

What can the study of Comparative Religion contribute to your understanding of Buddhism

Religion, by definition, is the focus of ultimate concern of something holy and eternal.¹ In the academic study of religion, we take the cross-culture and global perspective notions into consideration. Since there are various religions existing globally, we want to study the comparative religion which largely emphasizes on the study of all forms of religious life instead of focusing on one tradition, to define the commonalities and differences among them specifically, historically, and ideally.² Also, religious pluralism can help us to see our own tradition better.³ Therefore, the topic of this paper is to see how the studying of comparative religion can contribute my understanding of Buddhism.

From the onset of civilization, besides hunting, farming, or producing food for physical survival, humans had developed language, art, social and philosophical skills, life's views, religion, systems of meanings and understanding, and others to fulfill the common and ultimate inclinations. Specifically, when we deal with something more obscure, abstractive, or ambiguous matters in the cosmic and human existences, we may not understand their meanings easily. For instance, when we want to inquire the witness or experience about something as holy and ultimate, a meaning system emerges. In fact, this type of questioning about something as holy and ultimate is a general definition of religion.⁴ ⁵ In Islam, God is considered a holy and eternal figure such as, "Say, He is God, the One! God, the eternally Besought of all! He neither begets nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him."⁶ Indeed, because their God or Allah is revered as the greatest divine and creator of universe, this God is holy; also this God represents the

ultimate reality of life, because human cannot describe and fathom God in a conventional way. On the contrary, since in Buddhism there is no notion of God as holy and ultimate, we regard Buddha and his teachings of guiding to attain Nirvana or Buddha-hood as holiness and ultimate goal respectively; because the Buddha's three karmas are pure and proper, he is holy;⁷ since the religious goal of Buddhist is to achieve Nirvana or Buddha-hood, these terms represent the ultimate goals of Buddhist practitioners.⁸ In short, God in Islam and Buddha and Nirvana in Buddhism represent the holy and ultimate essences of the respective religions.

As religion deals with the holy and ultimate issues, it needs language to describe the holiness, indefinite, eternal, and absolute that could not be spoken in an ordinary way⁹; namely, religious language reveals its functions and explains transcendently all defined and limited phenomenon. As mentioned above, the word "*Nirvana*" in Buddhism cannot be interpreted literally as "nothingness", because it carries several transcendental meanings such as "releasing from ignorance about the way the world is" or "penetrating and dissolving the virgules separating humanity and nature, self and other, subject and object, and even *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*."¹⁰ Namely, when one develops transcendental wisdom, which can perceive phenomenon exactly as the way they are or go beyond the dual notions of good and bad, you and me, and so forth, then one has reached to the spiritual state of Nirvana. Similarly, in Christianity the word Trinity is, "the summary of Christian faith in God, who out of love creates humanity for union with God, who through Jesus Christ redeems the world, and in the power of the Holy Spirit transforms and divinizes (2 *Cor.* 3:18)."¹¹ Actually, this concept of Trinity represents the union of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which are identical in the essence or nature. Since the

Father is God and the Son or Jesus has two natures of true human and true God, then both of them carry the Holy Spirit of God. Namely, they are equal and eternal as one in essence, nature, action, and power. So the term ‘Nirvana’ in Buddhism and ‘Trinity’ in Christianity represent the holy and ultimate natures of the religions.

In the aspect of the Truth of religion, religious images result from an experience of a sacred reality.¹² In deed, according to the Buddhist tradition, Nirvana is an enlightening and liberating experience of the mind, not a psychological state; namely when one has awakening experiences of the total absence of the emotional or psychological afflictions such as anger, anxiety, etc., one may feel relaxing, peaceful, and liberated; namely, one might have real experience of tasting the flavor of Nirvana, or the Truth of religion. Similarly, in Christianity God is encountered experience, not simply a fabricated, because one could recognize the real God’s existence only when one has experienced of seeing or hearing God directly. In short, having the peak ‘Nirvana’ experience in Buddhism and encountering ‘God’ experience in Christianity represent the truth of religion that religious people actually had experiences with.

The evaluative religious language¹³ plays significant role in dealing with morality, code of instructions, concepts of virtue, or critical reflection on moral and moral action. For instance, the Buddha spells out clearly the five moral obligations for the laity to follow in the *Sigalovada Sutta*.¹⁴ Namely, in order to be proper Buddhist, one should be good citizen in secular life by abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and drinking intoxicant substances. These five precepts are also the foundation for the monks and nuns’ religious disciplines to practice to achieve the transcendental goal of Nirvana or Buddha-hood. Similarly, Christian Ten Commandments spell out what the

Christians should and should not do so that they could be considered as good Christian on the earth and unite with God eternally in heaven after death. Therefore, the evaluated religious languages of five moral codes in Buddhism and the Ten Commandments in Christianity provide moral guidelines for their followers to practice in daily life.

In the academic study of religion, the inquires of history, philosophy, sociology, ideology, and others are based on scientific, rational, psychological, experiential, anthropological, historical, and philosophical approaches that are concerned with clarity, evidence, and logical consistency; namely it is neither the subject nor the discipline.¹⁵ This methodology elucidates the Buddhist hermeneutic method of free inquires in the Kalama sutta¹⁶ in which the Buddha described ten unreliable sources¹⁷ that need further clarification. He advised that one should accept and practice them if one knows and recognizes them personally as the skillful, blameless, and praiseworthy teachings and conducive to happiness. For instance, during Lunar New Year days, many Buddhists and non-Buddhists go to the temples to read the fortune stick; this indigenous custom has been practicing for many centuries in most Southeast Asian Buddhist temples, and it has been creating anxiety for people; if people pick the good fortune sticks, they would be delight and look for good fortunes; if no good fortune occurs, they will be frustrated. Conversely, if they happened picking a bad omen stick, they would concern nervously the occurring of those bad omens. In general, there is no real benefit in this practice. That's why the Buddha advises the Buddhists not to believe in anything that is considered as custom or tradition. On the other hand, in Judaism and Christianity, fear of god is the beginning of wisdom,¹⁸ or just trust god can help you going to straight path,¹⁹ or there is no other god except Jesus;²⁰ namely god is everything and above all things, because

Christians are supposed to depend on God's control completely; God dictates and directs their life entirely. Therefore, they must obey and trust their God without any doubt; namely, they can neither question nor expect any answer from God. This is one of the obvious reasons why it is problematic to study Christianity and Judaism academically. In short Buddhist doctrines are mostly relevant with the academic study of religion in the scientific, rational, and logical approaches whereas Christian theological doctrines are not.

Because religion serves as the way to understand the reality and guides to live within tradition, the religious languages describe the belief system (i.e. non-sensory dimension relating to the whole reality or ultimate order, conceptual frameworks to realize wide range of experience, and ordering reality and a mode of discovery).²¹ For instance, in a Mahayana literature on the Visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Lifespan, the Buddha describes clearly the sixteen techniques to contemplate and visualize Amitabha Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and the pure land's environments so that the Pure Land practitioners could follow to visualize those images. By utilizing this technique, the practitioners could have the Buddha's, Bodhisattvas', and Pure Land's iconographies in their mind so that they would remember and follow them to take rebirth on that pure land right after passing away. Similarly, according to Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments were authored by God and given to Moses on the mountain referred to as "Mount Sinai" (Exodus 19:23) or "Horeb" (Deuteronomy 5:2) in the form of two stone tablets. As a list of religious and moral codes in Judaism and Christianity, they provide the basic belief system for the followers. In short, the religious languages of describing the sixteen practices of visualizations in the Visualization of the

Buddha of Infinite Lifespan sutra of Buddhism and the Ten Commandments in Christianity provide the guidance and belief system for Buddhists and Christian to follow.

Furthermore, every religion should have some forms of belief either within their physical and ordinary dimensions or beyond them such as the non-ordinary and transcendent reality.²² Christianity require their followers to have an absolute trust in God such as, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.”²³ Namely, having absolute faith in God is the most imperative religious element in Christianity; Christians are supposed to submit, obey, and count on God completely; they cannot decide anything for their secular and religious life. Faith in Buddhism may be slightly different from that of Christianity. For example, the reason why Mahayana Buddhists believe in Amitabha Buddha is because they want to rely on that Buddha to take rebirth in his Pure Land so that they could achieve to Buddha-hood quicker and easier in that favorable environment. In short, trust in God in Christianity and believe in Amitabha Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism are the belief systems of transcendental reality.

Furthermore, scriptures, including the metaphors or stories in every religious tradition, serve as the spiritual guides or points of references of the holy and ultimate entities for their followers to understand or transform their existences.²⁴ It is truly essential in Buddhism, because before entering Nirvana,²⁵ Buddha vested his authority on the Dharma, his teachings or the scriptures, not anyone else. In the *Discourse on the Great Decease*, when Ananda asked the Buddha that who will substitute him to teach and

lead Buddhist adherents, the Buddha replied, “Be ye lamps unto yourselves and be ye refuges unto yourselves, seek no other refuge; let the dharma be your lamp and your refuge, and seek no other refuge.” Namely, while one should seek within oneself, one could rely on the Dharma or the scriptures as the teacher. This radical approach could help his later disciples to focus on the spiritual aspect of practice, rather on the authority aspect of power, because it is easy for unenlightened people to abuse the power (if they could have access to it) in both secular and religious life. Therefore, Dharma or Buddhist scriptures play the most important role in Buddhism in the respect of scriptural authority. Similarly, Bible does have firm authority in modern Christianity, because Christians believe that the words in the Bible are the words of God. Hence, scriptures in Buddhism and Bible in Christianity serve as spiritual guides or points of references of the holy and ultimate entities for their followers to understand or transform their existences.

Besides, the Buddha is the master of using analogy, paradox, or removal of metaphorical religious language such as the Simile of the Saw²⁶ that shows how to practice loving-kindness no matter how much others may try to provoke you, the Crossing over the Flood²⁷ that uses the paradox to subdue people’s pride, and to the layman Kandaraka²⁸ that discusses four kinds of persons found in the world. These stories remind Buddhists to follow and apply the principles of practicing loving-kindness, subdue pride, and others in daily life. Similarly, Christianity has the analogy of “Human beings have power; God is all-powerful,”²⁹ meaning that God’s power is incomparable; the paradox of “The simple, absolute, and immutable mysteries Divine Truth are hidden in the super-luminous darkness,”³⁰ meaning that God is everywhere; and the removal language of God’s nature, “We are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it

is not,”³¹ meaning that God could not be fathomed. Therefore, by using the analogy, paradox, removal of metaphorical religious languages, Buddha and Jesus explained their teachings in the simple and flexible ways for their followers to comprehend.

To point out something as holy by speaking of the ordinary and finite matters is the religious language of double intention³². Jesus used ordinary images such as shepherds and sheep, fathers and sons, lost coins and banquets to speak of god.³³ Similarly, when the Buddha used the metaphor of the poison arrow³⁴, he literally reminded us not to inquire the metaphorical matters but to solve the current problems of life. Namely, Buddha and Jesus utilized conventional language of double intention to explain their principles so that their followers could grasp the principles easily.

Also, in order to understand other religious systems, according to the methodological studies of comparative religion, one must have the “virtue sympathy”³⁵ or “put oneself into someone else’s shoe” to enter their intentionality and meaning with the recognition of the believers’ faith and commitment to experience them through their believes’ eyes so that one’s scholastic analysis and reconstruction of their principles and phenomenon could be consistent and compatible with their perspectives. Practically and personally, as a Buddhist this method is very useful for me, if I ever want to study other traditions or to compare them with Buddhism. Because only seeing or viewing others with impartial mind or as in Zen’s saying, “serious study requires an open mind”, we could understand and recognize their beauty, essence, and so forth. Similarly, currently there are many religious leaders try to understand other traditions with “virtual sympathy” spirit. For example, based on Vatican II documents, Amalor mentioned that Christians should learn, acknowledge, and preserve the moral goods and truths of other

traditions.³⁶ Namely, by having appreciation of other traditions' truths, moralities, etc., Christians can live in harmony with other non-Christian people. In short, with Buddhist open minded spirit and Christian appreciation of other traditions through the 'virtual sympathy' attitudes, the coexistence of world religions can be realistically achieved and prevailed which in turn will bring a peaceful world.

In summary, by studying the comparative religion in the lights of religious function, goal, belief, practice, language, scripture, and comparison as discussed above, my understanding of Buddhism has been enriched that Buddhism is a unique, logical, and rational religion to compare with that of other traditions.

Note

¹ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7-8.

² Paden, William E. "Comparative Religion." Encyclopedia of Religion. Ed. Lindsay Jones. Vol. 3. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 1877. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Gale. University of the West. (accessed Oct. 22, 2009).

³ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovery of a Faith*, 211.

⁴ Paul Tillich, "The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian," in Joseph M. Kitagawa, ed., *The History of Religion*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: UP, 1967), 247-48.

⁵ Roger Schmidt, *Exploring Religion: What is Religion?* (Wadsworth, Inc. 1988), ed. Sheryl Fullerton, 8-11.

⁶ Islam. Qur'an 112.

⁷ Three karmas mean body, speech, and mind karmas.

⁸ Attaining Nirvana is the Theravada's goal, and achieving to the Buddha-hood is the Mahayana's goal.

⁹ Schmidt, *Exploring*, 159.

¹⁰ Thomas P. Kasulis, "Nirvāṇa." Encyclopedia of Religion. Ed. Lindsay Jones. vol. 10. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 6633. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Gale. University of the West, (accessed October 6, 2009).

¹¹ Lacugna, Catherine Mowry. "Trinity." Encyclopedia of Religion. Ed. Lindsay Jones. Vol. 14. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 9360. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Gale. University of the West. (accessed Oct. 22, 2009).

¹² Schmidt, *Exploring*, 19.

¹³ Schmidt, *Exploring*, 168-169.

¹⁴ The Discourse to Sigala: DN 31.

¹⁵ Schmidt, *Exploring*, 21

¹⁶ AN 3.65.

¹⁷ Oral history, traditional, news sources, scriptures or other official texts, logical reasoning, philosophical reasoning, common sense, one's own opinions, authorities or experts, and one's own teacher.

¹⁸ Judaism and Christianity. Proverbs 9.11.

¹⁹ Judaism and Christianity. Bible, Proverbs 3.5-6.

²⁰ Christianity. Bible, 1 Corinthians 8.4-6.

²¹ Ibid., 170-72.

²² Ibid., 15.

²³ Judaism and Christianity. Bible, Proverbs 3.5-6.

²⁴ Ibid., 209.

²⁵ Buddhists only accept the notion that the Buddha does not die mentally and spiritually after a physical dying. He just enters the everlasting experience of Nirvana, namely having no more afflicted or desire thought to be reborn in the cycle of rebirth.

²⁶ Kakacupama Sutta: MN 21.

²⁷ Ogha-tarana Sutta (Crossing over the Flood): SN 1.1.

²⁸ Kandaraka Sutta: MN 51.

²⁹ Schmidt, *Exploring*, 164.

³⁰ Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans. By C. E. Rolt (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 196.

³¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, 96.

³² Schmidt, *Exploring*, 160-162.

³³ Ibid., 160.

³⁴ Sunakkhatta: MN 105.

³⁵ Schmidt, *Exploring*, 22. Note 42. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 183-84.

³⁶ John Berchmans Barla, *Christian Theological Understanding of Other Religions According to D.S.*, 179.