

## Article

# A Comparison of Human Life in Christian and Chinese Buddhist Bioethics

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**Abstract:** Bioethics provides a new perspective for the comparative study of Christianity and Chinese Buddhism. This paper provides a comprehensive comparison of the sources, states of existence, and fundamental principles and purposes of the Christian and Chinese Buddhist perspectives on human life, focusing specifically on the realm of bioethics. It places special emphasis on teachings about God's creation and dependent origination, original sin and Buddhist causality, as well as love and compassion. Despite the significant geographic distance between Christianity and Chinese Buddhism, the dialogue highlights potential cultural differences and interpretations. It also demonstrates mutual acceptance and the process of redefining one's own identity. Religious bioethics greatly benefits from a comprehensive study of various religions from around the world. It aims to encourage cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research on different religions globally. It promotes religious bioethics as a relevant field of study.

**Keywords:** religious bioethics; Christian bioethics; Chinese Buddhist bioethics; religious dialogues; human life



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## 1. Introduction

Bioethics is an interdisciplinary field that has emerged in response to the development of biotechnology and involves a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, ethics, and religion. As an integral part of Western society and an ethical resource, the Christian religion plays an important role in shaping the emergence and development of bioethics. Christianity places great emphasis on the field of bioethics, demonstrating its deep concern for this important topic. As a result, Christian bioethics stands as a true representation of religious bioethics. Chinese Buddhism focuses on the phenomena of human life, such as birth, old age, illness, and death. This delves into the essence of human existence and has developed unique core concepts, modes of understanding, and logical frameworks within Chinese Buddhist bioethics. These resources offer a wealth of theoretical wisdom.

Many studies have focused on the topic of Christianity and bioethics, with notable scholars such as Joseph Fletcher (1954) and Paul Ramsey (2002) making significant contributions to this area of research. However, when it comes to Chinese Buddhism, scholars have had limited chances to share their viewpoints and underlying principles. The construction of bioethical thought in Chinese Buddhism is rooted in its unique ideas and should not be confined within the disciplinary boundaries of non-Buddhist history and culture. Analyzing and comparing Chinese Buddhism in relation to Christianity will greatly enrich the study of religious bioethics.

How can we compare Christian and Chinese Buddhist bioethics? There are multiple approaches to delve into the contrasting perspectives of the two traditions. An effective approach involves examining their unique perspectives on particular bioethical techniques. Another approach involves analyzing the fundamental disparities between the two traditions from both a philosophical and ethical standpoint. To enhance the clarity and depth of our exploration, we have chosen to narrow our focus to the theoretical level. Thus, this paper delves into the profound concept of “human life” within the realms of both Christian

and Chinese–Buddhist bioethics. Despite the restrictions imposed by the paper’s length, our goal is to offer a comprehensive understanding and practical application of this crucial concept in our research.

## 2. The Central Issue of “Human Life” in Christian and Chinese Buddhist Bioethics

A crucial question in bioethics, especially in an era where modern science and technology often reduce human beings to mere biological entities whose fate is determined by external factors, is “What, ultimately, defines human life?” The central question in bioethics is therefore the nature and status of individual human life and the relationship between human lives.

Generally, in bioethics, life refers specifically to human life, focusing on life process issues such as human reproduction, growth, health, disease and death in terms of the meaning and limits of life. The involvement of contemporary biomedical technology in human life has triggered a recognition or even a reconceptualization of life. For example, in the abortion controversy, is an embryo life? In issues of human cloning and euthanasia, do human beings have the right to choose for themselves whether to live or die? Early bioethics favored a biological understanding of human life, namely, the possession of unique human genes and a genetic structure from which a unique human body and brain are developed, integrating the body and maintaining a dynamic balance between it and its environment (Qiu 1998, p. 27). Modern bioethics continues to enrich the meaning of human life, and holds that human life has three different attributes: first, biological attributes, i.e., human life from the biological point of view, including fertilization and gestation; second, sociological attributes, i.e., socially endowed life, for example, the foetus must be acknowledged by the parents and society; third, the attribute of personhood, which is the most obvious and essential characteristic (Sun 2003, p. 70). This interpretation of life is rich and appropriate.

The question of what constitutes human life is encountered in almost all major discussions of bioethics. When discussing the ethics of abortion, gene editing, euthanasia, and human cloning, the concept of “human life” has traditionally been employed to grapple with these issues. Ling (2017) indicates that this question is at the heart of bioethics. He adds that from an ethical perspective this has an impact on abortion, assisted reproductive technologies such as invitro fertilization (IVF), stem cell research, human embryo research and experimentation, prenatal screening as well as certain forms of contraception. For example, “When human life begins” should be discussed and considered before the topic of embryo selection or editing of the embryo can be broached. Understanding what human life is crucial to bioethics. The valorization and exploration of the question of human life is an important point of convergence between bioethics and religion.

Christianity and Chinese Buddhism are the most important religious traditions in history, with far-reaching influences throughout the world. This article takes Christianity and Chinese Buddhism as case studies and builds on previous scholarship but also goes beyond it. The text suggests a framework that combines Christian and Chinese Buddhist traditions to deal with ethical issues related to human life in the field of bioethics. This framework encompasses several vital aspects: (1) The contrasting doctrines regarding the genesis of human life, encompassing both God’s divine creation and the concept of dependent origination in Buddhism. (2) The distinctions in the essence of human existence and the associated principles that guide our actions, including original sin within Christianity and the implications of Buddhist causality. (3) The divergences in the ethical standards that govern human life, encompassing notions of love and compassion. Certainly, numerous recent studies have addressed these attitudes and doctrines, yet they have not provided an explanation in the context of bioethics.

Different religious traditions have relevant doctrines on the core issue of bioethics, “human life”. Christianity and Chinese Buddhism have different understandings of human life, including the rules for the operation of human life, the rewarding of good and

punishing of bad, the coexistence of human beings, and the relationship between human beings and other beings.

Christianity believes in one God who created everything. This supreme entity, known as God, orchestrated the creation of everything in the vast universe with a profound intent, thereby affirming the profound concept of the holy Trinity. According to this concept, God exists simultaneously as one being and as three distinct beings (i.e., the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) in a way that transcends ordinary human logic (Brower and Rea 2005). Christianity teaches that God will ultimately bring the world to an end and judge individuals based on their deeds, beliefs, and character. Good people will be rewarded by having their immortal souls placed in heaven forever, while bad people will be punished by having their immortal souls placed in hell forever. God's greatest commandment is to love not only God and one's neighbor, but also one's enemies.

In contrast to Christianity, Chinese Buddhism has a multiplicity of different spiritual beings and assigns them slightly different roles and classifications. This God is not the absolute only God; in fact, Buddhism usually rejects the concept of God (Harvey 2019). In Buddhism, everything in the universe is caused from karma, and there is no Creator. Buddhism teaches reincarnation, the belief that souls are born again in various forms such as humans, animals, and spiritual beings, known as the six paths of reincarnation (Chapple 2017). Reincarnation is governed by the laws of karma, and the entire universe operates according to these laws, which are the primary cause of the cyclical process of creation and destruction. Dependent origination dictates that good deeds will automatically produce rewards and that evil deeds will automatically produce punishments. Evil deeds cause a person to be reborn in a lesser form.

### 3. A Christian Bioethics Model for Human Life

Over the past few decades, scholars have started integrating the challenging awareness and fundamental insights of bioethics into the meticulous study of distinct religious traditions. As a result, bioethics studies on Christianity have emerged, such as those of Norman L. Geisler (Geisler 1989), Rae, Scott B., and Paul M (Rae and Cox 1999) and Engelhardt (Engelhardt 2014; Tollefsen 2011; Van Eyk 2023), who performed bioethics studies from a Christian perspective. Christianity contributes to the discussion of bioethics by interpreting the doctrines expounded in the Bible. Kotzé (2013) suggests that the Bible should be used as guidance during bioethical discussions in the form of Christian doctrine. Erickson emphasizes that the Christian doctrine, derived from the Old and New Testaments, offers valuable insights into contemporary issues (Erickson 2015). Thus, specific doctrines are used to provide guidance on this topic. With this understanding of the use of doctrine as a response to bioethics, the focal point will be the doctrine of human life.

Christianity has its own special model for recognizing and positioning human life in bioethics. The concept that humans are created by God underscores the fundamental relationship between humanity and divinity. Christian bioethics places human life at the center of its focus, recognizing the sacredness and value that emanates from our connection to God. Within this framework, the intricate interplay between "creation and grace" serves as the guiding force that shapes our understanding of the profound relationship between humanity and God. Humans are finite and sinful in their relationship with God, but this does not prevent God from loving the world. Thus, Christianity advocates human love of the self, a love of enemies and sinners, and a love that is expansive.

#### 3.1. The Source of Human Life: Creation by God

There is widespread agreement that Genesis 1 indicates that humans are created in God's image (Peterson 2016; Bentley 2017). According to it, the world, including human life, was created by God, and God is the only Creator. The Old Testament says that at the start of the universe, there was only God, who created everything, including the world, the sun, the moon, the stars, the birds, the beasts, and human beings. The origin of human beings is the same as that of created beings, "from nothing". How something new can be

created from nothing, without any reference points. Robson states that the entire creative process cannot be rationally understood (Robson 2008). Humankind is not separate from nature; instead, God is the ultimate source and destination of all things, possessing power over everything “in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth”. According to the Christian view of life, humans belong to God but live in bodies limited by time. The task of life is to deal with life’s problems and contradictions through God. This is the most basic Christian position on the origin of the human person.

A human, created by God, is an integrated whole of mind and body. In the Book of Genesis, it is stated that “the Lord formed man from the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living soul, whose name was Adam”. From this point of view, a human is an integrated mind and body, experiencing a holistic and concrete existence. Having a body makes it hard to be free from natural desires. However, the body also has its own operations and sensations, making it just as complex as the mind (Peterson 2016). The whole human creature is created in the image of God and not only the mind.

Humans were created by God in his own image, which affirms their dignity and nobility due to their special connection with God. It follows that humans, created by God, are special beings in Christianity. God, as the giver of human souls, forms the essential bond between humanity and divinity, allowing humans to transcend their limitations and establish a connection with God. Therefore, Christianity affirms the exceptional nature and significance of human life.

Humans being God’s special creation affect the relationships between humans and other humans, as well as between humans and the rest of nature. On the one hand, the relationships between people are united by divine faith, creating a spiritual bond that guides them towards God. Humans have the responsibility and ability to manage nature. Humans are created in the image of God and have the potential to do good. Angels are more similar to God than any other beings, and they have the ability to oversee and take care of other living creatures. Humans hold a unique position in life and can establish a connection with God. Tarus indicates that man should rule over creation, for without this rule humanity cannot bear the image of God (Tarus 2016).

The concept of human life is intricately intertwined with crucial milestones in the human life cycle, such as illness, aging, and death. Christian discourse on the stages of life is crucial to understanding the situation of human life. Human health and longevity are important concerns of Christian biblical texts. Hanson points out that Jesus is often portrayed as a healer of physical ailments (Hanson 2001). God is identified as Israel’s “healer” (e.g., Exodus 15:25–26; Deuteronomy 32:39; Psalms 6:2; 38:3–8; 41:3–4). In reality, this healing was more than physical, as the healing was emotional and spiritual. Sickness may signify divine punishment, while healing, restoration of health, and longevity are seen as signs of divine favor. In Christianity, individuals can achieve health and longevity only by acknowledging their limitations and their dependent, contingent state before God.

Christianity encompasses various profound aspects of human existence, including the origin and progression of life, as well as the intricate interconnections between humans and other beings. These concerns are encompassed in a broader theoretical framework that explores the concept of living in harmonious unity with the magnificent world created by God. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize that Christianity regards the entirety of life as a generous gift, intrinsically reliant on the benevolence of God. Human beings live on “borrowed breath and borrowed time”; Christians are stewards, but not masters, of their own lives. Having faith in God provides value and spiritual support for a peaceful life. Humans surrender to God to find meaning in their existence and to attain eternal life.

In conclusion, since human beings are created in the image of God, human dignity has its foundation. Vorster (2012, p. 4) concluded that the right to life, autonomy and equal respect are the basic components of human dignity. The term “human dignity” is usually used in Christian bioethical discussions.

### 3.2. *The Existential State of Human Life: Sinfulness*

According to the Christian portrayal of human life, the first humans, Adam and Eve, committed original sin by stealing the fruit of wisdom. They disobeyed God on a moral and spiritual level; therefore, although humans were made in the image of God, they are finite and sinful. The doctrine of the sinfulness or evil and weakness of human nature is the basic presupposition of Christianity about human life and has deeply influenced Christian bioethics.

While Christianity emphasizes the sinful nature of humanity and asserts that all people have a natural tendency to commit evil, this does not imply that human beings are beyond redemption. As McKenny stated, humans have boundaries. As finite creations, their limits are exactly what work in their favor (McKenny 2018). According to this perspective, the suffering or illness that humans experience may serve to keep them connected to God, the infinitely precious divine being, as everything that happens is part of God's benevolent plan. The doctrine of guilt serves a crucial purpose: to emphasize the potential for goodness in human life, a potential that is ultimately reliant on the power of Almighty God.

Almighty God is seen as a just king who rewards and punishes people according to their behavior. People have autonomy to do good or evil. Both good and evil actions have certain consequences. God does not directly interfere in people's actions; rather, individual motives are what govern human behavior and yield diverse outcomes. God can judge human behavior as good or bad and reward or punish humans according to his standards. In a moral framework, the established order is designed to encourage fairness and wisdom while discouraging wrongdoing and foolishness. God works diligently to ensure that these moral outcomes are effectively achieved. The eternal destination of individuals, whether it be heaven or hell, is determined by God's righteous and all-encompassing judgment. This divine judgment takes into account various criteria, including complete obedience to God's will and unwavering adherence to His commandments. To ensure compliance with God's laws, it is absolutely imperative to initiate a profound transformation in human conduct, encompassing both intentions and outcomes, in order to harmonize them with the sacred commandments and principles. This transformation will ensure that God's laws are upheld and respected without any transgression. Creel states that man will be judged based upon his works and obedience to the moral law of God (Creel 2014).

Christian beliefs about sinfulness and human evil, as well as God's judgment, cause individuals to restrain themselves in front of God. In Christianity, people cannot get rid of evil by themselves. Only faith in Christ can free them from sin and bring goodness. As the Gospel of Mark says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). The fear of God defines human life as an individual in a divine-human relationship. Relying on God for salvation is essential; faith in God is the sole path to attaining salvation. This perspective is shared by Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther, among other influential thinkers. Human life, despite its limitations and flaws, is deserving of salvation precisely because human beings are not entirely autonomous or self-reliant.

According to theologians, the source of original sin is not God, but free will. God does not interfere with the free will of human beings; rather, He bestows rewards and punishments based on their individual choices and actions. God forgives man's sins and offers salvation. Salvation is not based on personal repentance, practice, or morality, but on God's will. In essence, due to the inherent sin and guilt of humanity, judgment by God's justice is necessary for the guilty, and humans are in dire need of God's judgment and salvation. The relationship between God and humans can be likened to that of a loving father and his imperfect children; humans, being finite beings, cannot attain the divine stature of God. Humans are constantly in a passive position, unable to achieve salvation through their own efforts alone, and must instead rely on the grace and blessings of a higher power. There is always an insurmountable boundary between humans and God the Creator.



### 3.3. The Purpose of Human Life: Love

Christianity places particular emphasis on love (agape) and a mercy-oriented ethic (Wolterstorff 2015; Cochran and Calo 2017). In the New Testament, Jesus taught that the core of morality is love of God and love of one's neighbor (Matthew 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–27; see also *Deuteronomy* 6:4–7). In Christianity, God crucified his Son like a “lamb” on the cross in Jerusalem so that human sins could be forgiven (*John* 3:16; *1 Corinthians* 5:7; *Ephesians* 1:7; *Hebrews* 9:22). Christianity emphasizes God's mercy, a one-way giving that requires nothing in return; only God can give love purely.

God's love for the world is the foundation of human love for one another. The first letter of John 1 John 4:19 states, “We love because God first loved us”. This kind of love is not only loving relatives, friends and neighbors, but also loving strangers and even enemies, to “love your neighbor as yourself”. Jesus said in Matthew (22:36–40), “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest of the commandments. The second is similar, that you love your neighbor as yourself”. This love is not love between human beings in the ordinary sense of the word; rather, the root and source of love are in God, and love between human beings, founded on the relationship between God and humankind, derives both from God's love as its source and from God's commandments.

Christian love emphatically advocates fraternity, not only the love of the neighbor but even the love of the enemy, the sinner, and the marginalized. The divine love of Christianity is absolute and undifferentiated on the ontological level, but it shows different tendencies in the practical order. For example, Jesus Christ offers salvation to the marginalized and the vulnerable and even to sinners: “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners”. Jesus exhorted his followers not to hate their enemies but to love them (Matthew 5:43–48). Many times in the *New Testament*, Jesus is portrayed as advocating a moral standard above justice. He urged people not to demand punishment when they are attacked (“turn the other cheek”) and to help those who want to rob them (Matthew 5:38–40). While being crucified, Jesus prayed to the Father for forgiveness for those who carried out the crucifixion (*Luke* 23:34). Christian love has nothing to do with the affinity of the individual or even with the value or merit of the object towards which it is directed; individual or human defects and even sins can be loved. Instead of sympathy for the crime committed, it is sympathy for the person who committed it, i.e., the compassion that arises from the belief that the crime is unfortunate and worthy of sympathy. Thus, divine love prioritizes the sinner, breaks through the limits of the world or nature and looks down from God to humans, from top to bottom. Love and mercy are universal, undifferentiated, and unconditional.

The Bible itself and its doctrines provide some guidance to respond to bioethical difficulties. Especially specific doctrines are used to provide guidance on this topic. For example, human identity implies a holistic approach. From this perspective, it becomes possible to understand and respond to bioethical dilemmas in the context of Christian theory.

## 4. A Chinese Buddhist Bioethics Model for Human Life

Compared to the extensive research findings in Christian bioethics, there is a marked scarcity of research in the field of Buddhist bioethics, particularly in the context of Chinese Buddhism. British ethicists Hammalawa Saddhatissa (2007) and Peter Harvey (2000) have presented a thorough understanding of the essence and substance of Buddhist ethics. Some important books on Buddhist ethics written by Damien Keown, a well-known British scholar, are “The Nature of Buddhist Ethics” (Keown 2000) and “Buddhism and Bioethics” (1995).

Chinese Buddhism explains how life comes to be and develops, emphasizing the relationships and connection between things. It has developed concepts like dependent origination, Buddhist causality, and compassion. The theory of karma asserts that there is no fully autonomous self, eliminates opposition between the self and the other, and defines the relationship between moral subjects in Chinese Buddhist bioethics. Karma places the responsibility to behave morally in the hands of the individual and defines the moral

laws that moral subjects should adhere to when practicing moral behavior. In Chinese Buddhism, bioethics has inherited Indian Buddhism's theories of karma and cause and effect as its theoretical foundation. At the same time, Chinese monks have creatively interpreted and enriched the theories of dependent origination and Buddhist causality, expanding such theoretical systems as "dharmadhatu pratityasamutpada" (法界緣起, fajie yuanqi, the dependent arising of the whole realm of phenomena) and "san shi yin guo" (三世因果). Compassion, based on karma and cause and effect, is the moral principle of Chinese Buddhist bioethics.

#### 4.1. The Origin of Human Life: Dependent Origination

There is a fundamental difference between Chinese Buddhism and Christianity in terms of the source of human life. Primitive Buddhism had an atheistic bent, with the Buddha appearing as a "sage of the Sakya clan". Only during the period of Mahayana Buddhism was the Buddha deified, giving rise to many concepts of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Nevertheless, Mahayana Buddhism does not regard the Buddha as the Creator of all things. While defying the Buddha, it also repeatedly emphasizes that the relationship between all beings and the Buddha is that "all sentient beings have the Buddha nature (一切眾生皆有佛性)".

In Buddhism, human life arises from "Pratītyasamutpāda" (緣起, yuan qi, dependent origination), and it denies the existence of a Creator. The theory of origination developed through different periods and has taken different theoretical forms. In this theory, all phenomena are born according to certain conditions and nothing can be born without relationships and conditions. The theory of origination is the cornerstone of the entire Buddhist theory (Fang 1986, p. 154), on which all schools of Buddhism, both large and small, have established their doctrinal and behavioral views. It is the first principle of Buddhist moral formality (Dong 2006, p. 33) as well as the basic principle of Buddhist normative ethics (Shi 2013, pp. 27–34).

The theory of "Pratītyasamutpāda" (緣起, yuan qi, dependent origination) provides a paradigm for recognizing the value of individuals and the relationship between individuals in bioethics; it is a unique Buddhist theory that explains the individual nature of moral subjects and the relationship between moral subjects in bioethics. A moral subject is a moral actor who has self-awareness and can make moral decisions, perform moral actions, and take moral responsibility. Moral subjects and their relationships in the context of karma have different meanings from those in Christian bioethics.

The theory of "Pratītyasamutpāda" (緣起, yuan qi, dependent origination) implies not the negation but rather the "nonsubstantiality" of the moral subject. This concept suggests that our lives are shaped by a combination of circumstances and conditions. This eliminates attachment to a fixed sense of self and highlights the influence of associated factors in shaping our existence. The doctrine of karma does not deny the moral subject or the factual existence of human beings as moral subjects but rather holds that the moral subject is determined by relations while possessing an independent will. In the karmic view, the individual in real life identified as the self is not truly the self.

The moral subject from the "Pratītyasamutpāda" (緣起, yuan qi, dependent origination) perspective has a relational character: the moral subject is not limited to the individual but extends to the moral subject in symbiotic relationships. Kenneth K. Inada argued that the karmic awareness that others are interdependent and interactive with oneself helps one develop a distinctive sense of morality that allows people to relate in a mutually beneficial and harmonious way (Kenneth K. Inada 2000, pp. 255–75). The concept of the moral subject lacks emphasis on the distinction between subject and object, making it a rather unique perspective. The essence of karma is interdependence, rejecting the understanding of human beings as separate individuals. The theory of karma denies the existence of the self. Chinese Buddhist bioethics sees individuals as interconnected beings, with each type of individual having intrinsic value. This means that moral responsibility and the fulfillment of moral rules are not about the individual person but about the person in relation

to others. Charles Goodman argued that karmic egolessness implies that it does not matter who bears the benefits and burdens because there is no ego in the ultimate sense, and egolessness can lead to ignoring the distributive benefits and simply maximizing the good of actions (Goodman 2009, p. 96). The moral subject as a relational being must respect the other.

“Dharmadhatu pratityasamutpada” (法界緣起, fajie yuanqi, the dependent arising of the whole realm of phenomena) is Huayan’s unique interpretation of dependent arising. According to interpenetration doctrine, individuals and others have a connected and inseparable relationship instead of separate and independent ones. According to the concept of “dharmadhatu pratityasamutpada” (法界緣起, fajie yuanqi) Chinese Buddhists think that all moral actions and events are interconnected with others and the environment. “Dharmadhatu pratityasamutpada” (法界緣起, fajie yuanqi, the dependent arising of the whole realm of phenomena) emphasizes that all existence is united in essence and nature, meaning that there is no eternal and unchanging selfhood. However, this does not negate the fact that things in the real world have their own characteristics. Things may be similar, but they can still have their own unique characteristics based on their specific differences in time, space, and situations. For example, “dharmadhatu pratityasamutpada” (法界緣起, fajie yuanqi, the dependent arising of the whole realm of phenomena) is the belief that each individual being has its own value (Cook 1977, p. 19). Under the understanding of “dharmadhatu pratityasamutpada” (法界緣起, fajie yuanqi, the dependent arising of the whole realm of phenomena), Chinese Buddhism views the moral status of individual beings from a comprehensive and dynamic perspective. Chinese Buddhism believes that the moral status of individual beings is viewed from a comprehensive and dynamic perspective, based on the understanding of “dharmadhatu pratityasamutpada” (法界緣起, fajie yuanqi, the dependent arising of the whole realm of phenomena). “Dharmadhatu pratityasamutpada” refers to the Buddha’s inherent nature and virtue. Unlike other sources of karma, it exists independently of the cycle of birth and death. Every dharma of it has a value, and all existences have incomparable value; at the same time, such existences are karmic emptiness, and at the same time, all such existences are karmically empty and have no self-nature; that is, they are based on the principle of emptiness, thus avoiding the theoretical difficulty that all things are bound to interfere with each other because they have a self-nature” (Fang 1998, p. 69). All phenomena in the world are infinitely vast and mutually inclusive, differentiated and interconnected, and while phenomena merge with each other, they can also exist alone and preserve their own nature in an orderly manner, i.e., “All events/phenomena interpenetrate (事事無礙, shishi wuai)”. The ethical principles of Chinese Buddhism are rooted in the cultivation of an individual’s life consciousness, leading to personal enlightenment and the extension of this heightened awareness to others. This concept centrally embodies the life ethics of Chinese Buddhism and the pursuit of eternal significance.

#### 4.2. The Law of the Functioning of Human Life: Buddhist Causality

Buddhist causality is a profound theory in Buddhism that provides deep insights into the continuous journey of life and the unchanging laws that govern the destiny of all sentient beings. It encompasses profound concepts such as life, death, and morality, all of which intersect with the realm of bioethics. Buddhism in China developed its own theory of karma, which is different from that of Indian Buddhism. San shi yin guo (三世因果) is a theory of karma in Chinese Buddhism proposed by Huiyuan during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. This idea of karma is more utilitarian and secular than that in Indian Buddhism and is better connected with individual behavior. Moreover, it changes the subject of moral behavior from living beings to human beings themselves (Fang 1996, pp. 99–101).

The theory of san shi yin guo (三世因果) is unlimited in utility time. Karma affects three lifetimes—the past, present, and future. Good behavior brings rewards, evil behavior brings bad results. This places the consideration of human life in the context of the wider world for examination, compensating for the lack of the binding force of Confucian-



ism on real life. In the temporal dimension, the transition from the first to the third life significantly amplifies the influence and reach of karma. This increases the chances of behaving virtuously and avoiding wrongdoing, which explains the differences in destinies. San shi yin guo (三世因果) solves the problem of the mismatch between cause and effect in traditional theory and explains the reasons for injustice. “The san shi yin guo (三世因果) provides an unprovable explanation for the dichotomy between morality and happiness in the real world, and firmly and completely rejects the contradiction between the two” (Zhang 1999, p. 118).

San shi yin guo (三世因果) is individual in terms of its results. All physical and mental activities, such as behavior, speech, and thought, of an individual produce specific results for that person, and the subject who creates karma and the subject who receives the rewards are the same body. China originally had the idea of mutual rewards, as recorded in the Confucian classic, the Book of Rites (《禮記》): “In the highest antiquity they prized (simply conferring) good; in the time next to this, giving and repaying was the thing attended to. And what the rules of propriety value is reciprocity. If I give a gift and nothing comes in return, that is contrary to propriety; if the thing comes to me, and I give nothing in return, that also is contrary to propriety” (太上貴德，其次務施報。禮尚往來。往而不來，非禮也；來而不往，亦非禮也). The cornerstone of the Chinese theory of karma lies within the family structure. Specifically, this means that the consequences of an ancestor’s karma can be inherited by their descendants. This signifies that the individual’s behavior and the volitional decisions that shape it are determined by good and evil karma. Good actions lead to positive outcomes, while evil actions lead to negative outcomes. This causal connection between moral behavior and moral results establishes an intrinsic correlation between virtue and happiness. This correlation is not only a law of life, but also a law that spans several lifetimes. It is not a law of contingency and individuality, but a law of necessity and wholeness. San Shi Yin Guo (三世因果) is a profound theory that elucidates the intricate connections between moral conduct and its repercussions on an individual’s life. It underscores the idea that a person’s behavior has the power to shape their destiny and future existence. Karma is the moral law that ensures people are held accountable for their actions and encourages moral behavior. It reflects the inherent link between virtue and happiness.

San shi yin guo (三世因果) refers to the subjectivity of the moral subject. The theory of karma emphasizes the importance of individual self-discipline in moral motivation, choice, and behavior. It also states that personal encounters are not due to divine providence, chance, destiny, or unknown forces. Therefore, individual moral self-discipline is not influenced by divine providence, predestination, chance, or agnosticism. Chinese Buddhism focuses on the fact that people have the ability to make choices, and that their actions have consequences. This means that the nature of actions is connected to the results they produce. Doing good and doing evil are choices made by the moral subject that lead to different results. Chinese Buddhists believe in karma, which affects a person’s destination after death, but it also influences their actions and words during their lifetime. “In the religious-ethical sense, the law of karma emphasizes that people must take responsibility for their own actions in order to warn people of their moral self-discipline and to become a powerful driving, dominating, and restraining force for the conscious practice of moral norms” (Sheng 2004, p. 85). In other words, San shi yin guo (三世因果) reinforces the role and position of the individual as a moral subject.

Origination doctrine sees the moral subject as part of moral behavior structure, while causality doctrine emphasizes the moral subject’s responsibility for moral behavior. In this regard, the form of life undergoes constant change under the moral law of cause and effect, and there is no fixed sequence of eternal and absolute essences.

#### 4.3. The Purpose of Human Life: Compassion

Compassion means giving happiness to all beings and removing suffering from all beings. As recorded by Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-sāstra (大智度論), translated by Kumarajiva (n.d., jiumoluoshi, pp. 344–413), “Great compassion is with all beings in joy, and great com-

passion relieves all beings of suffering. Great mercy is with all beings by the cause of joy, and great compassion is with all beings by the cause of suffering (大慈與一切眾生樂，大悲拔一切眾生苦。大慈以喜樂因緣與眾生，大悲以離苦因緣與眾生。 *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-sāstra*, 大智度論, vol. 27, p. 256)". Compassion is based on the theory of dependent origination (緣起), which transcends self-centeredness and embodies life concerns. The karmic origin of all things implies that there is no entity and that all things are interdependent with each other, with a commonality and unity of destiny. Weimo jing yishu 維摩經義疏, produced by Jizang (n.d., pp. 549–623), wrote, "To perform great compassion, to guide by the Mahayana, and therefore to save their suffering. Guiding by the Mahayana is also the power of great compassion. Now, if one desires to be merciful and happy, one is also guided by the Mahayana, hence the name of great compassion. The practice of compassion without fatigue is based on the view of emptiness and egolessness. The feeling of fatigue and boredom is born out of the existence of the self. If one's compassion is based on emptiness and egolessness, then there is no fatigue (行大慈悲，導以大乘故，救彼苦難。導以大乘，大悲之能也。今慈欲與樂，亦導以大乘，故名大悲。行無厭慈，觀空、無我故。疲厭之情，生存乎我。以空、無我心而起慈者，則無疲厭。 Weimo jing yishu 維摩經義疏, vol. 5, p. 966)". In contrast to Christian charity, compassion is not a condescending one-way sympathy, but is based on karma.

Buddhism's emphasis on compassion has increased over time. Primitive and Sectarian Buddhism focused on finding freedom in life through personal practice. They taught that embracing kindness, love, and compassion is essential to attaining personal salvation. Mahayana Buddhism teaches that one should not focus solely on their own salvation but should instead seek self-realization and benefit through the universalization of all beings. Compassion in Mahayana Buddhism combines meanings from Hinayana Buddhism, like beneficence and equanimity (Keown 1995, p. 51). Buddhism promotes "great compassion" (ahimsa), associating it with universal benevolence as well as love and sympathy (metta, karuna) (Harvey 2000, pp. 103–9).

Similar to love being the essence of God, compassion is the essence of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Similar to Jesus, Chodamma is portrayed as being full of love and compassion for all people, in all circumstances—even for armed robbers who are sawing off their own body parts (Harvey 2000, p. 105). In these past lives, Jotama's love and compassion prompted him to make sacrifices as a sign of mercy. Thus, he sometimes sacrificed his life for others in a manner similar to that of Jesus. The Buddha is compassionate and cannot be called a Buddha without the trait of compassion. "The great compassion is the root of all the three worlds. If this is great compassion, where is it now? If there is no great compassion, it is not Buddha (三世諸世尊，大悲為根本。如是大慈悲，今為何所在？若無大悲故，是則不名佛)" (*Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, 大般涅槃經, translated by Huiyan n.d., vol. 10, p. 671). The Bodhisattva is both compassionate and wise. Seeing that all living beings suffer from physical and mental suffering, the Bodhisattva saves them, as explained in volume 27 of *The Great Treatise on Wisdom*: "Compassion is the root of the Buddha's path. What is the reason for this? The Bodhisattva sees all beings suffering from old age, sickness, death, physical suffering, mental suffering, suffering in this world, the next life, and other suffering, born of great compassion, to save such suffering, and then developing the mind to seek Adornment; also with great compassion, in the infinite number of ahistorical births and deaths, the heart does not get tired of losing; with great compassion, the power of a long time should be achieved nirvana and not to take the certificate. For this reason, of all the dharmas, compassion is great; if there is no great compassion, they will enter nirvana early (慈悲是佛道之根本。所以者何？菩薩見眾生老、病、死苦，身苦、心苦，今世、後世苦等諸苦所惱，生大慈悲，救如是苦，然後發心求阿諾多羅三藐三菩提；亦以大慈悲力故，於無量阿僧祇世生死中，心不厭沒；以大慈悲力故，久應得涅槃兒不去取證。以是故，一切諸法中，慈悲為大；若無大慈大悲，便早入涅槃)" (*Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-sāstra*, 大智度論, vol. 27, p. 256). Obviously, Buddhist compassion is directly related to belief in the Buddha, and Mahayana Buddhism has a tendency to make Siddhartha Gautama the supreme deity and to develop various rituals to worship the Buddha. On the whole, however, Buddhist

compassion is not limited by the necessity of belief in the one and only Buddha. Faith in the Buddha is not valued above other good deeds.

In Buddhist ethics, compassion is highly valued, particularly in Mahayana Buddhism (Keown 1995; Yuanchi 2009; Yao 2015). In *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* and *Buddhism and bioethics*, Keown Damien described the content of Mahayana Buddhism, which is represented by the concepts of Bodhisattva and compassion. Keown pointed out that compassion is given such prominence in Mahayana Buddhism because it is elevated to the level of “metaphysical virtue”; he concluded that compassion in Mahayana Buddhism implies two things: (1) compassion itself, which is the ability to effectively recognize the suffering of others, and (2) the sum total of moral virtues that come with enlightenment (Keown 1995, p. 51). The British Saddhatissa, H. had a similar view, stating in *Essence of Buddhism*, “In examining the supreme source of knowledge, we must remember that the Buddha’s great compassion is inseparable from it. When the Buddha became enlightened, the door to the realm of immortality was opened, and by his compassion, he knew mankind and its needs so well that he must have been prepared to show people the way to enter it” (Saddhatissa 2007, p. 28). According to Goodman, the meaning of compassion is the core of Mahayana Bodhisattva’s view of being attached not to the attainment of self-wisdom or the attainment of nirvana, but rather to a non-residency of perspective and the benefit of all sentient beings (Goodman 2009, p. 5; Yan 2016, p. 175).

The theoretical foundation of Chinese Buddhist bioethics thought is the theories of dependent origination and causation. Dependent origination states that the moral subject is not physical. In Chinese Buddhism, the concept of dharma karma suggests that morality should be understood in relation to all beings. Causation theories, like samsara causation, suggest that moral practice should be seen over the long stages of rebirth in samsara. Dependent origination and causation theory help people understand the connection between their actions and their outcomes. It encourages recognizing interdependence and developing moral self-awareness.

## 5. Conclusions

Bioethics has produced a novel framework for analyzing major world religions. This groundbreaking approach presents a fresh perspective on the interpretation and comparison of the paramount religious traditions. It unveils new insights into the status, operational laws, and guiding principles governing human existence. Both Christian and Chinese Buddhist bioethics share a common goal: to promote the physical and psychological well-being of individuals while also emphasizing self-improvement and self-transcendence within the human experience. Christianity and Chinese Buddhism have different interpretations of how to understand life in the context of bioethics, and each has its strengths. Many studies reflect many efforts to connect various religious traditions to bioethics, but they have rarely utilized a comparative approach. This study explores the disparities and resemblances in the understanding of life between Christianity and Chinese Buddhism. Its aim is to explore and reveal the two distinct perspectives on human life by delving into their views on its origin, condition, and purpose.

Although every religious tradition retains its originality and main spirit, similarities between religions actually exist. Both Christianity and Chinese Buddhism recognize the importance of human life. Christianity believes in the creation of humans by God, while Chinese Buddhism stresses dependent origination. Both Christianity and Chinese Buddhism have laws that govern human life. Christianity believes in God’s judgment of human beings, while Chinese Buddhism believes in cause and effect. Christianity and Chinese Buddhism both emphasize universal love and compassion as the main message of life. They both emphasize a love that knows no boundaries, that extends to all without exception. They both understand the suffering that affects people and ask to show compassion to all who experience it. In this shared emphasis on empathy and love for our fellow human beings, these two profound traditions echo each other.

Interreligious dialogue often ignores differences and hides the disparities between Christian and Chinese Buddhist bioethics. There are real differences separating the bioethics of the two. For example, Christianity and Chinese Buddhism have different emphases on human life. Both Christianity and Chinese Buddhism have created their own interpretive pictures of the source, state, and purpose of human life.

First, Christianity holds that God created human beings and other beings lack human-like souls. In Christianity, humans are favored by God over other forms of life, but it is impossible for a human being to become a God. Buddhism believes that humans are created through dependent origination, animals and plants have human-like souls, and all things are sentient beings. Chinese Buddhism recognizes that human life is one of the six paths of existence and that individuals have the potential to attain Buddhahood.

Second, Christianity teaches that human nature comes from God and depends on one's relationship with God, implying that human nature does not possess divinity. At the same time, all human beings share the same status before God—everyone is sinful, and the truth is that human nature is inherently sinful. The responsibility for this sinful nature is due to the fall of man, namely, in man himself. The doctrine of original sin focuses on God's top-down salvation. Christianity believes that God is in charge of giving rewards and consequences, while Chinese Buddhism believes that the law of karma determines the rewards and consequences in human life. Chinese Buddhist dependent origination focuses on the individual's moral motivation, moral psychology, and moral self-help.

Third, in Christianity, divine love is rooted in the love of God and is considered a commandment to be obeyed. Love of others and love of neighbor and even love of enemy come from God's command. Compassion in Chinese Buddhism is the core of the ideal Buddhist character of Buddha and Bodhisattva. It is achieved through cultivation and represents the essence of human beings. Compassion emphasizes both the protection of human lives and the giving of care and help to others, even requiring us to sacrifice our own interests when necessary. Christian love and Chinese Buddhist compassion are both forms of universal love, but they have slight differences. Christian love values human uniqueness, while Chinese Buddhist compassion extends to include more than just human life.

In short, while both Christianity and Chinese Buddhism acknowledge the significance of human life, they diverge in their perspectives on the dignity and autonomy of human existence. Christian and Chinese Buddhist bioethics agree on the conclusions about life technologies, but their underlying theories are different. Christianity, for example, sometimes argues against bioethical technology by arguing that man was created by God and possesses God's divinity. Chinese Buddhism's justification is often based on the theory of karmic reincarnation.

Christian and Chinese Buddhist bioethics require dialogue because of differences in their concepts of human life. Alastair V. Campbell, former president of the International Association of Bioethics, said, "As a theologian and philosopher, I expect bioethics to look broadly for a basis for ethical theory. I certainly do not advocate some kind of religious takeover of the discipline, nor does the Judeo-Christian tradition have any priority. Global bioethics must respect the overall diversity of bioethical perspectives worldwide, whether religious or non-religious. ... By listening to and honoring those neglected religious apprehensions and cultural apprehensions of the good, we can learn from each other" (Campbell and Shan 2002). Christianity and Chinese Buddhism should engage in a dialogue to learn from each other. Only through comparison can they recognize each other's strengths and weaknesses. Discovering your own strengths and weaknesses through dialogue helps you understand yourself, connect with others, and learn from each other. Such a dialogue between epistemologically sovereign partners would certainly prove beneficial to both sides. In today's globalized world, there is a great opportunity for mutual learning and cross-enlightenment in the religious sphere. Studying various religious traditions helps us understand each tradition better and promotes harmony and cooperation among religious communities.



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