harmony with the natural world, promoting environmental protection and sustainability, and ensuring a healthy planet for future generations.

## **2. Applications for contemporary environmental issues**

Buddhism and Christianity offer unique perspectives and applications for addressing today's environmental problems. Both religions emphasize the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of responsible and sustainable stewardship of the natural world. Through mindfulness, compassion, prayer, fasting, and compassionate action, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of their relationship with the environment and take more responsible and sustainable actions to address environmental issues such as climate change, deforestation, pollution, and habitat destruction. By prioritizing the well-being of all living beings and ecosystems, Buddhism and Christianity offer valuable insights and practices for promoting a more sustainable and just future.

Both Buddhism and Christianity recognize the urgent need to address climate change and its impact on the environment. They recognize that climate change disproportionately

affects the most vulnerable populations, including those most dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. Therefore, Buddhists and Christians are called to take action to reduce their own carbon footprint and to advocate for policies and practices that promote environmental sustainability and social justice. They recognize that it is our responsibility to take action to protect and care for the earth and all living things.

Similarly, both Buddhism and Christianity recognize the destructive effects of deforestation and habitat destruction on the environment and all living beings. They recognize that deforestation and habitat destruction disproportionately affect vulnerable communities, including indigenous peoples and local communities that depend on forests for their livelihoods. Therefore, Buddhists and Christians are called to take action to reduce their own impact on the environment, to advocate for policies and practices that promote sustainable land use and forest conservation, and to care for the people most affected by deforestation and habitat destruction.

Both Buddhism and Christianity recognize the negative effects of pollution and poor waste management on the environment and all living beings. They recognize that pollution and poor waste management disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including low-income and marginalized populations who are most likely to live in areas of high pollution. Therefore, Buddhists and Christians are called to take action to reduce their own impact on the environment, to advocate for policies and practices that promote sustainable waste management and pollution prevention, and to care for those most affected by pollution and poor waste management.

### **Conclusion and Suggestion**

Buddhism and Christianity exhibit parallel beliefs and practices regarding the environment, acknowledging the interconnectedness of all life and the significance of responsible stewardship of nature. Both religions emphasize understanding the environmental impact of human actions and advocate a compassionate and mindful approach that prioritizes the well-being of living beings and ecosystems. While specific beliefs and practices may differ, they each provide distinctive perspectives on addressing environmental issues like climate change, deforestation, pollution, and habitat destruction.

Individuals can enhance their environmental responsibility and sustainability through practices such as compassion, mindfulness, prayer, fasting, and compassionate action. These efforts facilitate a deeper comprehension of one's connection with the environment and foster a sustainable and equitable future. Consequently, exploring the environmental concept in Buddhism and Christianity through a comparative lens yields beneficial insights and strategies for tackling contemporary environmental challenges.

The examination of these religions also holds significant implications for environmental ethics and current environmental concerns, emphasizing the recognition of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life forms and ecosystems. It stresses the necessity of environmental management and protection, as well as the moral obligation to conserve the environment for future generations and take action against present environmental dilemmas. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of compassion, respect, and care towards all living entities, advocating for social justice and sustainability in environmental decision-making.

The examination of the concept of environment in Buddhism and Christianity presents various opportunities for future research. Several recommendations are provided:

1. Comparative Analysis Across Religious Traditions: Expanding the comparative analysis of environmental ethics to include Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and indigenous spiritualities can offer insights into diverse approaches to environmental ethics in different religious contexts.
2. Historical Examination of Environmental Ethics: Investigating the historical development of environmental ethics in Buddhism and Christianity can reveal how these ethics have changed over time, including key events, influential figures, and important texts.
3. Study of Contemporary Environmental Movements: Examining current environmental movements in Buddhist and Christian communities can shed light on how these groups address modern environmental challenges and advocate for sustainability and justice.
4. Cross-Cultural Exploration of Environmental Ethics: Exploring how environmental ethics are perceived and practiced in various cultural contexts can help understand the influence of cultural values on environmental decision-making and activism.

5. Interdisciplinary Inquiry into Environmental Ethics: Promoting collaboration among scholars from disciplines like philosophy, theology, ecology, and anthropology can lead to new frameworks for comprehending and addressing environmental ethics and the complex relationships between humans and the environment.

Further research in the field of comparative environmental ethics can enhance our understanding of the intricate connections between humans, the environment, and spirituality. Such efforts have the potential to advance our awareness of ethical obligations towards the natural world within diverse cultural and religious settings.

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