

Religion Today
May 12-18, 2000
Are Religious Values Universal?
Paul V.M. Flesher

A recent Newsweek magazine contained a feature article about teenagers' beliefs concerning religion. One point was that many kids thought all religions taught basically the same values. I find this observation also applies to many of the students in my introductory courses at the University of Wyoming. While I am encouraged by the tolerance and acceptance for all religions that this belief implies (it would certainly help avoid the next Bosnia, Kosovo or Chechnya), the belief holds true only to a limited extent.

Religious commonalities are strongest when we look at personal and family morality. But when we look elsewhere in a religion, the common beliefs are much fewer. This point becomes apparent in a comparison of the Christian Ten Commandments and the Buddhist Ten Precepts.

Six of the Ten Commandments concern matters of personal morality, especially within or between families: Honor your father and mother; Do not kill; Do not commit adultery; Do not steal; Do not bear false witness (i.e., tell lies); and Do not covet your neighbor's house, wife or possessions.

The first five of the Buddhist Ten Precepts also concern morality and family. The first four forbid theft, killing, lying and deceiving, and adultery. All of these are paralleled in the Ten Commandments. The fifth precept forbids the consumption of alcoholic drinks. Although this restriction does not appear in the Ten Commandments, it has been adopted by many Christian denominations, such as Baptists and Mormons. The Methodists even changed their communion wine to grape juice (under the influence of a wealthy church member and juice distributor named Welch). So in the area of personal morality, we find a number of important commonalities between Christianity and Buddhism.

But when we turn to the worship of God, major differences appear. The four commandments concerning worship all focus on an individual's behavior towards God: You shall have no other gods;

You shall not make any images of God; You shall not speak God's name in vain; and You shall keep the Sabbath Day holy. All of these emphasize ways in which people should behave to make clear that they worship God properly.

When we turn to the remainder of Buddhism's Ten Precepts, by contrast, we find two important differences. First, the second five precepts apply only to monks, not to lay people as do the Ten Commandments. Second, the emphasis lies on creating a worshipful and humble attitude on the part of the monk (at all times), rather than how to direct worship to a god. The last five precepts are: Do not take food from noon to the next morning; Do not adorn the body with anything other than the monk's robe; Do not participate in or watch public entertainments; Do not use high or comfortable beds; and Do not use money.

These five precepts function to separate the monk from the world in a radical way. Certainly not eating for 12 hours, or sleeping in comfortable beds, denies what we consider the minimal comforts of life. Not using money prevents participation in even the day-to-day commerce of buying food, clothing and other necessities. Separating the monk from human society in these ways leaves little room for doing anything except communing with the Buddhist understanding of the divine.

So although religions share common concerns in the areas of personal and family morality, this comparison of Christianity and Buddhism suggests that outside of those areas religions often go their separate ways.