Is Nonviolence and Pacifism in Christian and Buddhist Ethics Obligatory or Supererogatory?

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Is Nonviolence and Pacifism in Christian and Buddhist Ethics Obligatory or Supererogatory?

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ABSTRACT

It is well documented and widely recognized that both Buddhism and Christianity have common themes of nonviolence, pacifism, and peace found throughout their teachings. In the beginning, the adherents of these two faiths consistently held to a strong form of pacifism and nonviolence. Yet as time progressed and the religions continued in their development, nonviolence and pacifism ceased to be normative practices for Christians and Buddhists. Although in our modern context the core teachings have remained consistent, on a practical level, many adherents of both religions do not hold to pacifism and the concepts of nonviolence. This article intends to examine the concepts of nonviolence and pacifism in Buddhism and Christianity, through viewing their respective theological, philosophical, and historical traditions, and then decipher how central and necessary these concepts are to the authentic practice of their faiths. In other words, the paper intends to answer the question, “Are the teachings of nonviolence and pacifism obligatory or supererogatory in Buddhism and Christianity?” After coming to a conclusion about the nature of the ethics of nonviolence and pacifism in both faith traditions, it intends to then ascertain what the implications are for the religions and their followers and to express how the concept of pacifism and nonviolence should create common ground in religious dialogue between the two faiths. The hope is that this dialogue and commonality could promote beneficial societal change.

KEYWORDS: pacifism, nonviolence, supererogation, obligation, Christianity, Buddhism, violence, war

INTRODUCTION

When one examines the teachings of both Buddhism and Christianity, one can clearly see that the concepts of nonviolence and pacifism are core values and principles, which are celebrated traditions in both religions. Both the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of Buddha incorporate and promote teachings of peace, nonviolence, nonresistance and doing no harm. Even outside of the direct teachings from these leaders, one
can see that other religious texts and doctrines within Buddhism and Christianity also point toward resisting violence, opposing retaliation, and the avoidance of war. These are common bonds that both religions share. Yet, as we look at these religions on a global scale, it can be seen that the vast majority of the adherents to these faiths do not follow these practices and principles. Virtually all of the countries in which the majority religion is Christianity or Buddhism still have armies, use the death penalty, manufacture weapons, and participate in actions that espouse violence and retaliation.

Therefore, some questions that might arise are, “How can one come to a justification of a discrepancy between the doxa and the praxis of these respective religions?” “Are the teachings optional and are simply the ideal, but in actuality are not the real?” Or, “Are these teachings supposed to be completely followed, but are simply ignored by individuals and societies?” All of these questions must begin with one key piece, which can serve as a starting point to this discussion, which is this question: “Is nonviolence and pacifism obligatory or supererogatory in Christianity and Buddhism?”

This question is the concept that will be explored in this paper. Historically, and on a global scale, it appears these concepts have been treated by most followers of their respective religions as though they are indeed supererogatory, but this paper will see if this thinking is justified by the texts of their religions or if it simply reactionary to the surrounding culture.

UNDERSTANDING OF TERMS

Before one can tackle the questions about the obligatory or supererogatory nature of pacifism and nonviolence, one must have a firm grasp of the concepts and the meaning of the uses of these terms in this paper. Both of these terms when applied to moral concepts make inference about what is the best moral choice in a situation. Neither of the options is at conflict about what is the most good. To put it in simple terms, obligatory actions would be actions that are always required, and supererogatory actions are actions that may be deemed as good actions, yet these actions would be viewed as going beyond the call of duty, therefore not required. A baseline definition that could be used states, “Supererogatory actions are sometimes equated with actions that are morally good in the sense that they are encouraged by morality but not required by it.”

In other words, supererogatory acts are actions that may be encouraged and celebrated, but they are not morally required and are not viewed as duty. Supererogatory and obligatory actions are both actions that would be considered morally beneficial and good, one just simply has a stronger requirement attached.

The doctrine of supererogation finds some of its philosophical roots in the Roman Catholic tradition and its early thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas. On a surface level, some ethicists, such as those from a Kantian or utilitarian stream, may deem the doctrine of supererogation incompatible with their views. But Kantian ethics are complex, and even utilitarians may be able to hold to a form of supererogation. Some philosophers such as Thomas E. Hill and Adam Cureton have pointed out that through looking at utilitarian philosophers such as G. E. Moore and J. S. Hill: “... utilitarians could affirm that some acts are ‘beyond duty’ – not wrong, not
indifferent, but ‘good to do’ and praiseworthy.” Regardless of whether one finds the concepts of supererogation and obligation convincing or not, this article is not looking to discuss the validity or potentiality of obligation or supererogation in broad scale ethics. Instead, the scope is viewing these concepts through the lens of Buddhism and Christianity when applied to the teachings of nonviolence and pacifism.

To put these concepts into an example, a parent of a child would be required to feed and provide for his children. That is an obligation of a parent, and if one does feed and take care of one’s child, then that individual could end up in jail and get their rights as a parent stripped. However, if another child showed up to that house, unclothed and hungry, it would be very good to help that child with food and clothing, but it would be a supererogatory action. That family might be limited on food, be concerned about their own safety, or have other reasons—that might make him not want to help the child out. It would be best to help the stray child, but not required, therefore not obligatory.

Notice the core of supererogatory and that of obligatory questions are the same, they are not at ethical odds to one another, they both affirm the same core moral principle, but they have different views about how one is required to respond. Likewise, Christianity and Buddhism both teach that nonviolence and peace are morally superior responses, and the roots of nonviolence are quite frankly undeniable. The core focus of this paper will be observing the obligatory or supererogatory nature of these roots in each of the respective religions.

In this paper when one refers to pacifism and nonviolence, the terms are expressed in their classical definitions. Pacifism itself is referring to the complete rejection of war, or as Robert L. Holmes simply states, a “Principled opposition to war.” In Holmes’s work, Pacifism, a Philosophy of Nonviolence, Holmes breaks pacifism into three subgroups:

- **Warism**: There are (a) some hypothetical wars and (b) some actual wars that are morally justifiable.
- **Absolute Pacifism**: There are (a) no hypothetical wars and (b) no actual wars that are morally justifiable.
- **Relative Pacifism**: There may be hypothetical wars that are morally justifiable but there are either (a) no actual wars (past or present) that are morally justifiable (Universal Pacifism) or (b) no actual wars in the modern world that are morally justifiable (Pragmatic Pacifism).

For the sake of a standard definition, when looking at the concepts of supererogation and obligation in regard to pacifism, this paper will hold to relative pacifism, specifically in part (b), which is stating that in today's society there are no actual wars that are morally justifiable. When pacifism is mentioned, it will be using that definition.

With that concept in mind, this paper does not intend to simply stop at pacifism. Some pacifists may condemn the concept of war and yet will affirm that at times violence is needed to maintain a proper society. For example, religious pacifists could...
condemn war, yet personally affirm the justification of violence for reasons such as the
death penalty, police force, personal defense, and so on. Therefore, the concept of non-
vviolence goes even further than pacifism, stating that there are never times in which
humans should enact violence upon other humans.

For these reasons this paper is classifying pacifism and nonviolence together, in that
it is not only limiting itself simply to the concept of large-scale war, but also on a
personal scale. Whereas pacifism has the tendency to denote large-scale war, nonvio-
lence infers practices that individuals can and should apply to their own daily lives as
well. In other words, nonviolence is a lifestyle and a deeper personal commitment than
simply pacifism. By applying both terms together, it infers that one is condemning
violence on not only a personal scale but also a global scale.

Again, the scope of this paper is handling the issues of supererogation or obligation
among the religious texts of Buddhism and Christianity. Therefore, it will not be
looking at arguments from moral approaches, pragmatism, ethics, or other views.
The goal of this paper is not an overarching defense of pacifism and nonviolence
as simply a concept, but an analysis of how Buddhist and Christian adherents are
supposed to respond to their respective teachings. The concern is not whether paci-
fism is the most moral, or best for a society, or even if there are themes running
through the teachings, but instead it is looking to see if pacifism and nonviolence
are obligatory or supererogatory for Christians and Buddhists.

CHRISTIANITY

If one is to observe the modern views of Christians and violence, one will notice that
the majority of adherents do not practice or ascribe to the concepts of pacifism and
nonviolence. Therefore, one may assume that pacifism and nonviolence are either
completely new concepts or some kind of modern twist on classic theological concepts.
In other words, from a quick observation, one would assume that the teachings are
supererogatory. Yet when looking at history, one could argue that they are not so much
new concepts or supererogatory concepts, but are forgotten and neglected concepts.

When one looks at the origins of the Christian faith, for about the first 300 years
pacifism and nonviolence were the standard and the norm. One author points out,
“The early church fathers, including Tertullian and Origen, asserted that Christians
were constrained from taking human life, a principle that prevented Christians from
serving in the Roman army. Thus, the early Christians were essentially pacifists.” As
one can see through the above quote, early church fathers were not anomalies in their
pacifist and nonviolent leanings. Others such as Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr,
Hippolytus of Rome, St. Cyprian, and Gregory of Nyssa, all held to views of pacifism
and nonviolence. In fact, there are actually instances of pagan critics of Christianity,
such as Celsus, attacking Christianity on the basis of Christians not being willing to
serve in the military. He spoke strongly against Christians, in that due to their pacifist
leanings, Christians were bad for society.6 Origen himself quoted in Contra Celsum V,
“No longer do we take the word against any nations nor do we learn war anymore since
we have become the sons of peace through Jesus . . .” The earliest followers of Jesus
understood the concepts of avoiding violence not as optional, but as a basic tenet of being a follower of Christ.

The shift in thinking really changed following the legalization of Christianity and the subsequent conversion of Emperor Constantine. In the beginning of the fourth century, Constantine not only legalized Christianity and accepted it personally, but he made it the favored religion of the empire. From Constantine’s conversion there arose a strong conundrum. How could one justify being both a ruler of a powerful empire that has relied on war and violence and espouse Christian beliefs? Christianity experienced its first taste of societal power. Constantinian Christianity shifted Christianity from its truest form and instead created a version that fit better with modern societies and with the new-found power it experienced. Thus, from this period of time is when one begins to see the main development of Just War Theory, and the writings of Just War Theory become more prevalent. Augustine of Hippo provided some of the main concepts to introduce theories of Just War, reasoning that if God gave Christians the power of the sword, one has a responsibility to use it. As Greg Boyd quotes about the newly formed theory, “Pagans throughout history have equated military power with divine favor. What was shockingly new, however, is that Jesus’ own followers now thought this way.”

Augustine and the Constantinian empire started the aligning of the ways of Jesus and war, but the theory of Just War really was delved into and made more of a doctrine by Thomas Aquinas, then built upon by protestant reformers, such as Martin Luther.

Although Constantinian Christendom and the arrival of just war theory dealt a blow to the adherence of pacifism and nonviolence in Christian tradition, it continues to remain alive in various other groups. Groups such as the Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, as well as Russian spiritual Christian groups (such as the Molokans and Doukhobors) remain fully committed to the teachings of nonviolence and pacifism. Many groups today have roots of pacifism such as the Seventh Day Adventists as well as the Pentecostal movement.

Currently within all current strains of Christianity—whether Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestantism, one will find adherents still holding to the concepts of pacifism and nonviolence. These concepts have been the backbone of many modern social movements, such as the Civil Rights movement, led by Martin Luther King, who quotes “Through nonviolent resistance we shall be able to oppose the unjust system and at the same time love the perpetrators of the system.” The roots of pacifism are there and are still very much alive, this is due to the evidence for ascribing to these views, which will now be viewed.

In Christianity the primary teachings of nonviolence and peace come from Jesus’s teachings himself, but the themes of nonviolence are also found throughout the Old Testament of the Bible and the rest of the New Testament as well. In the Old Testament, violence undeniably existed and at times was also permitted. One can see that at certain times, war and the fighting of Israel’s enemies were ordained by God; and certain other acts of violence such as capital punishment were prevalent. These did occur and at times were means used to bring peace to the society, but it was never the ideal. For example, priests were not allowed to take part in any violence; in
fact, King David was not allowed to even build the temple due to his history of violence.10 The goal and the expectation were that there would be a time when violence and war would be eliminated. Proverbs 3:31 confirms that violent thinking is not correct, “Do not envy the violent or any of their ways.” In the prophetic books of the Old Testament, one text states “And He will judge between many peoples and render decisions for mighty, distant nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they train for war nor will they train for war anymore.”11 The hope and expectation for nonviolence were the goal. This is why although one would not classically define the Old Testament or Judaism as a pacifist religion, one can still find some Jewish scholarship, such as scholars like Yonassan Gershom, Steven S. Schwarzschild, and Arthur Waskow, who make cases for pacifism in Judaism and the Old Testament.

This thinking continues to move forward to the core teachings of the Christian faith, through the teachings of Jesus and of the New Testament. Jesus himself acknowledged that at one point, there were previously teachings of war and retaliation in the scriptures, but now humanity has entered into a new era. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.”12 This verse acknowledges that, in fact, in the previous dispensation, the way that things were ethically done was through a system of violence and retaliation, yet now a new era has begun and we are under a different dispensation. It is emphasized through the phrases “...it was said...” and then “But I tell you...” These are the new teachings that Christians are told to abide by. This same concept continues and is expounded on in the next few verses,

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.13

Leo Tolstoy expounded further on this text stating,

We believe that the penal code of the old covenant – an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth – has been abrogated by Jesus Christ, and that under the new covenant the forgiveness instead of the punishment of enemies has been enjoined on all his disciples in all cases whatsoever. To extort money from enemies, cast them into prison, exile them, or execute them, is obviously not to forgive but to take retribution.14
These examples are just some core examples of Jesus’s teachings, but these themes are found in all of the gospels. Jesus emphasizes this teaching in his direct command to Peter as one can see in Matthew 26:52, “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” In this command we see Jesus not just speaking in philosophical lofty ideals, but in real-time situations commanding his followers to avoid violence and choose the path of nonviolence. It takes the previous teachings of Jesus and moves them toward actual real-life application, thus showing us there is no place for violence and retaliation for followers of Jesus.

The thinking continues into the teachings of Paul and the rest of the New Testament. For example, in Romans, the Apostle Paul states,

> Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mind, I will repay,’ says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.¹⁵

An interesting word here is “never,” which occurs before the command of not taking revenge, but also before not paying back evil with evil as well. This points toward the fact that the concept of nonresistance is not a situational principle but is one applicable to all situations.

Theologically, Christianity also retains its commitment to nonviolence. We see this through a few concepts. Specifically, one of the key concepts that one can see is the concept of the *imago Dei*. According to the theological premise of the *imago Dei*, every human is created in the image of God, the creator. Therefore, everyone has intrinsic value. Not value based upon who they are because of actions, status, and so on, but simply by being a human, one has great value. Thus, causing any harm to other human beings is in some way causing harm to the Creator. According to the principle of God’s image in humanity, people are to be treated as sacred, life is sacred, and the enemy is not humanity, but rather the enemy is the evil that at times humanity gives into.

This springs into the next concept, which is found throughout the New Testament and is especially put forth by the Apostle Paul, which is the concept of principalities and powers. The Bible states, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”¹⁶ For people who follow Jesus, the paradigm that tells people who are enemies and who are not enemies has completely shifted. No longer are people themselves enemies, but the unseen forces, the demonic, and the power of evil is. At times people may seem like the enemy, but according to Paul, it is the evil working inside of them, not the actual people themselves. This requires the followers of Jesus to take on a completely different mindset,
one that does not follow human values or logic, one that is not self-preserving or insider group oriented, but instead it is a radical concept, that always places others first. Theologically this can come into play with the concept of loving one’s neighbor as themselves. In parables such the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells his followers that even our enemies can be our neighbors, who still require love and kindness. In this parable found in Luke 10:25–37, Jesus speaks about a man who is beaten, robbed, and left to die in the desert. A priest walks buy and does not help, then a Levite walks by and does not help. Then finally a Samaritan walks by and helps the wounded man. Jesus then goes on to ask his audience, “Who is the real neighbor?”

The catch is that Samaritans were notoriously outsiders to the Jews, they were the ones who are called neighbors, and the character is one who helps the Jew in the story. Jesus commands the love of one’s neighbor, then goes onto say that all of humanity is our neighbor. Robert Gundry sums up the meaning of the parable by stating, “Being a neighbor means treating any needy person near you as your neighbor without laboring over a definition, whereas laboring over the definition of a neighbor keeps you from helping the needy person.” Any person, whether good or evil, friend or foe deserves proper treatment.

If one understands these concepts along with the textual evidence, one can clearly see that nonviolence is taught by Jesus and has theological backing that is found throughout the whole New Testament. Although one might see differences in the Old Testament, there are new commandments that explicitly supersede previous teachings found in the Old Testament. Finally, one strong indicator to the obligatory nature of the teachings of nonviolence in the Bible has do with a lack of counter-argument. Throughout the New Testament, there are no contradictory concepts that can be found, and nonviolence is always the norm and the standard. As Greg Boyd states, “... there are no exception clauses found anywhere in the New Testament’s teaching about loving and doing good to enemies.” The only instances of violence and war that can be found are ones of eschatological violence, that have to do with the returning of Jesus at the end of time. There is no sense of a just war theory, instead there are simply calls by Jesus and the New Testament writers to a radical life of peace and nonviolence. If people do a textual and theological study, separate from Christian culture and human rationale, one can come to the conclusion that nonviolence is indeed obligatory for those who hold to the Christian faith. For Christians who hold a high view of the Bible, it appears that pacifism and nonviolence are more accurate options than traditional just war theory. As Leo Tolstoy plainly states, “Jesus Christ forbids me to resist evil doers, and to take from them an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, bloodsheds for bloodshed and life for life.”

A final note about this has to do with the way Christians tend to view ethical concepts. In Christianity, ethical concepts tend to be nonsituational. Meaning, principles that are viewed as correct are always viewed as correct. Christianity has a strong tendency in its ethics to state that the principles, which are condemned or celebrated, are always condemned or celebrated. Historically, the Christian church has stated that people should follow Jesus and take him at his word and that the commands are not
situational and are not supererogatory. This, therefore, would point to the fact that even though most Christians do not hold nonviolence and pacifism to be obligatory, according to Christian teachings, nonviolence and pacifism are obligatory for Christians.

**BUDDHISM**

One can see from the Christian religion that the teachings of nonviolence are obligatory. But what about Buddhism? Historically Buddhism tends to have a stereotype as a more peaceful religion than Christianity. Few wars and revolutions have been started in the name of Buddha; and teachings of peace and doing no harm are more consistently and universally daily components of basic Buddhist teachings, thus giving a general consensus that Buddhism is a peaceful religion. The concept of nonviolence or the Ahimsa is a well-developed principle. But are these teachings of nonviolence obligatory or supererogatory in Buddhism?

Historically, Buddhism has a strong presence of pacifism and nonviolence. Due to its peaceful nature, Buddhism has a history of being viewed as a religion that can have the strength and ability to resolve conflicts. Historically, one can see a pattern of kings and rulers using Buddhist monks to negotiate the ending of violent conflicts such as war. One common Buddhist Jataka story includes two warring tribes on each side of a river. Upon these tribes hearing the teachings of Buddha, they threw their weapons into the river and made peace. One of the most striking examples of this probably has do with the conversion of the Indian Emperor Asoka in around 263 BCE. Previously a war lord of sorts, and a violent conqueror of many regions, once Asoka became a Buddhist, he completely renounced all forms of violence. This was due to the fact that he realized that the overarching teachings of the Buddha called him to a life of nonviolence and peace. It is stated about his history, “Emperor Asoka made ahimsa the central theme of his famous ‘dharma conquest.’ Asoka erected hundreds of stones and pillars throughout this kingdom, encouraging his subjects to live by ahimsa and to become vegetarians.”

This thinking and adherence to nonviolence and pacifism continued through the ages and have impacted nonviolent social action, various societies, and even empires. Many Buddhist individuals in the modern era are harbingers of peace and nonviolence such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Preah Maha Ghosananda, and even the Dalai Lama. Modern groups such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship continue to have an impact alongside other factions of modern socially engaged Buddhists.

To begin looking at the roots of the themes on nonviolence and pacifism, one must of course look at the Five Precepts, which are the key principles that every Buddhist is expected to try to follow. The Five Precepts of Buddhism are five things to abstain from: killing living beings, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and using intoxicants. These precepts are designed to be a base ethical code that even laymen should obey. As has been noted, the first of these concepts is to abstain from killing living beings. If a Buddhist is desiring to stay on the Eightfold Path and wants to advance through the four stages of enlightenment, then one must hold to the first precept. It is interesting
here to note that the first precept does not simply infer humanity, but all living beings. Therefore, to kill insects, other animals, or really anything that has a life would be doing something in opposition to the first principle. Many genuine Buddhists, while holding to the first precept, will still consume meat and kill insects in their home.

Could this infer that it is not so much of an obligatory practice as much as a potentially supererogatory? Or is it the same as Christians who take part in war, even though nonviolence is obligatory? There will always be adherents who do not follow their respective religions in all aspects, but something more insightful might be the fact that in Buddhism, due to the karmic nature of sin, certain sins are more egregious than others and have greater karmic ramifications than others. Christianity has the tendency to place sin as sin, with each sin being on par with one another, while Buddhism tends to have more of a sliding scale.

One concept that could shed light on understanding this tension could be through the Buddhist concept of the "Middle Way." In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta of the Pali scriptures it states,

There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure with reference to sensual objects: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathagata — producing vision, producing knowledge — leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding.23

For many followers of Buddhism, especially for the lay practitioners of the religion, a place of moderation and middle road is stressed, not extremism. In Christianity it could be argued that the concept of obligation is found throughout all of the teachings, and in Buddhism, the concept of supererogation is much more frequent. Christianity has standards that do not typically differ between the clergy and the laymen. In Buddhism, however, monks are expected to keep more rules than laypeople. It appears that at times the Buddha encouraged a middle way, a sense of ethics that could shift at times to fit the scenario. Ethical standards can be different at different times for different people. For example, Peter Harvey states when looking at early Buddhist texts that there is, “... The ideal of nonviolent rule as expressed in the early Buddhist texts. Yet it seems to be acknowledged that this is an ideal that can be fully lived up to only by an exceptional person.”24 The concept is there, but is for exceptional individuals, which, by nature of that statement, infers supererogation.

One other aspect that can add clarity to the situation is to view some other texts of Buddhism as well. Many other texts speak strongly to the principle of Ahimsa in Buddhism. In the Dhammapada, it clearly states, “All tremble at violence; life is dear to all, Putting oneself in the place of another, one should neither kill nor cause another to kill.”25 Another text it even goes as far to condemn even the occupations
associated with violence, “These five trades, O monks, should not be taken up by a lay follower: trading with weapons, trading in living beings, trading in meat, trading in intoxicants, trading in poison.”26 Violence and power are not the proper ways of Buddhism. In similar theme to that of the apostle Paul’s writing, Masao Abe points out, “Buddha never fought against hostile powers with power . . . This basic attitude is expressed in his following words ‘Not by hatred is hatred appeased. Hatred is appeased by renouncing of hatred. It is so conquered only by compassion. This is a law eternal.’”27

When one takes the Four Noble Truths and then combines them with the concepts found in the Eightfold Path, one will gain a rather robust view advocating for social action and nonviolence. To extend these concepts even further, one could view the Buddhist concept of the Three Poisons: greed, anger, and ignorance. While Christianity spends the majority of its time addressing proper responses to nonviolence and pacifism, Buddhism has the tendency to focus more on the roots and the reasons for why violence and war exist in the first place. Thus, if one looks at the Three Poisons, then views wars throughout history, one will see that the roots of violence and war are typically found through greed, anger, and ignorance.

The perplexing issue though is that while this precept on nonviolence is a backbone of the Buddhist tradition, there also appears to simultaneously be a history in the Buddhist scriptures referring to war and violence. One Sutra is especially interesting in regard to these concepts. This would be the *Arya-Bodhisattva-gocara-upayavisaya-vikurvana-nirdesa* Sutra.

In this Sutra we can see that there are violent threats, warnings against excessive compassion, acts of torture that are ordered, an affirmation of the death penalty, and the allowing of a war under special conditions. In the work, *Buddhist Warfare*, Buddhist scholars Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer analyze the text. They go on to state,

“General conceptions of a basic Buddhist ethics broadly conceived as unqualified pacifism are problematic. Compassionate violence is at the very heart of the sensibility of this sutra. Buddhist kings had sophisticated and practical conceptual resources to support their use of force, which show a concern for defense, political stability, and social order through a combination of harshness and benevolence.”28 They state at another point, “We can see from the example of the *Arya-Bodhisattva-gocara-upayavisaya-vikurvana-nirdesa* Sutra that Buddhist kings had conceptual resources at their disposal that supported warfare, torture, and harsh punishments.”29 One thing that can be realized though is that the although at times it appears that violence is allowed, there is still compassion involved. It is not ever suggesting that war or violence is a good thing, but more a necessary reaction. This thinking is continued into modern analysis of classic Buddhist doctrine.

In *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*, Sallie B. King states,

An infrequently cited Pali text, the Cakkavatti Sihandada Sutta of the Digha Nikaya, seems to give legitimacy to the military in a Buddhist state. In it, the
Buddha is recorded as giving the following advice to the one who aspires to be a Cakravartin: ‘Yourself depending on the Dhamma, honoring it, revering it, cherishing it, doing homage to it and venerating it, having the Dhamma as your badge and banner, acknowledging the Dhamma as your master, you should establish guard, ward and protection according to the Dhamma for your own household, your troops, your nobles and vassals, for the Brahmins and householders, town and country folk, ascetics and Brahmins, for beasts and birds.’ Thus is justified the existence of a military force for the purpose of protection.  

Buddhādasa Bhikkhu, who was a prominent Thai monk and Buddhist scholar, commented as well about the usage of violence and force in Buddhism stated, “No matter what kind of activity we carry out – be it politics, economics or, indeed, even war – if done morally it will maintain the natural, harmonious balance of all things, and will be consistent with the original plan of nature. It is absolutely correct to fight for the preservation of dhamma in the world, but it is wrong to fight for anything other than that. Indeed, we should be happy to sacrifice our lives in fighting to preserve dhamma for . . . all humanity.” There appears to be an overarching thinking in Buddhism that at times war and violence may be needed to preserve the Dhamma, peace, and social order. 

One must remember though that any actions of violence still may have karmic ramifications. E. J. Harris comments on the relation of potential just action and karmic consequences, “The person who feels violence is justified to protect the lives of others has indeed to take the consequences into account. He has to remember that he is risking grave [karmic] consequences for himself in that his actions will inevitable bear fruit . . . such a person needs to evaluate motives . . . Yet that person might still judge that the risks are worth facing to prevent a greater evil.” Harris realizes that one may deem the need for violence necessary, but even then one must be very wary and careful due to the potential karmic ramifications that could occur from violent actions.

In conclusion, in Buddhism, while on a surface level it would appear that pacifism and nonviolence are obligatory, this initial observation appears incorrect. Through viewing various teachings: from the sacred texts, current scholars, as well as through Buddhist philosophical thought, one will come to the understanding that nonviolence, doing no harm, and pacifism are not obligatory but are in fact supererogatory. In Buddhism, there is an overarching principle of supererogatory ethics when viewing the teachings of Buddha and the Sutras. There are times where a call to nonviolence becomes supererogatory, and potentially other methods are allowed. Buddhism certainly promotes peace and pushes toward doing no harm, but it would appear that it would align more with a just-war type of theory than typical pacifism. Pacifism and nonviolence still remain the ideal, yet when confronted with some other texts and concepts, one can see an allowance for compassionate violence and resistance. There is a tension found in Buddhism. One author states, “. . . war is unjustifiable according to Buddhist thought although it remains a useful literary device. In practice,
however, whether war is justifiable is less clear.” This explains the tension and the potential allowance of war and violence. Yet even during those times of allowance, it appears that one who would choose the way of Ahimsa that would still be viewed as the most morally correct.

CONCLUSION

When analyzing and comparing, the religions of Buddhism and of Christianity concepts of nonviolence and pacifism are certainly emphasized and prevalent. Oddly, in a religion that has a longer history with traditions of war and violence, the teachings appear to be obligatory, and in the tradition that has historically been ascribed with a peace and nonviolence, the teachings are actually supererogatory. Buddhism has consistently emphasized nonviolence; therefore, more adherents have responded to this teaching even though the teaching is supererogatory.

What are the ramifications of this knowledge that nonviolence and pacifism are obligatory in Christianity and supererogatory in Buddhism? They are potentially simply reminders for both religions to continue in their traditions of peacemaking. The core issue is that followers of the Christian faith need to do a reassessment of their own commitment. Are they willing to “come and die” as Jesus calls them to? Or will they choose to ignore texts that appear inconvenient or illogical in today’s world? That is a decision that the Christian church must come to understand. As stated earlier, in the early days, the Christian church seemed to hold stronger to the commitment to the teachings of Jesus. In When Religion Becomes Evil, the author states “The overwhelming evidence suggests that the followers of Jesus were pacifists for the first three centuries. Many early church leaders and documents underscore the unwavering commitment to nonviolence.” He continues, “Christianity and war were incompatible. Christians were charged with undermining the Roman Empire by refusing military service and public office: they answered that human life was sacred to them, that they were... given over to peace, that God prohibits killing even in a just cause, without exception, that the weapons of the Christian were prayer, justice, and suffering.” The modern church needs to return to this stance, if it wants to be true to the teachings of Jesus and the Bible.

For Buddhists, scholars and leaders must keep wrestling with the fact that although peace is indeed promoted and is one of the foundational tenets of Buddhism, there appears to be a form of allowance for war and other actions. One must try to understand the tension that is there. For Buddhists who hold strongly to the concepts of nonviolence and pacifism, they must be aware that there are factions in Buddhism who would not hold to the same understandings and would find completely logical rationalizations for their justifications of violence within Buddhism. One must realize that there can be other teachings of violence and must learn to argue and emphasize the key concepts of nonviolence in Buddhism, based upon supererogatory concepts.

It is realized and noted that both religions have many different schools, traditions, and crosscurrents and at times have been two religious views that can have difficulty in dialogue. Paul Knitter and Roger Corless state, “… the Buddhas and the
Christian God function in their own universes and it is not at all clear whether these universes relate to each other at all, and, if they do, in what way or ways.”

With awareness of these differences, it can be seen that for both religions, peace and nonviolence could be one starting point and bridge for dialogue and for joint social change. Buddhism and Christianity appear to be the forerunners for social change through the means of nonviolence and pacifism. If societies that espouse these faith traditions would return to their purist roots, one might see a much more peaceful society and world. Collectively, if both religions can see that this is a building point in each of their respective faiths, they should be able to share ideas and values to impact societies toward social change.

NOTES

4. Ibid., 240.
7. Ibid.
10. 1 Chronicles 22:8 New International Version
11. Micah 4:3–7 NIV
12. Matthew 5:38–40 NIV
15. Romans 12:17–21 NIV
16. Ephesians 6:12 NIV
24. Harvey. An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics, 252.
29. Ibid., 59.
30. Sallie B. King, Being Benevolence, the Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 188–189.
35. Ibid.